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Breaking Barriers: Ethnic Minority Coping Strategies in the Belgian Military

RESEARCH ARTICLES

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ABSTRACT

Traditionally regarded as uniformed, disciplined, and hierarchically ordered institutions, military organizations are increasingly emphasizing the institutionalization of diversity and inclusion practices aimed at integrating minority groups. This shift stems not only from functional and recruitment imperatives but also from a growing recognition that diversity enhances operational effectiveness and organizational legitimacy in culturally complex environments. Yet ethnic minority soldiers continue to face both subtle and institutionalized forms of discrimination. Positioned within critical military studies and intersectionality, this article explores how ethnic minority soldiers in the Belgian Armed Forces experience and cope with these dynamics. Drawing on 28 semi-structured interviews, the analysis identifies seven coping strategies that reflect processes of adaptation and micro-resistance within a normatively bounded and bureaucratically rigid military culture. While emotion-focused strategies such as ignoring, avoidance, withdrawal, and aggression offer individualized forms of short-term relief, problem-focused approaches including mobilizing support networks, excelling, and reporting discrimination reflect attempts to reassert agency and collective belonging. The findings suggest that minority personnel are integrated into the military only insofar as they adapt to existing institutional norms, leaving underlying inequalities intact.

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INTRODUCTION

The integration of ethnic minority soldiers into the armed forces has long been a subject of scholarly interest. While military organizations may appear increasingly inclusive, formal diversity policies often coexist with hierarchical norms and everyday practices that continue to marginalize certain groups. Rather than indicating linear progress, shifts toward diversity are better understood as part of broader institutional dynamics in which commitments to inclusion operate alongside entrenched organizational cultures. Although military organizations increasingly prioritize inclusion of ethnic minority soldiers to attract and retain personnel (Soeters, 2018), representation alone does not guarantee meaningful inclusion.

Existing research has primarily examined these tensions through gender, demonstrating inclusion to be unevenly produced across social positions (Davis, 2022; Reis & Menezes, 2020). Extending this lens to ethnicity suggests that ethnic minority soldiers may encounter comparable, though distinct, forms of marginalization that are often less visible yet nonetheless consequential for everyday belonging and recognition (Salem et al., 2023). Diversity is associated with a range of operational and societal benefits, including strengthened civil–military relations (Soeters & van der Meulen, 2007), enhanced creativity and innovation in culturally complex environments (Resteigne & Manigart, 2021), and improved recruitment outcomes. At the same time, diversity initiatives can generate short-term tensions among majority members and may inadvertently reproduce dominant cultural mechanisms (Resteigne, 2022).

While attention to diversity within the military has increased and a growing body of research now examines ethnic minority personnel, important gaps remain regarding their lived experiences. Existing studies show, for example, that ethnic minority personnel often struggle to form connections with non-minority colleagues, leading to feelings of isolation within the broader military community (Salem et al., 2023). Other work has identified disparities in behavioural health outcomes, with non-Hispanic Black and Asian service members more likely to report suicide attempts than their non-Hispanic White peers, even after accounting for sociocultural risk factors, suggesting the influence of unmeasured factors such as discrimination (Wong et al., 2021). These findings underscore the need for research that examines not only the challenges faced by ethnic minority soldiers but also how they navigate and manage these challenges in their everyday military lives. Understanding coping strategies provides insight into adaptive practices, resilience, and the interplay between individual agency and institutional power.

Against this backdrop, this study explores how ethnic minority soldiers in the Belgian Armed Forces cope with experiences of discrimination in everyday military life. By examining the strategies they employ to navigate discrimination, the study contributes to ongoing debates on diversity and inclusion in the armed forces and offers a more grounded understanding of how ethnic minority soldiers manage discriminatory experiences within a hierarchical military environment.

THEORY

Coping theory provides the central analytical lens for understanding how ethnic minority soldiers manage experiences of discrimination in military organizations. “Coping” refers to the cognitive and behavioural strategies individuals use to regulate stress. Lazarus and Folkman’s (1984) transactional model conceptualizes coping as a dynamic process shaped by the interaction between personal resources and situational demands. Their framework distinguishes between *emotion-focused* coping, aimed at regulating emotional responses, and *problem-focused* coping, aimed at addressing the source of stress. Emotion-focused strategies such as avoidance or emotional expression may provide temporary relief but are generally less effective over the long term (Baker & Berenbaum, 2007; Lazarus & Folkman, 1984). By contrast, problem-focused coping, such as taking constructive action, tends to promote longer-term adjustment and psychological resilience (Forster et al., 2022). Rather than regulating emotional reactions, it focuses on modifying or managing the stressor itself, such as making a concrete plan to improve the situation or seeking advice from others (Carver, 1997; Lazarus & Folkman, 1984). Research has associated problem-focused coping with fewer mental health difficulties, more effective handling of day-to-day stress, and stronger overall psychological well-being (Chao, 2012; Wong et al., 2016). By promoting a sense of control and competence, it may also strengthen self-efficacy, which can serve as an important source of resilience in challenging situations (Chang et al., 2024).

Research indicates that members of different ethnic groups adopt culturally shaped combinations of these strategies (Sanders Thompson, 2006). For example, cognitive avoidance may reduce distress temporarily but can hinder full psychological recovery, whereas logical analysis or active problem-solving can transform stress into a sense of agency (Abbott, 1995). Further, those with weaker identity commitment often report heightened anxiety and slower recovery from discriminatory experiences. These findings underscore that coping cannot be understood in isolation from the social, institutional, and cultural contexts that shape both stress and resilience (Yip et al., 2022).

Military institutions constitute a distinctive context for coping. They are characterized by hierarchy, discipline, and strong norms of conformity, which shape how individuals can respond to discriminatory treatment. Critical military studies (CMS) highlight how organizational structures and institutional norms reproduce broader social hierarchies (Basham, 2013; Enloe, 2000). Rather than functioning as neutral or integrative "melting pots" (Janowitz, 1976; Moskos, 1993; Sasson-Levy, 2017), militaries embed expectations of loyalty, discipline, and uniformity that can obscure or normalize unequal treatment. Enloe's (2000) work demonstrates how militaries assign loyalty and value to ethnic groups in ways that preserve dominant power relations, granting symbolic inclusion while maintaining structural inequalities. These insights situate experiences of discrimination within broader institutional logics, emphasizing how organizational norms and everyday practices shape the conditions under which personnel navigate belonging and recognition (Sasson-Levy, 2017).

Intersectional perspectives further clarify why coping strategies vary across social positions. Ethnicity intersects with gender, rank, and religion to shape the degree of visibility, vulnerability, and room for manoeuvre individuals possess within the military hierarchy (Crenshaw, 1989; Lutz et al., 2016; McCall, 2005). Attending to these dynamics helps clarify why individuals may experience discrimination differently and why their responses vary across social positions.

Within the military context, coping responses reflect the tension between institutional expectations and personal experiences. Minority soldiers navigate exclusion by aligning with dominant norms – such as loyalty and discipline – while simultaneously seeking spaces of authenticity, solidarity, and subtle resistance. Some internalize military values to gain legitimacy, whereas others form informal networks or deploy humour and high performance as forms of subtle resistance (Higate, 2001; Sasson-Levy, 2003). Coping strategies may resemble those used in managing general life stress, such as emotional eating, avoidance, or seeking social support (Brownlow et al., 2019; Hoggard et al., 2015; McNeil et al., 2014), or take discrimination-specific forms, such as direct confrontation, education and advocacy, or adaptive self-presentation tactics such as using humour or friendliness to defuse tension (Ilic et al., 2012; Link & Phelan, 2014). Some individuals, however, may resort to social withdrawal to avoid stigmatizing or unsafe contexts. These coping strategies reflect the interplay between individual agency and structural constraints, illustrating how coping is shaped by the organizational environment as much as by personal preferences (Major, 2006; Partow et al., 2021).

Taken together, these perspectives position coping as a socially and institutionally embedded process. CMS clarifies the structural conditions under which discrimination occurs, intersectionality highlights variation in how individuals experience and respond to these conditions, and coping theory provides the conceptual tools to analyse the strategies ethnic minority soldiers use to navigate discriminatory experiences in everyday military life.

METHODS

For this study, we adopted a qualitative approach by conducting semi-structured in-depth interviews to gain a deeper understanding of the perspective of Belgian soldiers from diverse ethnic backgrounds.

TARGET POPULATION

The target group consisted of Belgian military personnel and Royal Military Academy (RMA) students from ethnic minorities. At the beginning of 2021, the Belgian Armed Forces employed approximately 26,100 military personnel (Dedonder, 2022). It is estimated that over 80% have a Belgian background (Guisset et al., 2022). This proportion has remained stable since 2013,

partly because European (including Swiss) nationality is a requirement to serve as a soldier in the Belgian military (Guisset et al., 2022). Unlike countries such as the Netherlands, Canada or the United States of America, there are no official statistics on the number of Belgian military personnel with an ethnic minority background (Resteigne & Manigart, 2021).

The Belgian Armed Forces currently define "a Belgian with a migration background" as those citizens holding the nationality of a country outside the EU-15, or those who have at least one parent or two grandparents who do (Algemene Directie Human Resources, 2021). While this institution-specific definition guided the selection of participants within the military context, it differs from the broader civilian definition commonly used in Belgium. In Belgium, there is no single universal definition of a Belgian with an ethnic minority background. However, the most commonly used definition – notably by Statbel (2025), the official Belgian statistical office – describes such a person as someone who did not hold Belgian nationality at birth, or who has at least one parent who was not a Belgian national at the time of their birth, and who resides legally and on a long-term basis in Belgium.

In this study, "ethnic minorities" refers to military personnel who either have a migration background themselves or whose parents or grandparents were born outside Belgium.

DATA COLLECTION

Between October 2021 and November 2023, 28 semi-structured in-depth interviews were conducted with military personnel from ethnic minorities. All participants volunteered to participate. Two recruitment strategies were used. First, military personnel were selected through snowball sampling (Glesne, 2016). Initial participants were recruited through existing personal and professional networks, including individuals known directly or indirectly to the researchers. After completing the interviews, participants were asked whether they knew other ethnic minority soldiers in the Belgian Armed Forces who might be willing to participate. These referrals typically resulted in one or more additional potential participants, who were subsequently contacted and invited to take part in the study. This process was repeated until the final sample was achieved. While snowball sampling is effective for accessing hard-to-reach populations, it can introduce bias, as participants may refer individuals similar to themselves, potentially limiting representativeness. For instance, we were unable to recruit a soldier with a migration background from the navy. Second, students of the RMA were recruited via a self-selection process: an email was distributed to all students outlining the study's objectives and inviting voluntary participation. Interested students contacted the research team directly.

The final sample included 28 participants representing 14 different ethnic backgrounds, multiple ranks – from captain-commander, captain, and lieutenant to non-commissioned officers and soldiers – across eight different military locations in Belgium. The participants have ethnic origins in Sub-Saharan Africa (11 participants), North Africa (10 participants), Eastern Europe (3 participants), South Asia (1 participant), Middle East (1 participant), North America (1 participant) and Western Europe (1 participants). Some participants have multiple ethnic origins from this list, and two of them are of mixed Belgian heritage (see Table 2 in Appendix).

Participants' names were replaced with pseudonyms to maintain confidentiality. Each interview lasted between 30 and 180 minutes and was conducted face-to-face at military bases, in offices at different military barracks, online or in informal settings depending on participants' preferences. The semi-structured interview guide addressed four main themes: personal background, motivation to work in the institution, experiences with ethnic diversity, and integration and inclusion in the Belgian Armed Forces. Interviews were conducted in French and Dutch, according to each participant's preference.

At the RMA, no institutional ethics committee oversees research projects. However, all participants provided oral informed consent before participation. Participation was entirely voluntary, and they were informed of the research's objectives, their right to withdraw at any time, and the measures taken to ensure confidentiality. Although written consent was not obtained, ethical research principles were upheld and participants explicitly agreed to share their insights under these conditions.

DATA ANALYSIS

The interview guide was designed to explore how military personnel with an ethnic minority background experience inclusion within the Belgian Armed Forces. It focused on questions about participants' ethnic backgrounds, how their ethnic origins functioned as either an asset or an obstacle in their work within the Defence organization, whether they felt accepted, whether they experienced discrimination, and how they perceived the Belgian Armed Forces' diversity policy. Additional sub-questions were asked to further explore each of these main topics.

The analysis followed an hybrid thematic approach. The interview guide did not contain any predefined categories related to coping strategies. During the open coding phase in NVivo, various coping mechanisms emerged spontaneously from the data. These categories were therefore generated in a fully data-driven manner. Only after completing the inductive analysis was relevant coping theory consulted to conceptually interpret the findings. The analytical process unfolded iteratively.

A first set of deductive codes was derived from the themes included in the interview guide, such as acculturation strategies, perceived advantages or disadvantages of ethnic diversity, experiences of discrimination, and institutional policies and procedures. As the coding progressed, additional inductive codes were created for data segments that did not align with these predefined categories, including the coping strategies that emerged from participants' narratives. Coping strategies were identified through pattern recognition and were subsequently grouped into inductively derived categories such as social support, excelling, reporting, avoiding, ignoring, withdrawing, and aggression.

POSITIONALITY AND REFLEXIVITY

We acknowledge that our positionality shaped the research process. Our professional roles as civilian researchers working within the Belgian Armed Forces organization, as well as our linguistic and cultural backgrounds, influenced both the interview dynamics and the interpretation of the data. One of the authors has an ethnic minority background, which provided additional sensitivity to issues of ethnicity, identity, and belonging. The interviews were conducted by two interviewers: one who is fully bilingual in French and Dutch, and another who is a native Dutch speaker with functional proficiency in French. To ensure that interviews conducted in French proceeded as smoothly as possible, extensive preparation was undertaken in advance. Reflexive practices such as memo writing, peer debriefing, and language checks were used to mitigate potential bias and enhance analytical depth.

FINDINGS

This section explores how ethnic minority soldiers in the Belgian Armed Forces cope with discrimination. Drawing on Lazarus and Folkman's (1984) distinction between emotion-focused and problem-focused coping, and viewed through the lens of CMS, coping is understood as both an individual response and a reflection of institutional power, hierarchy, and belonging. Seven strategies were identified: four emotion-focused and three problem-focused. Emotion-focused strategies regulate emotional distress, while problem-focused strategies target the source of stress (Baker & Berenbaum, 2007; Lazarus & Folkman, 1984). Table 1 summarizes the prevalence of each coping strategy among participants. Coping practices were not mutually exclusive; several respondents mobilized multiple strategies over time and across situations rather than relying on a single, fixed approach.

Table 1 Problem-Focused and Emotion-Focused Coping Strategies.

	PROBLEM-FOCUSED COPING STRATEGIES			EMOTION-FOCUSED COPING STRATEGIES			
	SUPPORT NETWORK	EXCELLING	REPORTING	IGNORING	AVOIDANCE	WITHDRAWAL	AGGRESSION
Number of participants	15	11	9	10	9	6	3

PROBLEM-FOCUSED COPING STRATEGIES: RECLAIMING AGENCY

A first type of problem-focused coping strategy that emerged repeatedly – mentioned by more than half of the participants across the interviews – was the formation of a *support network*. This strategy involved seeking emotional, social, and practical support from others. Group

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empathy played a central role: individuals with migration backgrounds often described being able to understand and share the emotions of others who faced similar challenges. Their own experiences, or those of family and friends, enabled them to recognize the dynamics of unequal treatment based on ethnicity (Sirin et al., 2016).

Just over half of the participants, 15 in total, reported finding support within the institution through connections with other ethnic minority personnel. One of the informants, Aaron, explained that soldiers with migration roots tend to feel more at ease with one another, noting that the atmosphere felt less tense when he was surrounded by soldiers from ethnic minority groups. Khalid similarly described being immediately drawn to colleagues with an ethnic minority background, particularly those with roots in the Arab world, and noted that his closest friendships within the institution were with individuals who shared his background.

For some, entering the military alongside someone with a similar background provided an early protective buffer. Omar described how beginning his military career together with a close friend who also had an ethnic minority background strengthened his confidence during the initial adjustment period: "I started together with a really good friend. There were two of us [soldiers with an ethnic minority background], so we immediately felt more confident and stronger in our position" (Omar, December 2022).

Others emphasized how supportive environments developed later in their careers. Amin reported that his start in the Belgian Armed Forces had been difficult, marked by bullying and harassment during the military initiation phase. However, at the time of the interview he described working in a unit where he felt comfortable and supported, largely because both his supervisor and many of his colleagues had ethnic minority backgrounds:

> That's exactly why I feel really good here, especially in this place. My supervisor here has a different ethnic background, and I have my colleagues here too. I feel really good with them. And honestly, I work with a smile. (Amin, December 2022)

For Solange, support networks were essential when confronting difficult experiences. She explained that she confided primarily in her Black colleagues, as she felt most at ease discussing sensitive issues with them and believed that they were better able to empathize with her situation:

> At work, I'm not the only Black person around. So, if I have any problems, if I experience things like that, I can talk to the other Black men. I'm really glad that I'm not the only one. … And that's it, it's just with them that I can talk about it. (Solange, November 2022)

While Solange emphasizes the value of having colleagues who understood her experiences without explanation, Wilson illustrated how these networks also operated proactively. He described how individuals with shared backgrounds looked out for one another by signalling potential risks and advising caution in specific contexts:

> If an African person runs into an issue somewhere in the army – and they see another African person, they'll be like, "Hey, be careful over there." That's something we've kind of carried over from civilian life. Africans who come across each other will say, "Be careful in that area – they're not very nice to Black people." (Wilson, February 2022)

Taken together, these accounts showed that support networks had both reactive and proactive functions: they provided emotional comfort after discriminatory incidents and acted as protective mechanisms that helped individuals anticipate and navigate potentially hostile environments. Combined with evidence that actively seeking support can reduce both psychological and physiological stress, these findings indicated that cultivating supportive social connections was an effective coping strategy, even when individuals faced situations beyond their direct control (Forster et al., 2022).

A second problem-focused coping strategy, mentioned by 11 participants, involved striving for success or *excelling*. Participants explained that ethnic minority soldiers who held higher ranks or occupied visible positions in the army often experienced less overt discrimination, as professional achievement functioned as a protective buffer. Several participants described

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feeling compelled to demonstrate competence in order to gain acceptance. As John explained, he felt the urge to prove his worth: "Really showing that I am capable enough, that people simply recognize my expertise. These are the kinds of things someone often does unconsciously in order to be accepted more quickly" (John, November 2023).

For some, excelling was not only a professional strategy but also a deeply personal one. Ibrahim described how his drive to succeed was tied to affirming his national belonging and countering assumptions about ethnic minorities:

> My biggest motivation was to prove that I am a real Belgian. I'm the child of a mixed marriage, so I have a North African father and a Belgian mother. From adolescence onward, I was confronted with my diversity. That wasn't always pleasant, and I really felt the urge to prove: "Yes, I am Belgian. Okay, I have a foreign name, a different skin tone, and curls, but I was born here, and I am Belgian. Even though I feel a connection to my other ethnic background, I am Belgian." I had a strong need to prove: "We can do it too, we can." (Ibrahim, October 2021)

Several participants also noted that rank influenced the degree of respect they received. Solange, for example, described facing frequent discriminatory comments during her training at the RMA. After becoming a lieutenant, however, she observed a noticeable reduction in such remarks.

> Now that I have my rank, they seem to respect me a bit more. They might not fully accept me, but they don't comment as much. So, they think that if I have my rank, it's because I deserve it. But it's a shame that respect only came because of my rank. (Solange, November 2022)

Similarly, Omar emphasized that his rank shaped how others treated him. He also stressed the importance of standing up for oneself as an ethnic minority soldier:

> Whether you're accepted or not really depends on your status and your place in the world – and that's something quite strange. If you're not able to stand your ground, you're more likely to be pushed into a corner where you don't feel comfortable. But if you can make a bit of noise and know how to handle things, it's a different story. (Omar, December 2022)

For some participants, excelling was shaped by intersecting social positions. Amira described how being both a woman and visibly ethnically diverse raised the threshold for recognition and advancement, requiring her to work harder for the same outcomes:

> In the army, I have to give much more to get somewhere. I hope I'll get there, but if there's one thing that holds me back, it's the fact that I'm a woman, and that I'm a foreigner. In fact, it's simply my name. My name is Amira, not Emily. (Amira, November 2022)

More broadly, the data suggested that coping strategies were shaped by gender, rank, and ethnic visibility. While most female participants acknowledged that career opportunities in the Belgian Armed Forces were formally open to them, they also described how everyday interactions remained marked by sexism, most commonly through comments, jokes, and other seemingly "small" remarks that cumulatively undermined their sense of belonging.

A third problem-focused coping strategy that emerged from the interviews involved *reporting* discrimination to authority figures or external support structures. Nine participants described turning to superiors, human resources, or labour unions, and, when internal channels failed, seeking legal support outside the military. For many, this strategy was motivated by a desire to document mistreatment, seek accountability, or simply ensure that "someone in power" was aware of what they were experiencing.

Several participants reported reaching out repeatedly without receiving any meaningful response. Amin, for example, contacted the labour union multiple times but never heard back, eventually abandoning the effort altogether. Others did manage to access external forms of support. Julia contacted Unia, Belgium's independent public institution for combating discrimination, and explained that her case was taken up and was being followed:

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> I've already contacted Unia. They're also waiting for my file. Of course, I want to make something out of it, but I want to be sure that something can come of it for the organization. So, I don't want it to be just about me personally. I don't have time to just do this for my personal file. But if my personal file can help the [Belgian military], if it can improve our policy, why not? I'm willing to do that. (Julia, January 2023)

For some, reporting escalated from an organizational procedure into a legal battle once internal options were exhausted. Malcolm (November 2023) described how, after years of strong evaluations, his transfer to a new unit led to escalating tensions and conflict with the local hierarchy. Instead of resolving the conflict, he was instructed to remain at home for an extended period, a period he experienced as deeply distressing. After exhausting internal options, he hired legal counsel, structured his case carefully, and pursued proceedings across jurisdictions. Although he ultimately won his legal cases and received compensation, he emphasized the psychological toll of the process, including prolonged stress, self-doubt, and a lasting sense of having "lost something," illustrating how formal vindication does not necessarily translate into emotional recovery or organizational reintegration.

These uneven experiences highlight both the potential and the limitations of reporting as a coping strategy. While formal complaints could open pathways to recognition and support, participants often found themselves navigating institutional silence and uncertainty on their own. For some, reporting was not only a personal coping mechanism but also an attempt at collective advocacy, undertaken with the hope of improving conditions for others who might face similar experiences. However, the responses they received – or, in many cases, did not receive – shaped their sense of what organizational change was realistically possible. Inconsistent follow-up, long periods of silence and what several described as "bureaucratic walls" often eroded their trust in formal support structures. These accounts illustrated the limits of problem-focused coping in a highly hierarchical and procedurally rigid institution, where efforts to seek redress could easily dissipate into administrative inertia.

Taken together, these strategies reflected both adaptation and subtle resistance. Support networks cultivated resilience; excelling reclaimed dignity through achievement; and reporting sought structural change. Yet each strategy remained constrained by the institution's disciplinary culture, demonstrating that coping unfolded within – rather than outside – systems of power.

EMOTION-FOCUSED COPING STRATEGIES: ENDURING WITHIN HIERARCHY

"Emotion-focused coping" refers to the cognitive and behavioural strategies individuals use to regulate emotional distress during stressful experiences, rather than addressing the underlying cause of the stressor. While such strategies can offer temporary relief or be adaptive in the short term, they are generally not effective as a long-term solution (Theodoratou et al., 2023). Within the Belgian Armed Forces, these strategies reflected adaptation to a hierarchical environment that valued composure and cohesion, where challenging authority or peers was often discouraged.

The most frequent emotion-focused coping strategy identified among participants was *ignoring*. Ten participants indicated that they had encountered comments or jokes about their ethnicity, yet chose to ignore them. Khalid, for example, described how he dealt with stereotypical remarks: "At the [Belgian Armed Forces] they joke around a lot and there are stereotypes like 'Arabs steal.' I don't let it bother me. It goes in one ear and out the other" (Khalid, October 2022).

Other participants described similar experiences. Solange, who frequently encountered comments disguised as jokes, explained that she advised new soldiers with an ethnic minority background to be "mentally prepared" to ignore racist remarks or jokes:

> I would recommend joining the Belgian Armed Forces, specifically the medical corps. And I'd say, realistically, you have to be mentally prepared to accept certain things, and sometimes to switch off when you go to work. You can't fight every battle for everyone all the time, because it's exhausting. Sometimes I'd hear things and just say, "Okay, switch off, I'm too tired today." (Solange, November 2022)

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John similarly noted that, although he tried to address denigrating language, responding to every instance is unsustainable: "For example, the n-word, some people keep using it anyway. That's something I try to call out. But if you have to intervene every single time, after a while you just think, 'it's not worth the effort'" (John, November 2023).

For some, ignoring was tied to more direct experiences of bullying. Amin described being the direct target of harassment during a particular period and coping by remaining silent: "They really gave me a hard time during the military initiation phase. They said all kinds of nasty things about me. I just kept my mouth shut" (Amin, December 2022).

From a CMS perspective, such silence should not be interpreted as passivity, but rather as a survival mechanism within an institution that prized obedience and endurance (McDew, 2022). Damsa described ignoring as both a way to avoid escalation and a pragmatic response to the recurring setbacks he encountered in his career. He reflected on how these challenges were woven into everyday military life and how continuing forward often meant choosing silence over confrontation:

> It's not easy for someone with the background I have to try to build a career in the Belgian Armed Forces or to feel like you belong somewhere. So yes, here and there you do get those setbacks. But you just go on, you turn around and you keep going. (Damsa, November 2021)

Together, these accounts showed that ignoring functioned as a common emotion-focused coping strategy, shaped by the institutional norms of the Belgian Armed Forces. While it helped participants maintain composure and avoid confrontation, it also reflected the constraints of a hierarchical environment in which challenging discriminatory behaviour was often perceived as risky or futile.

A second emotion-focused coping strategy involved *avoidance*: intentionally distancing oneself from environments where discrimination might occur. As Wechsler (1995, p. 126) noted, "an effective strategy to get rid of an aversive stimulus is to increase distance to that stimulus." Nine participants described avoiding certain units, activities, or aspects of their identity to minimize exposure to discriminatory behaviour.

For some, avoidance meant steering clear of specific units perceived as unwelcoming. Aaron, for example, chose not to join the paratroopers after hearing it was "not a good environment for people of colour". In retrospect, he also expressed regret at never having had the courage to join it.

> I didn't want to join the paratroopers because people told me that it was a unit where ethnic differences weren't well accepted. It wasn't a good place to go. … It really depends on the situation. But still, there are units, there are places where, as they say, it's not a good environment to live or work in. (Aaron, January 2023)

Avoidance also took the form of concealing aspects of one's identity to prevent becoming a target of comments or suspicion. Adil described deliberately refraining from mentioning that he was fasting during Ramadan.

> I try to say as little as possible about it. When Ramadan starts, most people don't even notice. I just go about my day. By the end of the month, they usually put the pieces together: "Wait, why aren't you coming to the canteen? Why aren't you having coffee?" That's when it comes out. But I often feel like there's no real space for it. That if you mention it, you risk being seen as an extremist or… something like that. Sometimes people make really extreme comments, you know? And that can hit hard. (Adil, November 2022)

Mourad expressed a similar experience of invisibility around religious practices, noting that during Ramadan "they know nothing" and often only realize it "in the last five days" (Mourad, November 2021). Julia likewise described keeping a deliberately low profile regarding her national background:

> I never tried to bring my identity to the forefront. I always stayed low profile because of the public opinion. … Given everything I'd been through with some people, I don't dare to talk about it. So I also try not to mention it. (Julia, January 2023)

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Avoidance also involved strategic decisions about whether to confront discriminatory behaviour. Wilson reflected on the dilemmas involved in choosing between confrontation and withdrawal, saying: "Do I really want to go and fight, to push the conflict all the way? You also have to think about what you might lose" (Wilson, February 2022).

Together, these accounts showed that avoidance functioned as a pragmatic emotion-focused coping strategy shaped by the institutional culture of the Belgian Armed Forces. By distancing themselves from potentially hostile environments or concealing aspects of their identity, participants sought to reduce exposure to discriminatory behaviour in a context where confrontation was perceived as risky, exhausting, or unlikely to lead to meaningful change.

A third emotion-focused coping strategy employed by participants was *withdrawal* – distancing oneself from others as a reaction to discrimination. In such situations, individuals might pretend that nothing had happened; internalize blame for the discriminatory act; hope the problem resolves on its own; or isolate themselves from friends and social circles (Madera et al., 2012; Villegas-Gold & Yoo, 2014). This coping strategy was mentioned by six participants, some of whom isolated themselves within the organization, while others ultimately left the Belgian Armed Forces.

Adil, for example, resigned despite enjoying his job, explaining that discrimination made it impossible for him to continue. He later re-entered another branch of the Belgian Armed Forces, where he experienced less discrimination. Amin also described reaching a point where he felt compelled to leave: "I wanted to leave [the institution] two months ago. I applied to loads of jobs in the civilian sector and got accepted" (Amin, December 2022).

Not all participants resigned. Some withdrew internally. Julia described how a series of events linked to her ethnic background led her to distance herself from her environment:

> A few years ago, something began happening that was linked to my cultural background, and it still hadn't stopped. I had never experienced anything like it in my unit, during operations, or among my colleagues; it came from people I actually knew. After two years, I decided to move to another position, but it all started with a file and a series of events. It became a kind of attack on my identity. I hadn't even been consciously aware of my cultural background any more, it simply wasn't important to me. I felt both Belgian and connected to my ethnic roots, but above all I saw myself as an officer, a NATO officer. At no point did I ever imagine or even consider the question, "If I were involved in a war, which side would I choose?" That question doesn't exist for me. I am a NATO officer, and I support Belgian decisions fully. (Julia, January 2023)

Other participants noted that they knew colleagues who had resigned or were considering resigning due to discrimination, even if they themselves ultimately stayed. Withdrawal thus represented a form of disengagement used as self-protection in a culture where protest risked marginalization. However, prolonged disengagement could harm well-being and career development, and it has been linked to higher absenteeism and turnover (Jones et al., 2009).

Taken together, ignoring, avoidance, and withdrawal corresponded to what Santiago and Wadsworth (2011) term *disengaged coping* or *passive appraisal*, which has been associated with declining functioning over time. Research by Kaiser and Miller (2001, 2003) showed that African Americans who attributed failure or rejection to discrimination were often judged as "complainers," while those who blamed themselves were viewed more favourably. Similarly, studies on confronting prejudice found that expressing dissatisfaction with discriminatory remarks could lead to negative judgments; for example, women who challenged sexist comments were liked less and labelled as complainers (Dodd et al., 2001; Shelton & Stewart, 2004).

Although ignoring, avoidance, or social withdrawal could help stigmatized individuals prevent further interpersonal and emotional costs, these strategies also reinforce silence around discrimination. At the same time, choosing not to confront discriminatory acts carried its own emotional and cognitive toll. Individuals facing discrimination were caught in a difficult position: confronting the perpetrator often leads to social rejection, while staying silent could generate self-directed frustration or regret (Shelton et al., 2006).

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A fourth type of emotion-focused coping strategy identified in the interviews was *aggression*, mentioned by three participants. General strain theory (Agnew, 1992) and the frustration-aggression model (Di & Lu, 2022) suggest that experiencing discrimination can trigger negative emotional states that compromise individuals' ability to regulate their emotions. Feelings such as anger and frustration may intensify urges for retaliation and increase the likelihood of aggressive reactions in challenging or provocative contexts. Three participants described responding aggressively to discriminatory behaviour from colleagues.

Chris, for example, explained that within the para-commando environment, physical confrontation was a common way of resolving personal issues. When faced with discriminatory remarks, he resorted to aggression to intimidate the offender and prevent further harassment.... "There was this old guy who started saying 'Yeah, n**** and black'. I hit him once, and he respected me ever since." (Chris, November 2022).

Overall, emotion-focused coping provided temporary relief but rarely altered the structural conditions that produced discrimination in the first place. These accounts illustrated how conformity within the military functioned simultaneously as a shield and a constraint: it protected individuals from further escalation but also limited their ability to challenge discriminatory behaviour.

This tension was particularly visible in the accounts of women of colour, where intersectionality (Crenshaw, 1989) – the overlapping effects of gender and ethnic positioning – shaped both the experience of discrimination and the coping options perceived as available. Participants described navigating a double burden of sexism and racism, managing what felt like a constant, low-level strain through emotion-focused coping and peer support. Solange captured this dynamic clearly, describing how such behaviour became normalized within a male-dominated environment.

> These are just little things, more like remarks or jokes. I think it's normal, but it's not. That's because we're in an environment where there are a lot of men. And some men still don't accept that there are women in the army. It's not that we're not allowed to do this or that. It's just little jokes all the time, little microaggressions. (Solange, November 2022)

Together, these accounts showed that emotion-focused strategies emerged as a response to the emotional strain of discrimination but remained constrained by the institutional culture of the Belgian Armed Forces. While such strategies helped individuals cope in the moment, they did little to challenge the broader systems of power that shaped their everyday experiences.

DISCUSSION

The findings indicate that coping among ethnic minority soldiers in the Belgian Armed Forces was shaped by gender, rank, and ethnic background, producing different "room for manoeuvre" across social positions. Women of colour described navigating a dual burden of sexism and racism, often relying on emotion-focused strategies and peer support to manage a constant stream of microaggressions. By contrast, higher-ranking men were more likely to describe problem-focused strategies such as excelling, challenging inappropriate behaviour, or directly addressing discriminatory acts. The patterns demonstrate that coping was not equally available to everyone but was structured by one's location within overlapping hierarchies of gender, ethnicity, and authority. Coping, in this sense, became a reflection of power: who could push back, who had to endure, and whose strategies were constrained by institutional norms (Crenshaw, 1989; Lutz et al., 2016; McCall, 2005).

Across the dataset, coping emerged not as a purely individual psychological response, but as an institutional and relational process, shaped by the military's hierarchical culture, disciplinary norms, and unequal distribution of power. This aligns with CMS, which conceptualizes the military not as a neutral integrative institution, but as a site where social hierarchies are reproduced through everyday norms and bureaucratic routines (Basham, 2013; Enloe, 1980). Interpreting the findings through the combined lenses of CMS and intersectionality reveals that coping strategies both reflected and reinforced the organizational environment in which they unfold.

Support networks illustrate this dynamic clearly. Participants sought out colleagues with similar backgrounds to access understanding without justification, exchange practical advice, and restore a sense of belonging in an environment where legitimacy is frequently questioned.

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These networks functioned as in-group resources that compensated for the absence of reliable institutional inclusion. They provided emotional validation, helped individuals process microaggressions, and enabled collective problem-solving. For marginalized groups – particularly women and people of colour – these networks foster camaraderie, empowerment, and resilience. Rather than simply buffering exclusion, they served as informal infrastructures of care and protection in a context where formal mechanisms often felt inaccessible or ineffective (Ashmore & McLaughlin-Volpe, 2004; Holder et al., 2015).

Emotion-focused strategies, such as ignoring comments, avoiding, withdrawing socially or professionally, or – in rare cases – responding aggressively, reflected adaptation to a setting where confrontation was risky, silence was valued, and emotional endurance was normalized. A CMS lens reframes these strategies not as passivity but as disciplined forms of endurance: ways to remain functional and protect oneself in an institution where discrimination was often normalized and where raising concerns could be interpreted as disloyalty or weakness. Yet these strategies also reveal the costs of conditional inclusion (Hackl, 2022). They reduced immediate distress, but left underlying exclusion intact, placing the burden of adjustment on those already marginalized. This echoes research showing that emotion-focused strategies offer short-term relief but do not address structural problems, particularly in rigid hierarchical organizations (Graves et al., 2021).

Aggression – though less common – further demonstrates how coping was shaped by institutional subcultures and informal norms. In units where masculinity and dominance were central to local culture, some soldiers responded to discrimination through confrontation where formal channels were perceived as ineffective or risky. From a CMS perspective, such reactions were not simply expressions of anger but reflected environments where power was often negotiated informally and where justice was seen as inaccessible through official mechanisms (Basham, 2013).

Problem-focused strategies – including support networks, striving for excellence, and reporting discriminatory behaviour – represented attempts to reclaim agency, yet the findings show that this agency is uneven and structurally bounded. Excelling functions as a "meritocratic shield" (Levy, 1998): achievement could reduce exposure to overt discrimination and increase respect, especially when validated by rank. However, this did not signal institutional fairness. Rather, it revealed conditional belonging: recognition granted only when minority personnel exceeded expectations. This dynamic reinforces dominant norms and reproduces the expectation that minority personnel must "outperform" to be treated as ordinary members (Levy, 1998).

Reporting discriminatory behaviour exposed the clearest tension between formal inclusion rhetoric and institutional reality. While some participants pursued institutional routes (superiors, HR, labour unions) or external routes (e.g., Unia), many encountered silence, delayed follow-up, or bureaucratic inertia. These experiences weakened trust in formal mechanisms and signalled weak organizational accountability. When reporting did not lead to recognition or remediation, personnel learned that discrimination was something to be managed privately rather than addressed collectively. This pushed coping back toward emotion-focused endurance and informal support, reinforcing the very silence that protected the organization from change.

Taken together, the findings show that coping strategies among ethnic minority soldiers in the Belgian Armed Forces were shaped by the institution's hierarchical culture and by individuals' positions within intersecting structures of gender, ethnicity, and rank. Coping was both a response to discrimination and a reflection of the organizational conditions that produced it. While personnel developed creative and resilient strategies to navigate exclusion, these strategies also revealed the limits of individual adaptation in the absence of structural change.

CONCLUSIONS

This study examined how ethnic minority soldiers in the Belgian Armed Forces cope with discrimination, showing that coping is not simply an individual psychological response but a relational and institutional process shaped by hierarchy, discipline, and unequal power. Across the findings, coping emerged as deeply structured by one's position within intersecting hierarchies of gender, rank, and ethnic background, producing unequal "room for manoeuvre" in how personnel could respond to discriminatory behaviour.

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Support networks played a central role in sustaining belonging and recognition, particularly when institutional inclusion proved unreliable. Emotion-focused strategies – such as ignoring, avoiding, withdrawing, or occasionally responding aggressively – reflected adaptation to a culture that valued cohesion, silence, and endurance over open confrontation. These strategies helped individuals remain functional in the short term but left underlying exclusion intact, placing the burden of adjustment on those already marginalized. Problem-focused strategies – including excelling and reporting discriminatory behaviour – offered avenues for agency but were tightly bounded by rank, gender, and ethnic background. For many participants, recognition remained conditional, granted only when they exceeded expectations or navigated bureaucratic obstacles with persistence and risk.

Taken together, these insights underscore that inclusion cannot be achieved through representation alone. Coping strategies should not be interpreted as signs of individual resilience but as indicators of how personnel navigate – and are constrained by – organizational norms. Advancing genuine inclusion therefore requires more than recruitment targets or awareness campaigns; it demands cultural and structural change that legitimizes diverse forms of expression, strengthens collective voice, and fosters leadership practices that recognize the uneven distribution of risk and vulnerability. Understanding coping as both a symptom of institutional inequality and a form of everyday resistance provides a foundation for rethinking organizational well-being in ways that balance psychological safety with discipline, and belonging with uniformity.

APPENDIX 1

Table 2 List of Participants – Military Personnel Belgian Defence.

PARTICIPANTS	PSEUDONYM	AGE RANGE	GENDER	ORIGINS	INTERVIEW DATE
1	Ibrahim	45–54	M	North Africa	10/2021
2	Mourad	35–44	M	North Africa	11/2021
3	Damsa	25–34	M	South Asia	11/2021
4	Marouane	35–44	M	North Africa	11/2021
5	Saïd	18–24	M	North Africa	11/2021
6	Malcolm	35–44	M	Sub-Saharan Africa	11/2021
7	Wilson	35–44	M	Sub-Saharan Africa	02/2022
8	Sofia	35–44	F	Eastern Europe	02/2022
9	Raoul	35–44	M	Sub-Saharan Africa	02/2022
10	Khalid	18–24	M	Middle East	10/2022
11	Solange	18–24	F	Sub-Saharan Africa	11/2022
12	Adil	35–44	M	North Africa	11/2022
13	Amira	25–34	F	North Africa	11/2022
14	Chris	35–44	M	Sub-Saharan Africa	11/2022
15	Amin	18–24	M	North Africa	12/2022
16	Omar	35–44	M	North Africa	12/2022
17	Anthony	18–24	M	North America	12/2022
18	Ese	18–24	F	Sub-Saharan Africa	12/2022
19	Lina	18–24	F	North Africa	12/2022
20	Eliot	18–24	M	Western Europe	12/2022
21	Alexander	18–24	M	Eastern Europe	12/2022
22	Yassin	18–24	M	North Africa	12/2022
23	Samuel	18–24	M	Sub-Saharan Africa	12/2022
24	Thomas	18–24	M	Sub-Saharan Africa	12/2022
25	Patrick	18–24	M	Sub-Saharan Africa	12/2022
26	Aaron	25–34	M	Sub-Saharan Africa	01/2023
27	Julia	35–44	F	Eastern Europe	01/2023
28	John	35–44	M	Sub-Saharan Africa	11/2023

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The authors have no competing interests to declare.

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