



Ahn, P. D. and Jacobs, K. (2019) Accountants' incessant insecurity: focusing on the identities of CPAs hired in the South Korean public service. *Accounting, Auditing and Accountability Journal*, 32(8), pp. 2421-2450.

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## **Accountants' incessant insecurity: Focusing on identities of CPAs hired in South Korean public service**

### **ABSTRACT**

**Purpose:** In this paper, the authors aim to understand how and why accountants who moved from accounting firms to public service adapted their identities to reduce insecurity. The literature on accountant identity highlights insecurity caused by promotion criterion to partnership, which requires accountants to win new work for their employers and leads to overtime, as a serious problem which has permeated the accounting profession. However, there have been few studies that explore whether accountants who moved to public service, where they have stronger job security and can enjoy work-life balance, have resolved the insecurity problem, although a neoliberalism turn accompanied by NPM (New Public Management)-style reforms has increased the number of accountants in public service. Therefore, the authors of the current study aim to fill this gap in the literature by exploring identity transitions of South Korean (hereafter Korean) accountants who joined the public service.

**Design/methodology/approach:** We theorise the nature of the process of identity adaptation with conceptual tools from Pierre Bourdieu, such as habitus and capital, and examine whether the accountants took a 'vision-of-division' or a 'di-vision' strategy in the public service to secure their identity. For this purpose, we interviewed accountants and their non-accountant colleagues, and investigated other written sources, such as newspaper articles and business cards.

**Findings:** We found that Korean accountants in Big-4 firms dealt with the same insecurity issues as accountants in Western countries and perceived public service as an attractive alternative to remove this insecurity. However, accountants who joined the public service found themselves confronted with different types of problems, such as accounting/costing work being regarded as demeaning work, which made their identity insecure. Therefore, some accountants took a di-vision strategy that makes the difference between themselves and typical public servants less visible by avoiding accounting/costing work, using bureaucratic designations, and de-emphasising their accounting credentials. Accountants took this strategy because the symbolic value of their accountancy qualifications grew weaker over time, due to the increase in the number of qualified accountants, and because the public service field valued bureaucratic habitus and capital more highly than those of the accountants.

**Originality/value:** From a methodological aspect, the authors collected participants' business cards and analysed which designations/credentials they chose to lead recipients to perceive who they are. This analysis helped the authors understand how accountants work on their identity by de-emphasising accounting credentials to secure their identity in an organisational field. In a theoretical dimension, the current study argues that the symbolic capital of accounting credentials is dependent on the organisational and social context in line with Bourdieu, and, contrary to Bourdieu, on the supply and demand in the professional labour market.

**Keywords:** accounting profession, identity, insecurity, Bourdieu, public service

# **Accountants' incessant insecurity: Focusing on identities of CPAs hired in South Korean public service**

## **1. Introduction**

We aim to understand how and why qualified accountants hired in public service take a certain strategy to handle their insecure identities. The literature on accountant identity has recognised the insecurity which led to overtime, thereby breaking work-life balance, as a serious problem that has permeated the accounting profession (Ladva and Andrew, 2014; Lupu and Empson, 2015; Spence et al., 2015; Christensen et al., 2018). A type of workplace that an accountant could strategically choose to escape this problem was public service, which has reportedly offered a relatively regular work pattern and stronger job security (Romzek, 1985). While prior studies have reported the increased number and influence of qualified accountants in the government sector, driven by NPM-style public-sector reforms (Power, 1997; Guthrie, 1998; Groot and Budding, 2008; Lapsley et al., 2009; Christensen et al., 2018), there has been minimal research that has explored whether and how accountants have achieved their desired identity security by moving to public service. While Becker et al. (2014) explored identity changes of public-sector accountants in two German states upon the adoption of accrual accounting and budgeting, none of their interviewees were qualified accountants but instead were normal public servants, and thus had a different focus. In order to fill this gap in the literature, we explored how qualified accountants who moved from accounting firms to public service tried to overcome the insecurity problem.

We argue that public service is a good research site to explore how accountants strategically work on their identities because, while it grows harder to distinguish their professional identity from organisational identity (Hamilton, 2013) as big accounting firms became a main locus where accountants construct their identities (Anderson-Gough et al., 2000; Cooper and Robson, 2006; Spence et al., 2015), public service is a place where their professional identities, represented by CPA/CA designations, could be distinct from organisational identities. As individuals' identities are configured by their 'perceptions of the environment in which they are embedded' (Broberg et al., 2018, p. 378), the identities of qualified accountants working in public service is not expected to necessarily be the same as that of accountants in accounting firms, and thus salience of one identity over the other can be more easily seen than in accounting firms.

The remainder of the paper is structured as follows. In the subsequent sections, we review the literature on accountant identity and present Bourdieu's practice theory as a suitable framework to understand it. In the fourth section, we discuss research site, methods, and objects used. In the fifth section, we map out the Korean social space and accounting field. In the sixth section, we explore the insecurity issues faced by accountants at Big-4 firms. In the seventh section, we explore the temporal context, wherein accountants moved to the public service field, which is also mapped out. In the eighth section, we delve into the insecurity problems faced by accountants who joined public service. In the ninth section, we examine the strategies undertaken by accountants to handle their insecure identities. In the 10th section, we explain why accountants took a certain strategy. In the final section we discuss and conclude the paper.

## **2. Literature review**

### *2.1. Professional and organisational identities*

An individual's identity is complex and multifaceted because it has many overlapping layers: racial, sexual, religious, political, social, economic and so on. Even one's family identity can comprise multiple layers: a parent to their children, a husband/wife to their spouse, and a provider/breadwinner for their household (Gendron and Spira, 2010; Lupu and Empson, 2015; Bujaki et al. 2017; Lupu et al., 2018). In this paper, we focus on accountants' work-related identities, such as their professional identity (i.e. CPA/CA) and organisational identity (i.e. trainee, junior, manager, and partner). Professional and organisational identities are understood respectively as 'the extent to which a professional employee experiences a sense of oneness with the profession' and 'the extent to which an individual experiences a shared identity with an organisation' (Broberg et al., 2018, p. 375). Broberg et al. (2018) found that there was a difference between Big-4 firms and non-Big-4 firms regarding professional identity. This finding suggests that the organisational field can affect the professional identity of accountants, and thus there is a need to explore the organisational fields in which accountants work.

Salience of one identity over the other depends on relative esteem and prestige. Warren and Alzola (2009) asserted that in prestigious international accounting firms such as Big-4 firms, an accountant's more salient identity would be organisational rather than professional, whereas an accountant in a small local firm would show a stronger professional identity (Warren and Alzola, 2009). This finding suggests that accountants compare esteem and prestige from their professional qualifications with those given by their workplaces, and strategically work on their identities to enhance their social standing and status.

The relative salience of professional and organisational identities is also dependent on their length of service. As an accountant is promoted from a trainee to a partner in an accounting firm over decades, organisational identity grows stronger than professional identity (Guo, 2018; Broberg et al., 2018). Guo (2018) found that senior partners' organisational identities were strong enough not to care much about the merger of three Canadian accounting bodies, unlike younger accountants, who showed stronger professional identities. This type of evolution suggests that accountant tenure at workplace is critical to their identity salience.

However, in spite of these prior studies, it grows more difficult to differentiate professional and organisational identities nowadays, since accounting firms, rather than professional associations, became the main locus where trainee accountants learn both technical and social skills, and form their identities (Hamilton, 2013). Therefore, as we argued in the introduction section, there is a niche that a research site other than an accounting firm can fill.

## *2.2. Role-image-identity nexus*

Alvesson and Wilmott (2002) argued that individuals within an organisation are continuously 'forming, repairing, maintaining, strengthening or revising' their identities and they labelled this process 'identity work' (p. 626). However, identity work is more complicated than simple classifications into these patterns, because social actors' identities are formed and shaped by their own perception of and reflection on the roles they play, and the images of themselves perceived by others in a particular context (Warren and Parker, 2009; Taylor and Scapens, 2016). Here, professionals' identities, roles and images are understood respectively as how they view who they are, what they do in comparison to what others do (in terms of both functions performed and positions taken), and how others view who they are (Warren and Parker, 2009, p. 206; Taylor and Scapens, 2016; Englund and Gerdin, 2018, p. 7). For example, an accountant's professional identity is often graciously expressed as a 'watchdog'

or ‘gatekeeper’, images signifying their critical roles in watching over businesses and keeping economies safe (Everett et al., 2018). However, a more stereotypical image of an accountant is a ‘boring, joyless, single-minded and dull’ bean counter (Friedman and Lyne, 2001, p. 424). A stereotypical image of a public-sector accountant is akin to this bean-counter image: a middle-aged man wearing a cardigan with no distinct personality who works on piles of numerical data in an unassuming but reliable manner within a bureaucratic structure (Christensen et al., 2018). Although accountants’ roles have moved beyond traditional financial reporting and auditing to more strategic leadership functions, such as strategic planning, project management and consulting, this bean-counter image has persisted (Parker, 2001; Warren and Parker, 2009). These studies suggest that stereotypical images shape identities but are difficult to change once they have been perceived by society.

Nevertheless, there have been endeavours to remove this bean-counter image at both institutional and individual levels. Jeacle (2008) examined how Big-4 firms and professional bodies tried to present friendly, fun, happy, exciting and colourful images of accountants in their recruitment brochures. At a more micro level, Morales and Lambert (2013) studied how accountants preferred rewarding business-oriented and decision-making roles to mundane or demeaning number-crunching roles, which they tried to avoid because of the associated bean-counter image. This finding confirms the role-image-identity nexus, and thus now we understand that accountants strategically make changes to their roles (and more importantly, to others’ perception of their roles) in a symbolic hierarchy to improve their image, thereby ultimately improving their identity.

### *2.3. Identity in context*

A person’s identity is constructed in a given historical and socio-economic context (Bujaki et al., 2017; Brouard et al., 2017; Spence et al., 2017). Spence et al. (2017) explored Big-4 firms in Japan and found that these firms entered into the Japanese market via mergers with already well-established local firms and thus Japanese accountants were able to keep their professional identity of being an ‘honourable individual’, which reflected traditional values in Japanese society. This study suggests that accountants would try to present themselves in a manner acceptable to their social settings and that accountant identity formation and development cannot be examined without considering the values that are highly regarded in the society in which they operate.

Accountant identity is also constructed via interactions with other social actors (Empson, 2004; Warren and Alzola, 2009; Picard, 2016; Christensen et al., 2018). Warren and Alzola (2009) contended that it is possible for auditors to identify with their client firms more than their own employer, as in Enron’s case, where a senior partner of Arthur Anderson was too affiliated with the client company to objectively deliver messages from his employer to the client. Picard (2016), exploring marketisation of North American accountancy, argued that accountant identity was progressively represented as a hybrid between professional accountants and marketed accountants through their interactions and collaboration with marketers since the 1980s. These studies suggest that, where accountants work with other professionals, their identities can be reconfigured.

Accountants can further make sense of who they are by comparing themselves with other professionals. Empson (2004) argued that accountant professional identity is formed where accountants ‘understand themselves to be distinctive from members of other occupations in general and other professions in particular’ (p. 761). Her argument suggests that accountant

professional identity can be formed and re-formed as accountants realise that they are different from other professionals in an organisation. This cognisance of the difference can lead to professional rivalry. Christensen et al. (2018) argued that accountants strived for societal standing as high as that of lawyers and doctors, and they have insecurities about being perceived by the public as less prestigious professionals. This finding indicates that accountants' reflection on their identities in comparison with other professionals can lead to insecurity, but there are other drivers of insecurity at a more individual level than professional rivalry, which are addressed in the subsequent section.

#### *2.4. Identity evolution over time and incessant insecurity*

A person's identity evolves over time (Bucker et al., 2014; Bujaki et al., 2017). Likewise, accountants' professional identities are also continuously formed and re-formed as they proceed through their career paths, and as they reflect on their past experience, present situation and future outlook (Brouard et al., 2017; Guo, 2018). Specifically, accountants' professional identities are formed throughout their young adulthood, when they study accounting modules for qualification examinations and go through gruelling articling experiences in accounting firms (Anderson-Gough et al., 2000, Hamilton, 2013; Ladva and Andrew, 2014; Guo, 2018). Hamilton (2013) interviewed trainee accountants and found that their professional identities developed during the training processes in accounting firms, where their shared sense of belonging to a community of practices started to grow. As they shared learning experiences with their peers and moved towards future professional memberships and career prospects, they experienced deep camaraderie. This type of shared experience plays the role of 'rite of passage' (Bourdieu, 1991, pp. 117-126; see Kornberger et al. (2011, pp. 517-518) for a succinct explanation of this notion), whereby qualified accountants would feel that they belong to an expert group superior to other accounting practitioners who did not share the same experience.

Although qualified accountants may enjoy this camaraderie and high social status recognised by CPA/CA designations (Brouard et al., 2017), they can still suffer insecurity. Lupu and Empson (2015) argued that Big-4 firms strategically recruited 'insecure over-achievers' who constantly seek the approval and recognition of other people. A way to earn recognition and thus to overcome insecurity is by working hard, and thus junior accountants, in an attempt to secure their identity, work for long hours (Ladva and Andrew, 2014). Consequently, they formed the identity of 'efficient worker', which they thought could pave a way to future career successes, albeit by ruining their work-life balance (Ladva and Andrew, 2014, p. 648).

As junior accountants further develop their career paths, their identity can change (Kornberger et al., 2011), but their insecurities do not necessarily disappear with their promotions to higher positions. Kornberger et al. (2011) explored how accountants' identities change at managerial level in Big-4 firms and found that managers destabilised their identity of 'disciplined professional' (p. 515) and formed the new managerial identity by acquiring a new set of skills, including playing games and politicking. Kornberger et al. (2011) regarded this change as a rite of passage because only those who successfully passed this career stage through the web of interactions with juniors, clients and partners were able to be promoted to partner and form a new identity of 'entrepreneurially-minded agents' (p. 514). However, this rite of passage is not without insecurity because managers, as they grow more senior, suffer from anxiety about their 'partnerability', which hinges on their 'ability to win new work and to grow the business' (Spence et al., 2015, p. 775). If they were able to become partners, their identity would be as 'good guys', otherwise they would be viewed as

‘bad guys’ and be made redundant (Spence et al., 2015). This anxiety about partnerability is a driver critical to managers’ insecurity.

Even after making partner in a Big-4 firm, an accountant’s insecurity does not necessarily disappear. Spence et al. (2015) found that British and Canadian partners with considerable technical expertise felt insecure about their images being perceived as ‘geeks’ and ‘second-class citizens’, respectively (p. 774). Considering that technical expertise was highly appreciated in other contexts, such as Bangladeshi Big-4 firms (Spence et al., 2016), this finding highlights a need to investigate the context in which accountants operate in order to more fully understand their identities and associated insecurities. In summary, we understand that accountants’ insecurity drives overtime and can persist up to partnership level as long as they seek the approval of others.

In conclusion, this review of the literature on accountant identity provides us with some understandings and directions: 1) The problems of identity insecurity and overtime have permeated the accounting profession (Ladva and Andrew, 2014; Lupu and Empson, 2015; Spence et al., 2015); 2) Accountants work on their identity by reflecting on how they are viewed by others (image perception) and by trying to improve their image by strategically choosing more rewarding roles and avoiding demeaning roles, thereby changing others’ perceptions of their roles and image (Jeacle 2008; Warren and Parker, 2009; Morales and Lambert, 2013; Taylor and Scapens, 2016); 3) There is a need to factor in the esteem and prestige (which Bourdieu labelled ‘symbolic capital’) provided by accountants’ designations/qualifications and workplaces and in particular how accountants strategically mobilise them, because strong symbolic capital can reduce the insecurity accountants feel. Thus they are expected to work on their identity by deploying and utilising their symbolic capital in order to enhance their security (Warren and Alzola, 2009; Guo, 2018); and 4) More research is needed to explore organisational, social and cultural contexts in which accountants operate to more fully understand how and why they take certain strategies (Spence et al., 2017; Broberg et al., 2018). To extend this body of literature, we explore how accountants who move to public service to solve their insecurity problems work on their identities by making strategic changes to their role or image and by strategically deploying or de-emphasising their CPA/CA designations/qualifications in the context of Korean public service.

### **3. Theoretical framework**

The literature review led us to rely on Pierre Bourdieu’s practice theory as a theoretical framework. Bourdieu used the notions of field, habitus and capital to cover both structural forces and individual agency, thereby providing a comprehensive theoretical framework. In his framework, social actors reflect on their own habitus, capital, and positions in relation to other actors and strategically make changes to their habitus and mobilise their capital to take more dominant positions. At a methodological dimension, Bourdieu suggested that researchers map out the different relevant fields because habitus is shaped and capital is weighed in a different manner by particular fields. In this section, we try to understand Bourdieu’s key theoretical concepts, such as field, capital and habitus, and then discuss possible strategies to secure identity.

#### *3.1. Key theoretical concepts*

The Bourdieusian social world consists of many autonomous **fields**, including the accounting field, and each field is occupied by individual actors whose positions are determined by how much their capital is valued by other social actors (Thompson, 1991, p. 29). We have adopted the Bourdieusian notion of field instead of profession (Bourdieu and Wacquant, 1992, pp. 241-244) because our focus is not only on macro professional associations but also on micro individual accountants. Here, a field is defined as ‘an arena of permanent struggles and conflicts’ between social actors (Wacquant, 1987, p. 72). In this paper, we regard public service as a field to which accountants moved from the accounting field, not only to enhance their security but also to strive for dominance.

A social actor’s dominance in a field is dependent on the mobilisation and deployment of resources and power, which Bourdieu called **capital** in various forms: economic, cultural, social and symbolic (Bourdieu and Wacquant, 1992). Economic capital can be simply understood as money (Bourdieu, 1977). Social capital refers to relationships or networks that an actor can mobilise to the extent that other actors feel obligated to work for them just because they are connected (Bourdieu, 1986). In the accounting field, a network of qualified accountants connected through their professional bodies is an example of social capital. Cultural capital includes knowledge, skills, techniques and language proficiency (Bourdieu, 1986). These forms of capital become symbolic when they are ‘perceived and recognised as legitimate’ by a field (Bourdieu 1985, p. 724). Professional qualifications/designations are an example of symbolic capital because the accounting field respects and honours the holders’ knowledge (cultural capital) more than that of others. Consequently, qualified accountants with CA/CPA credentials are more likely to dominate the accounting field than bookkeepers and unqualified practitioners. Here, the symbolic capital of the accounting qualifications and the dominance of the qualified accountants are not dependent on the supply and demand for their professional labour, but on the symbolic scarcity of the credentials<sup>1</sup> (Bourdieu, 1991, p. 241).

As the weight carried by capital is dependent on fields, social actors strategically emphasise or de-emphasise a certain form of capital in a particular field. Spence et al. (2016) found that technical accounting skills (embodied cultural capital) were highly valued in the Bangladeshi accounting field, which also valued British qualifications more highly than local ones, whereas in many Western countries they were perceived as negative capital for promotion to partnership, and thus senior managers de-emphasised their technical skills to improve their promotion prospects.

One form of capital can convert to another form; for example, symbolic capital can convert to economic capital. In the accounting field, even though identical work could be carried out by either a CA/CPA qualified accountant or a bookkeeper, the accountant with qualifications (symbolic capital) would receive a higher fee (economic capital) than the bookkeeper (Thompson, 1991, p. 14; Bourdieu, 1991, p. 241).

Bourdieu’s definition of **habitus** is not definitive. It was defined as ‘systems of durable, transposable dispositions, structured structures predisposed to function as structuring structures’ (Bourdieu, 1990, p. 52). By ‘structured structure’, Bourdieu (1990) means that habitus is a social structure internalised in human bodies formed by social practices throughout history. By ‘structuring structure’ he suggests that habitus has agency to produce history by shaping practices (Bourdieu, 1990, pp. 54-56). While this definition focuses on the macro structural level, he provided another definition of habitus at a more individual micro level as ‘a system of dispositions acquired by implicit or explicit learning’ (Bourdieu,

1993, p. 76). This definition means that individual actors naturally learn from their upbringing, education and social experiences how to perceive, think and act, which consequently constitutes their habitus (Wacquant, 1987).

Habitus is an important concept in understanding social actors' collective decisions and practices. Where a group of people share common education and experience over time, they collectively grow a homogenous habitus, which leads them to socialise within the group and favour experiences that reinforce their habitus (Bourdieu, 1990, p. 61). Therefore, we argue that qualified accountants have accounting habitus collectively generated by their common accounting education and experience in accounting firms within the private sector (see Spence and Carter (2014) and Spence et al. (2016) for accountants' habitus produced in large accounting firms)<sup>ii</sup>. This habitus of accountants is expected to be different from the bureaucratic habitus that public servants have developed through their public service training and careers in addition to public administration studies. The dominance of one habitus over another is dependent on which habitus better fits the public service field.

A group of social actors who share a common habitus are likely to practise in a harmonised manner without direct instructions, conscious references to codified laws, or explicit co-ordinations, because their habitus plays the role of law inscribed in their bodies (Bourdieu, 1990, pp 58-59). Lupu et al. (2018) explored family histories and in particular the upbringing of professionals, and found that their work-family balance decisions and practices 'emanate from embodied and deeply engrained dispositions', that is habitus, rather than cognitive or rational processes (p. 176). This finding suggests that social actors are not necessarily aware that their practices and decisions have been shaped by their habitus (Bourdieu, 1990, p. 69), unless they become reflexive.

### *3.2. Identity strategies: Vision of division vs. di-vision*

Bourdieuian notions of habitus and identity are inextricably linked, and the process of identity formation is akin to that of habitus construction. Just as a group of people share habitus based on their common education and experiences over time, they also share a collective identity, such as being graduates of a certain university or being managers of a particular Big-4 firm (Bourdieu, 1991; Kornberger et al., 2011). Since both habitus and identity are constructed by upbringing, learning and experience, a social actor internalises the social world while configuring his or her identity (Bourdieu, 1990). Therefore, reflection on one's collective identity involves making sense of the meaning of the social world, in particular around a collective habitus, position and capital in a given social space (Bourdieu, 1991, pp. 234-236).

In addition to the collective habitus, official/legal naming or an endowment of title also effectively institutes identity (Bourdieu, 1990, p. 60). In the accounting field, while there would be little difference in the possession of accounting knowledge (cultural capital) between the last person to pass the CPA/CA qualification examinations and the first person to fail, the effect of the result of the examinations on their identity would be great (Bourdieu, 1991, p. 120). The former would be able to use CPA/CA designations, which become an official definition of his or her professional identity, and thus they do not need to further prove themselves (Bourdieu, 1991, pp. 239-240), but the latter would be a nobody in the accounting field.

When social actors realise that their identity is insecure, they take actions to secure it (Bourdieu, 1998, p. 28). They do this by striving to change others' perceptions of who they are (Bourdieu, 1991, p. 224). For this purpose, they can employ two key strategies: 'vision of division' or 'di-vision' (Bourdieu, 1991, p. 221). In the accounting field, qualified accountants would strive to make other actors see the difference between themselves and unqualified practitioners by introducing themselves to others as a CPA/CA-qualified accountant, rather than simply as an 'accountant' (letting other see the division) because, while both are true, a social actor would use the symbolically more powerful designation in the expression of his or her professional identity (Bourdieu, 1991, p. 240). When this vision of division is achieved, other social actors would perceive and recognise them as a qualified accountant, unlike mere bookkeepers or unqualified practitioners.

In contrast, di-vision is to de-emphasise individual differences within a group to prevent others from seeing the difference among the members of the group they identify with. The purpose of the di-vision is to 'establish meaning and a consensus about meaning and in particular about the identity and unity of the [CPA/CA] group, which creates the reality of the unity and the identity of the group' (Bourdieu, 1991, p. 221). This unity or belief in unity is produced by the inculcation of the identity through schools and training sessions, which form the basis of shared habitus (Bourdieu, 1991, p. 225). However, the identity is also reinforced through the process of communicating and socialising with other CPAs/CAs, and consequently trainee accountants gradually grow to think, speak and behave like a CPA/CA over time (Anderson-Gough et al., 2000).

Relying on this Bourdieusian theoretical understanding of identity, we conclude that qualified accountants' strategic choice (either vision of division or di-vision) depends on which field (either the accounting or public service field) is more valued in a social space. For this purpose we map out the different fields in Section 5 after introducing the research site in the next section.

#### **4. Research site and methods**

We aim to explore why and how qualified accountants who moved from accounting firms to public service work on their identity to reduce their insecurity, and for this purpose we chose Korea as a research site. While accountants who joined the public service to implement NPM reforms, such as public sector accrual accounting, have been reported to grow more powerful in their new organisational field (Power, 1997; Guthrie, 1998; Gendron et al., 2007; Groot and Budding, 2008; Lapsley et al., 2009; Christensen et al., 2018), this finding is mostly from Anglo-Saxon countries, where the accounting profession was deemed relatively prestigious. In those countries people are usually referred to by their first names, but Koreans are called by their designations, or designations plus their (sur)names in their workplaces. If John Smith was a Korean-qualified accountant, he would not be called simply 'John' or 'Mr Smith', but 'Accountant', 'Accountant Smith', or 'Accountant John Smith' by his colleagues. According to the *Certified Public Accountant Act*, both the membership to the Korean Institute of Certified Public Accountants (KICPA) and the 'Accountant' designation are limited to those who have passed KICPA qualification examinations<sup>iii</sup> (thus, an 'accountant' refers to a 'KICPA-qualified accountant' hereafter in this paper). Likewise, public servants were called by bureaucratic designations that disclose their public service levels. In particular, lower ranking ones who interacted with citizens were mandated to use official designations by an *Enforcement Rule on the External Use of Official Designations by Public Servants at Level Six or Below on Practical Services*, while there is no such rule for higher

ranking officials<sup>iv</sup>. Therefore, strategic designation choices of Korean accountants in the public service, in particular those at a higher level whose designations are not legally enforced, are expected to enrich our understanding of the accounting profession.

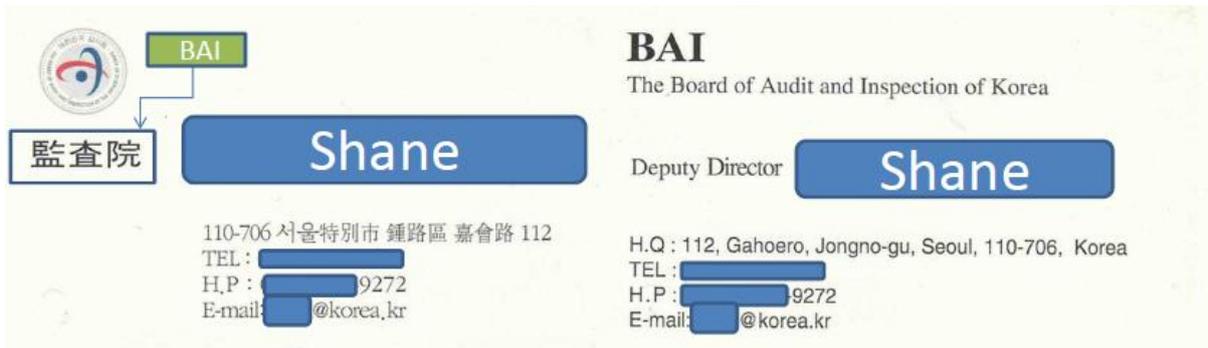
As for research methods, we relied on interviews as our primary research method as suggested by Bujaki et al. (2017), and we interviewed 12 accountants and six of their colleagues<sup>v</sup>. Our interviewees included accountants who 1) worked in the private sector; 2) were seconded to central government departments from the private sector; or 3) joined the public service as permanent public servants, as well as their non-accountant colleagues (see the appendix for more details). While they were asked about their education, training and experience to understand their habitus and capital, as suggested by Jacobs (2005) and Christensen and Parker (2010), particular attention was paid to their insecurity and strategies for managing this. The interviews were conducted in Korean and then transcribed and translated into English. Most of the interviews were electronically recorded but, for a few participants who did not consent to the recording, we relied on field notes.

In order to triangulate the validity of the interview data, we also relied on some written documents, such as articles in newspapers and Internet media, and government press releases. However, our key research object, which has seldom been used in prior accounting research, was including the business cards of interviewees. We argue that a business card is critical to examining one's identity via the role-image-identity nexus in the Korean context (Warren and Parker, 2009; Taylor and Scapens, 2016). Korean actors work on their identity by showing recipients their designations/qualifications on business cards that represents their role(s), which they think can improve the image perceived by the recipients. Therefore, social actors' identity strategies can be understood by analysing the designations and qualifications they deploy on their business cards.

This investigation was efficacious because Korean actors, even in public service, had considerable freedom regarding their business cards. They had the freedom of using or not using a card and of deciding the design and content on the Korean and English sides of their cards. Evidence of this practice was provided by our interviewees and their cards. An accountant employed at the Board of Audit and Inspection of Korea (BAI: equivalent to the National Audit Office) noted when we asked for his business card: 'There are some people who have business cards.... It (the proportion of BAI employees who used business cards and those who did not) is like half-and-half, but I don't use a business card'. His statement suggests that government employees, at least at BAI, had the freedom to use or not use a business card.

In addition, government employees had considerable freedom regarding the design and content of their business cards. In <Figure 1> we juxtaposed the Korean and English sides of a business card from Shane, BAI's typical public servant<sup>vi</sup>. The Korean side shows both BAI's logo and its name in Chinese characters under the logo but does not disclose his designation. In contrast, the English side does not have the logo but instead shows the 'Deputy Director' designation. Although this designation could lead a recipient of the card to recognise Shane's bureaucratic rank (level 5), he was not called by this designation. Instead, he was called by the 'Auditor' designation by his colleagues and auditees<sup>vii</sup>. These differences in design between the Korean and English sides and in designations between the card and the actual practice suggest that BAI's employees exercised freedom regarding the design and content of their cards.

<Figure 1> Public servant's business card at BAI



On the other hand, the two business cards shown in <Figure 2> belonging to Frank, an accountant at Ministry of Unification (MoU), demonstrate that this freedom was not limited to BAI. In the first card, he showed the ‘Deputy Director’ designation on both the Korean and English sides, but juxtaposed his KICPA and AICPA (American Institute of Certified Public Accountants) qualifications with the bureaucratic designation only on the Korean side when he worked for the general management division. On the second card, however, he only used the bureaucratic designation without showing any accounting credentials on both sides when he worked for a general planning team. This contrast suggests that Korean public servants had freedom to selectively show qualifications on their cards.

<Figure 2> Accountant's business cards at MoU



Finally, we found that Jeff, an accountant seconded from KICPA to the Ministry of Public Administration and Security (MoPAS), showed an incorrect designation. As shown in <Figure 3>, he used his correct KICPA designation on the Korean side, but he deployed the

‘Deputy Director’ designation on the English side, and thus a non-Korean recipient would presume that Jeff was a deputy director working in the local government accounting division and would address him as ‘Deputy Director Jeff’. He argued that a CPA-qualified accountant with more than 5 years’ experience in accounting firms should be equivalent to the deputy director level in public service (he previously worked for KPMG for 10 years). However, his colleague Leo clearly saw Jeff as an accountant and called him ‘Accountant Jeff’ rather than ‘Deputy Director Jeff’. Leo made this clear by stating that Jeff ‘belongs to KICPA, but has been seconded to us, so that we can use him. ... He gets paid by KICPA, although he works here’. Leo’s statement indicates that Jeff was neither employed by the public service nor awarded the public-servant status.

<Figure 3> Accountant’s business card at MoPAS



These examples show that Korean social actors in public service had considerable freedom to choose and show designations/qualifications on their business cards. In Bourdieusian theorisation, this choice is not necessarily a rational one, but directed by actors’ habitus and capital, which reflect the uncodified rule of fields and social spaces which everyone there takes for granted, wittingly or unwittingly. Therefore, a salient accounting credential on a business card would indicate that its holder strategically, but not necessarily consciously, deployed it to reinforce their professional accountant identity in contexts where accountants’ habitus fits and where the symbolic capital of accounting and accounting qualifications are valued in their field<sup>viii</sup>.

## 5. Cartography of Korean social space and accounting field

In accordance with Bourdieusian methodology, we start the analysis with mapping out Korean social space and fields. Korean social spaces, and particularly powerful fields within it (including political, academic, bureaucratic, and accounting fields), were dominated by graduates from a small number of elite universities, locally known as SKY (Seoul National, Korea and Yonsei) Universities with Seoul National University (SNU) being the most prestigious one (Sorensen, 1994). Academic qualifications from the elite universities had strong symbolic capital, and their graduates shared a habitus that reinforced their dominance in Korean society. Therefore, we expect that as the number of the elite university graduates increases their membership in KICPA, the symbolic capital of accounting, accountants and accounting qualification will grow stronger, and vice versa.

The Korean accounting field shared key attributes with the Japanese accounting field, as reported by Sakagami et al. (1999), Matsubara and Endo (2017) and Spence et al. (2017),

reflecting the history of Japanese colonial rule from 1910-1945. First, as in Japan (Sakagami et al., 1999), there was only one professional association for qualified accountants: KICPA. Its membership was dependent on the result of two rounds of qualification examinations, which were perceived to be very difficult to pass, and thus accountants enjoyed strong symbolic capital from this credential.

Second, also as in Japan (Matsubara and Endo, 2017), passing the KICPA examinations was compulsory for recruitment in accounting firms, unlike the option of articling offered in many Western countries. Therefore, only those who had passed the examinations were eligible for 1-year professional training (2 years for audit) in accounting firms. Full membership was awarded after the professional training, which formed the basis of shared habitus and identity of accountants as a rite of passage (Bourdieu, 1991; Kornberger et al., 2011).

Third, again as in Japan (Spence et al., 2017), Big-4 firms entered into the Korean accounting field through mergers or affiliations with already-established local firms and practised under local trading names. However, their foreign names were juxtaposed with local names in most occasions and thus the firms are locally labelled ‘foreign firms’. For example, as shown by a business card in <Figure 4>, local names such as Samil and foreign names such as PwC appeared together in most occasions, and our interviewees used them interchangeably.

<Figure 4> Accountant’s business card at PwC <sup>ix</sup>



Fourth, the accounting profession did not exist in the public sector field prior to accrual accounting implementation in the 2000s. Previously, the accounting function was practised by typical public servants under the cash-based system, and accounting was regarded as a private-sector practice (Ahn et al., 2014; Ahn and Jacobs, 2019). Therefore, we take an approach different to that of Christensen et al. (2018) in classifying our interviewees. While Christensen et al. (2018) broadly defined a public-sector accountancy practitioner more comprehensively ‘as any individual who has a claimed, or an expected, competency or interest in the preparation, communication, audit and/or evaluation of accounting products relevant to a public sector entity’, we differentiate KICPA-qualified accountants who join the public service without passing the public service entry examinations from typical public servants who had to pass the examinations, because they followed different career paths, which could shape their own distinct habitus and capital.

Finally, KICPA is subordinate to the state, which was not only evidenced by our interviews but also documented in the literature: The Korean accounting standard-setting body was

controlled by the central government (Graham and King, 2000), and the audit field was highly regulated by the state (Koo and Sim, 1999). The central government controlled the KICPA qualification examination and regulated the number of new members admitted every year. Paradoxically, this control enhanced the legitimacy of the KICPA credential and the social status of accountants because the state is considered the most powerful source of symbolic capital (Bourdieu, 1994, 1996). This symbolic benefit from state control was confirmed by Justin, a research fellow at the KICPA headquarters, who stated: 'FSC (Financial Services Commission: a central government agency) manages the KICPA qualification examinations, which provides public confidence and so gives us more stability'. Therefore we conclude that while Korean accountancy holds a respected social position, it is subordinate to the public service field.

## **6. Insecurity experienced by accountants at Big-4 firms**

Prior to exploring the identity work of accountants who moved from accounting firms to public service, we needed to examine how accountants in Big-4 firms perceived who they were to understand why some accountants strategically decided to make this shift. For this purpose, we interviewed Jason and Andrew whom we perceived as the most dominant actors within their cohort group in the accounting field because of their educational backgrounds and workplaces. Jason and Andrew respectively graduated from Gyunggi High School and Daewon Foreign Language High School (the most prestigious public and private high schools), obtained Bachelor degrees from the Business School of SNU, and passed KICPA examinations in 2000 (Jason) and 2001 (Andrew). Since then, they have been working for KPMG and PwC, respectively, at which they had been promoted from trainees to managers over 9-10 years. Nevertheless, they felt insecurity from their irregular work patterns including frequent overtime at night and on weekends. They testified:

It depends on the season. Usually I go to work around 9, 10. But time to get off work (pause). At times I cannot go home for 3, 4 consecutive nights in high season.... An accountant should complete his given project on time no matter how many hours it would take. A manager, even a partner, couldn't tell if he will have time to go home that night. [Jason]

My life is very irregular. In high season, we are extremely busy.... So it has an adverse effect on my health. We have to do a lot of overtime at night.... In busy season, my wife is sleeping when I come back home late at night. I don't have time to see people who are not related to work. It is hard to plan something. [Andrew]

These statements show that overtime on an irregular basis permeated the Korean Big-4 firms, akin to Lupu and Empson's (2015) study of French accountants. In both fields, accountants, regardless of rank, had to suffer from irregular overtime at night and on weekends, which had an adverse effect on their health, family and social life. This finding suggests that striking a work-life balance while working in the Big-4 accounting firms seems impossible in both Western and Asian countries (Ladva and Andrew, 2014). Moreover, Jason's statement that 'an accountant should complete his given project on time no matter how many hours it would take' suggests that accountants' collective identity of being a responsible or dependable person formed (and/or was also formed by) their habitus, which took overtime for granted.

Another type of distress was from imminent pressure to win new work for their employers, which was critical to partnerability. An Internet media article documented what partners were like in PwC:

At the moment, PwC has 100 partners. They are the ones who have been driving the turnover of the firm and have been through the jungle where only the fittest survive. ... Every year PwC recruits 30% of newly qualified accountants, but 80% of them are from so-called SKY universities. PwC seriously considers educational backgrounds for the recruitment, because that enhances future lobbying power (Park, 2003).

This quote indicates that: 1) the partners were those who had won new work to increase the revenue of their Big-4 firm (otherwise they could not have been made partners); 2) social capital based on their educational background was critical to winning new work; and therefore 3) graduates of the elite universities were more likely to be recruited by the Big-4 firms and successfully make partner, due to their social capital. This finding suggests that winning new work to grow business might be a universal criterion critical to the promotion to partner as shown by Spence et al. (2015). This was the situation in the accounting field, which increased the insecurity of accountants at manager level, such as Andrew, who stated:

Nowadays, even managers and senior managers are expected to win new work. In profitable headquarters, partners are the ones who do that. But in poor divisions, I mean poor in terms of client base, everyone is required to do that.... Once I get promoted to be a senior manager, I will be required to win new work too. If I can't, then I need to leave the firm. I will need to look for another job.

This statement indicates that there was strong institutional pressure at even senior manager level to win new work, just as reported by Spence et al. (2015), and that accountants' insecurity was not created only by their irregular overtime and broken work-life balance but also by their own perception of a possible future identity as a job seeker or even an unemployed person. In other words, an accountant's insecurity is not caused only by his or her present situation but also by future prospects.

According to Taylor and Scapen (2016), this type of insecure identity can be a motivation for an accountant to make a change. A possible manner of change is joining the public service, which could solve these problems as Andrew and Jason stated:

If one was recognised and rode high in his firm, and so he felt like he can make partner later, and if this job fitted his personal bent, then he would stay in the firm. But if he couldn't meet all these conditions, then he would be attracted to public service, in which they are not required to win new work and can enjoy job security.... But it is hard to join public service although everyone wants to because of job security. [Andrew]

There is quality of life. Government is a difficult organisation to work for. But they can see their schedule there about 'what I will be doing in one week'. Even if they had to work from 9 to 11, at least they would know that they go to work at 9, get off work at 11 and take weekends off. Of course, they would have to work at weekends on occasion. But they don't think like 'I may not be able to go home tomorrow, if some tasks are unexpectedly given to me'. So they can arrange social events. [Jason]

These statements indicate that public service was perceived as an attractive workplace to accountants, because of the better job security and quality of life it offered, including a more regular work pattern and improved work-life balance. Yet although accountants were attracted to public service, they used to be unable to join unless they had passed the public service entry examinations. The Korean government only started opening the door, albeit narrowly, to accountants circa 2000.

## 7. Exploring temporal and organisational contexts

In this section we explore the temporal context of the 2000s when some accountants left the accounting field for the public service field to set themselves free from their insecurity problems and then the organisational context of the Ministry of Strategy and Finance (MoSF), one of the central government departments that recruited the most accountants.

### 7.1. Temporal context

Since the 1990s, a neoliberal ideology accompanied by NPM, began permeating Korea, but it was the Asian Financial Crisis and subsequent IMF bailout in 1997/98 that held the most sway over both the private and public sectors. The government suddenly increased the number of newly qualified accountants to ‘enhance the accounting transparency in the aftermath of the financial crisis’ (FSC, 2017). As shown in <Table 1>, since 2001, approximately 1,000 accountants have been qualified each year. Due to this sudden increase in the supply of accountants in the labour market, many new accountants had difficulty finding a professional training placement (Kang and Park, 2002).

<Table 1> Number of new accountants from elite universities (1994-2009)

Year	'94 <sup>x</sup>	'95	'96	'97	'98	'99	'00	'01
Total number of newly qualified accountants	286	282	356	453	511	505	555	1014
Graduates of SNU	48	48	65	77	83	106	134	177
Graduates of Korea Uni	25	37	42	74	73	80	89	137
Graduates of Yonsei Uni	64	60	72	74	95	103	108	152
Percentage of SKY graduates	48%	51%	50%	50%	49%	57%	60%	46%
Year	'02	'03	'04	'05	'06	'07	'08	'09
Total number of newly qualified accountants	1006	1003	1001	1004	1007	830	1040	936
Graduates of SNU	154	148	159	137	93	63	88	51
Graduates of Korea Uni	138	144	148	157	155	120	129	114
Graduates of Yonsei Uni	156	149	156	176	156	132	154	137
Percentage of SKY graduates	45%	44%	46%	47%	40%	38%	36%	32%

(Modified from Financial Supervisory Service (2018))

In contrast with these narrower job opportunities in accounting firms, the central government started recruiting more accountants because NPM-style reforms, such as accrual accounting

adoption, required accountants' expertise (Power, 1997; Guthrie, 1998; Gendron et al., 2007; Groot and Budding, 2008; Lapsley et al., 2009; Christensen et al., 2018). Therefore, accountants who were attracted to the public service took advantage of opportunities to leave accounting firms where more severe competitions were expected due to the increased number of accountants. We argue that this temporal context provided us with an opportunity to explore whether accountants took a vision-of-division strategy to keep their professional identity, or a di-vision strategy to obscure their accountant identity and adopt a bureaucratic organisational identity in public service. However, this choice depended on how much the accountants' capital and habitus was valued by and fitted into the public service field.

## 7.2. Organisational context

The public service, in particular the central government, is one of the most powerful fields in Korean society. Its economic dominance has been recognised by economists, such as Witt and Redding (2013) and Witt (2014), who considered the central government's dominance over the business field to be a key attribute of Korean economic development. Regarding the power of public service over society, Im (2003) stated that "[t]he bureaucracy is strong and public servants, who are predominantly the elites of society, are considered wise and good decision-makers who hold a long-term perspective" (p. 90), while "the private sector remains weak and small" (p. 91). This dominance was further reinforced by competitive public service entry examinations because entry into public service was exclusively limited to those who had passed the examinations (Kim, 2000). While there were three entry levels (level 5, 7 and 9), the examinations for entry level 5 were considered the most prestigious and separately called 'advanced public service entry examinations', because managerial roles and 'Deputy Director' designations were awarded to those who passed the examinations immediately after one-year of professional training.

While the Korean public service is a powerful field, it is not homogeneous. We interviewed accountants working in several ministries, but MoSF appeared to be the most salient field, where the dominance of public servants was testified to not only by newspaper articles but also by our interviewees themselves. MoSF's nickname was 'MoFia', which was created by combining the 'Ministry of Finance' and 'Mafia' (Kang, 2006). This nickname suggests the strong social capital ties among MoSF's bureaucrats, which worked in their favour. Ties are reinforced by common educational backgrounds, professional public service training and career paths. This dominance was illustrated by Eric, the first accountant hired by MoSF without sitting the public service entry examinations in 2001:

They (typical public servants who passed the advanced public service entry examinations) have very strong ties.... If MoSF recruits 10 positions, then the top 10 apply for the positions at MoSF. Then the top 10 guys who had passed the advanced public service entry exams with the highest marks come here, so they are mostly from the SNU, Law Department or Economics Department.... 80% of them are from SNU.

This statement illustrates that a typical MoSF public servant would be a graduate of SNU who had passed the advanced public service entry examinations with top marks. This common prestigious educational background was a powerful device for producing and reproducing the dominant habitus shared by elite bureaucrats, which was further reinforced by the professional public service training; thus, this type of recruitment would form the basis of elite bureaucratic habitus and identity over time (Bourdieu, 1984, 1991, 1996; Jacobs, 2003). Therefore, an accountant who neither had an SNU degree nor had passed the

advanced public service entry examinations would not come pre-programmed with the dominant bureaucratic habitus and thus would be expected to be in a subordinate position at MoSF.

## **8. Insecurity of accountants in public service**

In this section, we explore the insecurities of accountants who joined the public service. To begin with, to examine whether accountants' insecurity problems in Big-4 firms had been solved by joining the public service, we met Oliver and Tyson. Oliver graduated from the Business School at Yonsei University and worked at KPMG for 3 years before joining BAI in 2006. Tyson graduated from the same school and worked at PwC for 4 years before joining the Defence Acquisition Program Administration (DAPA, which is equivalent to Defence Material Organisation) in the same year. When asked about work-life balance, they replied:

Public service gives us more leisure time than accounting firms did.... We can plan in advance and be more organised. We can have holidays and we work only on weekdays. [Oliver]

Most accountants would agree with me. In accounting firms, work intensity is very high. There is a lot of work to do. Instead, annual salary is high there. So it depends on what you pursue. I chose work-life balance rather than high annual salary. My more honest answer is to live a comfortable life. In the accounting firm, I couldn't go home at times in high season. I had to work overnight.... So I would like to strike a work-life balance. That's the reason. Work intensity is low, and the job is guaranteed until retirement. [Tyson]

These statements suggest that the accountants achieved both stronger job security and better work-life balance by joining the public service. They had more regular work patterns without the requirement to work at night and on weekends, which was taken for granted in the accounting field. However, this better work-life balance and stronger job security were achieved at the expense of the capital they could have accumulated in accounting firms.

### *8.1. Weakened economic capital*

Accountants' economic capital was reduced in public service. Tony, an accountant at MoSF, advised us that accountants' prior experiences in accounting firms were incorporated into the public service salary scale with a 20% discount, which means that their 5-year career in a Big-4 firm was equivalent to 4 years of public service. However, the bigger problem was that the absolute amount of salary had been lost. An accountant employed by BAI in 1995 for the first time without the requirement to sit public service entry examinations, testified during an interview with a newspaper that his salary was 'only 20-25% of the salary that his former colleagues would receive who started their accounting career together' (Jang, 2006). This type of missed economic capital was confirmed by Oliver, who highlighted his financial concern repeatedly during the interview:

The biggest disadvantage is in the financial aspect. In fact, the money we receive here is really small. ... As I said before, lower salary leads to lower living standards. That is a weakness. It is a huge weakness indeed.

Oliver's statement suggests that accountants' living standards had to be sacrificed after joining the public service. Oliver showed how this reduced economic capital was related to the role-image-identity nexus (Warren and Parker, 2009; Taylor and Scapens, 2016), while talking about why some accountants left BAI:

One of them went back to an accounting firm. The other one moved to a foreign company, Siemens, as an accounting team leader. It is because of money, because we have to support our families. Accountants are perceived to be high-income earners by family members, but the salary is really small here.

Oliver explained that some accountants left the public service because its salary was much smaller than the amount offered by accounting firms. This choice made by accountants was based on the gap between the widespread image of being high-income earners and their actual role as breadwinners at home. Therefore, the poor economic capital led some accountants to reflect on the gap between image and role and then choose the identity of a new comer to an unfamiliar organisational field or an identity of a returnee to the accounting field. Otherwise, accountants, as breadwinners at home, had to continuously deal with the insecurity caused by this discrepancy between the stereotypical image of a high-income earner and the actual identity of a medium-income earner, just as Oliver did. Oliver stated 'actually all my family members are professionals like lawyers and doctors. ... Most of my friends are also professionals like lawyers, doctors and accountants'. We understood that the gap between the high-income earner image, which matched most of his friends' and family's actual economic capital, and his medium-income earner identity left him with a feeling of greater insecurity, which he did not experience when he worked at KPMG. In addition to the lost economic capital, however, there were other causes of accountants' insecurity.

### *8.2. Cultural capital acknowledged but not valued*

Accountants' cultural capital (knowledge and expertise) was well recognised by their non-accountant colleagues in most central government departments. For example, the accounting knowledge of Frank, who worked for one year for PwC and 4 years for KPMG before joining MoU in 2008, was highly appreciated by his public servant colleagues, Jack and Eugene, who stated:

He did a really good job. He is an expert in accounting. Our Division Head said, 'If you have any question, ask Frank. He has all the answers.' His accounting knowledge was really helpful.

This statement indicates that Frank's cultural capital accumulated in the accounting field was well recognised in his new field.

However, this type of recognition did not necessarily strengthen accountants' security. Tyson at DAPA shared with us his difficulty:

Everyone wants to avoid costing here. ... In fact, accountants are very good at numbers, but we do not want to work on costing only. There are other tasks related to numbers, such as budgeting or project management. But accountants are constrained to work on costing only. I am good at numbers but I also want to do other types of work. But it seems to be impossible to get out of costing. I have to do only costing.

Tyson's statement indicates that costing work was assigned to accountants because their expertise on costing was recognised at DAPA. However, the problem was that costing, for which DAPA exceptionally hired accountants without the requirement to sit public service entry examinations, was perceived as difficult work that most public servants wanted to avoid, and thus accountants who were recognised as capable enough to do it well had to primarily work only on it. This finding suggests that costing was regarded as demeaning rather than rewarding in the symbolic hierarchy of DAPA's work (Morales and Lambert, 2013), and thus accountants' expertise to perform costing work well converted to negative symbolic capital (Spence et al., 2016).

We further found that this problem was not limited to DAPA, and perpetuated the stereotypical bean-counter image (Friedman and Lyne, 2001; Jeacle, 2008; Warren and Parker, 2009). Eric at MoSF stated:

The problem is that accounting is an unimportant task that is not highly regarded in public service. If a person is doing a policy-related task, he is praised like: 'He is very competent'; 'He is on a roll.' However, if a person is working on numbers, he is treated like 'You are just a bean counter, so you work on that task only.' ... Those who make policies are highly valued here. There will be no change in this atmosphere.

This statement also indicates that accountants faced a dilemma or were caught in a career trap that they could not easily escape. The better they performed accounting/costing tasks, which they were hired for and had expertise in, the more those demeaning roles would be assigned to them, thereby perpetuating the negative stereotypical bean-counter image and weakening their identity, increasing insecurity. Therefore, there was a risk that accountants' technical expertise on costing/accounting could lead them to form the identity of a second-class citizen in the public service (Spence et al., 2015).

### *8.3. Social capital missing*

Since accountants make sense of who they are by comparing themselves with other professionals in an organisation (Empson, 2004), they formed a minority identity in the public service as they considered the difference in the absolute number between accountants and typical public servants. Oliver stated:

We feel lonely. There are not many accountants here.... No one discriminates against us. No one intentionally bullies us. But personally we think like 'what if we had more cohorts, more friends, and more senior accountants here'. Then we might be better in responding to pressures and could be given more tips. But those who don't have [other accountants around] would feel lonely. On average, there is only one accountant per department. This workplace is their (typical public servants') main domain.

Oliver's statement suggests that accountants were neither systematically discriminated against nor bullied in the public service. However, the accountants felt insecure because they reflected on the fact that they didn't belong to the mainstream group of actors, thereby developing a minority identity. We found that this type of insecurity was most obviously shown in MoSF among the central government departments because of the salient dominance of its elite public servants. This situation was observed by Blake, an accountant who was seconded from PwC to MoSF:

We have a small number of accountants here, and opportunities for good positions and for promotions are limited. It is disadvantageous to accountants. Bureaucrats who passed the advanced public service entry exams are more valued here than accountants. It is difficult for accountants to take good positions in the most important bureaus and divisions, such as the economic policy, budget, and taxation bureaus. Those bureaus recruit only those who passed the advanced public service exams. It is not flexible. Those who passed the exams in the same year gather together like in the military, and this gathering is really important. So it seems that those who do not pass the advanced public service entry exams are left out.

Blake's statement indicates that the public servants who passed the advanced public service entry examinations and completed the professional public service training together possessed much more powerful social capital than the accountants, and they were more likely than the accountants to be promoted to higher ranks and/or work in more powerful and influential divisions and bureaus. It also suggests that public servants' elite bureaucratic habitus was formed through the professional public service training. This training played the role of a rite of passage, which consecrated and legitimated their sense of community, forging the basis of the elite bureaucratic habitus and identity shared by the homogenous cohort group (Bourdieu, 1991; Kornberger et al. 2011). The accountants who did not have the opportunity to join this training course did not share in the common experience, habitus or the same sense of community, making them permanent outsiders. Therefore, we expected that the marginalised accountants tried to strategically change their roles, thereby removing the demeaning bean-counter image to secure their identities (Warren and Parker, 2009; Taylor and Scapens, 2016).

## **9. Accountants' strategies**

We found that accountants took a di-vision strategy to obscure the difference between them and typical public servants, thereby securing their organisational identity (Bourdieu, 1991), and in this section we investigate how they put this strategy into practice. To begin with, all of them were called by their bureaucratic designations by their colleagues immediately after they joined the public service. No one insisted on being called by their 'accountant' designation once they left the accounting field. This was only the first step in casting off their professional identities and putting on bureaucratic organisational identities. As they grew used to the public service, they implemented a di-vision strategy by avoiding accounting work and de-emphasising their KICPA qualification.

### *9.1. Di-vision by avoiding accounting work*

We found that accountants tried to change their roles by strategically avoiding accounting/costing work for which they were hired. Tyson stated:

Some quit. Some are on leave of absence. Some are on language training programmes abroad. They (accountants at DAPA) employ all sorts of expedients to get out of costing.

Thus, accountants at DAPA made strategic changes to their roles, including leaving the public service, to avoid costing work. Avoiding accounting/costing work was a di-vision strategy effective in securing their organisational identities and weakening professional identities because in doing so, accountants obscured the difference between themselves and the mainstream actors in the public service field (Bourdieu, 1991). When we met accountants

in the central government departments, MoSF was the organisational field where this salient di-vision strategy was most common. Eric explained the choice to avoid accounting work as follows:

Accountants hate doing accounting. More than 10 accountants have been employed in MoSF since I was employed, but all of them fled from accounting work. Accountants do not want to do accounting because they do not want to be stuck there. They think like ‘other people experience all sorts of work thanks to the job-rotation system, but I am doing this only’. So they feel like they are held back. This belief prevails among public servants.

Eric’s statement showed that accountants had to reluctantly undertake accounting roles until they could successfully avoid this type of work using the job-rotation system, which moved a public servant from one bureau/division to another every 2 or 3 years to let them experience different types of work throughout their career. For Eric, it took more than 5 years to move out of accounting work because no one wanted to replace him. He was able to move to a ‘proper’ non-accounting division only after Tony was newly recruited from the accounting field in 2007.

### *9.2. Di-vision by de-emphasising the CPA qualification*

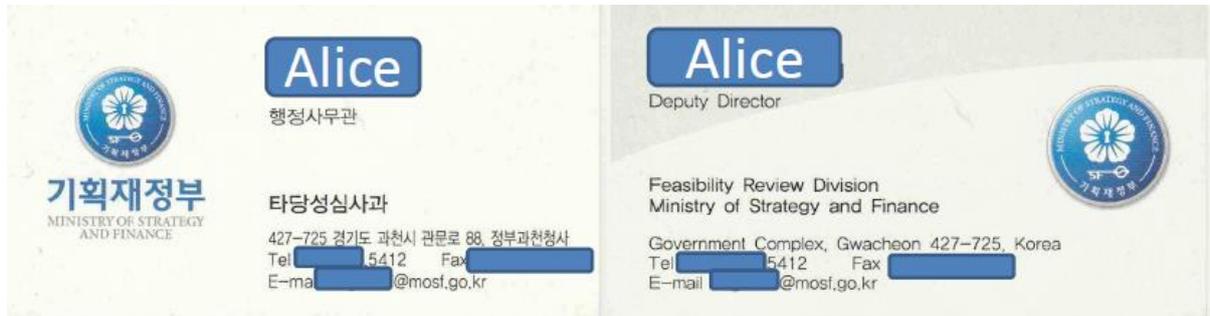
When accounting became more demeaning than rewarding, and thus had weak or negative symbolic capital, accountants were more likely to take a di-vision strategy by de-emphasising their CPA qualification after they moved out of accounting roles. This strategy was taken by Alice and Eric at MoSF. Alice had worked at PwC for 6 years before joining the public service in 2004 on a fixed-term contract but was later awarded permanent public-servant status, and Eric had worked at Deloitte for 7 years before joining MoSF in 2001. Their colleagues called them by their bureaucratic designations, such as ‘Deputy Director Alice’ and ‘Senior Deputy Director Eric’ and they undertook roles not directly related to accounting as the cards in <Figures 5 and 6> indicate. However, what surprised us more was that they had hidden their CPA qualifications from their cards on both the Korean and English sides. They only disclosed their bureaucratic designations, and thus an uninformed receiver of their cards would presume that they were typical public servants (di-vision achieved). It became clear in the interview with Alice that the decision not to disclose her accounting credential and to only use her bureaucratic designation was an intentional strategy. Alice explained her choice as follows:

I do not have to let others know that I am an accountant. It might be of greater advantage if one were working in the ‘Accounting Policy Division’ or ‘Account Settlement Division’. However, for me, even if I were working in the Accounting Policy Division or Account Settlement Division, I would not have my card disclose that I have a CPA qualification. CPA is a licence rather than a profession.

Alice was able to secure her employment within MoSF because of her accounting knowledge and CPA qualification, but now she dismissed this professional qualification as a ‘licence’. As her current work was not directly related to accounting, there was no incentive to disclose her accounting credential. However, she indicated that even if she were working in an accounting-related division that would appreciate her accounting knowledge and credentials, she would not disclose her CPA qualification as it would hinder rather than help advance her career in the public service. In comparison, Tony, who had not moved out of the Accounting

Policy Division since he joined MoSF in 2007, juxtaposed his bureaucratic designation and his KICPA qualification on his card as shown in <Figure 7>. In essence, Alice’s statement suggests that she had dismantled her professional identity as an accountant and adopted a bureaucratic organisational identity as a public servant.

<Figure 5> Accountant’s business card 1 at MoSF



<Figure 6> Accountant’s business card 2 at MoSF<sup>xi</sup>



<Figure 7> Accountant’s business card 3 at MoSF



## 10. Drivers of di-vision strategy

These stories, and in particular those of the accountants hired by MoSF, suggest that some accountants took a di-vision strategy. This strategic choice makes sense when we consider both the symbolic capital of being an accountant at the societal level and accountants' habitus and capital at the organisational level.

### *10.1. Symbolic capital of accounting credentials weakening*

We found that the symbolic capital of the CPA qualification and accountants' relative position in Korean society was weakening. This finding was evidenced by the changes in the public service levels at which the accountants were recruited, which Sean, a public servant at BAI, observed over the 10-year period:

BAI previously recruited accountants with years of experience as public service level 5 and those with no experience as level 6. But nowadays, those with experience join BAI as level 6 and those without the experience as level 7. It was like a one level downgrade.

Sean's statement suggests that the symbolic capital of accounting credentials has been devalued over time. Examining our interviewees' cases, in 2002 Michael joined BAI at level 6 with no prior experience, but in 2006 Oliver joined at level 7 after 3-years' experience at KPMG. Most interviewees believed that this downgrading was driven by the sudden increase in the number of newly qualified accountants in 2001 (see <Table 1>). KICPA had been perceived as an elite credential because approximately half of the membership came from SKY universities, but the portion of SKY graduates gradually decreased from 2001. When the fieldwork was performed in 2010 only one-third of new membership came from these elite universities. Consequently, the symbolic capital of the KICPA credential was gradually devalued. Jason at KPMG explained the consequences of this devaluation:

Do you know that 1,000 new accountants are qualified every year nowadays? 200-300 of them have difficulty finding a suitable placement, and they don't mind joining public service at lower levels.... Then gradually the government does not perceive accountants as very special.

Jason's explanation suggests that the increase in the supply of accountants in the professional labour market led to the devaluation of the symbolic capital of accounting credentials. This devaluation further exacerbated accountants' insecurity, because they were now more replaceable by younger accountants. This finding challenges Bourdieu's argument that symbolic capital of a professional qualification is not related to supply and demand in the labour market but to symbolic scarcity (Bourdieu, 1991). However, we found that the increase in the supply of accountants lowered the symbolic scarcity of the KICPA credential.

### *10.2. Accountants' habitus and capital weaker than those of bureaucrats*

The di-vision strategy was also driven by the accountants' realisation that their habitus and capital were not valued as highly as the bureaucratic habitus and capital by the public service field. Here, we present an example of MoSF, one of the central government departments that hired the most accountants, to illustrate how the difference in habitus and capital between accountants and public servants was recognised by its accountants like Eric, who stated:

Public service hired accountants with at least 4 years' experience, which means that public service employed those who had become used to the private sector. But public service is quite different from accounting firms. Accounting firms are more flexible, and they fight with their knowledge being their weapon. But it is more important in public service to make our opinion clearly understood and to make our policy clear than to possess knowledge itself. However, accountants are not good at this because public service considers what accountants would not consider.

Eric's statement suggests that accountants developed their habitus and capital in accounting firms before joining the public service. While accountants had accumulated cultural capital in the form of accounting knowledge and skills required for accounting roles, they were not as valued in the public service field as they were in the accounting field. Instead, the public service field valued communication skills, which public servants had developed throughout their careers, more than technical knowledge. However, these valuable communication skills were quite specific, as Jason and Blake, who had collaborated with public servants over the years, stated:

At the practical level, bureaucrats are good at writing. They are good at communication. What I mean is not spoken communication. They are good at report writing. But accountants are definitely better at addressing data. Accountants are good at numbers. [Jason]

Bureaucrats who passed the advanced public service entry exams are very good at report writing. According to the Head of the Accounting Policy Division, who passed both the CPA exams and the advanced public service entry exams, accountants are poor at report writing. It is very important to follow a given format in report writing, but accountants struggle with this. Deputy Directors from a CPA background also say that. They say that it is hard to follow the format the government requires. While accountants previously addressed numbers day and night, such as financial management, economics and accounting processes and etc. when they were young, bureaucrats focused on writing day and night when they were young.... Young accountants are good at Excel and PowerPoint. They are good at presentations, but what is important in the government is well-written reports. The problem is that the strengths of accountants are not what the government requires. [Blake]

These statements indicate that the public service field valued written communication skills, as demonstrated by well-written reports, which public servants were better at than accountants. Those who did well in the advanced public service entry examinations, which placed an emphasis on essay writing, and went through professional public service training, which formed the basis of the dominant bureaucratic habitus and capital that the accountants did not have, were particularly good at writing, and they were the ones who successfully joined the MoSF. Therefore, this finding suggests that accounting research should focus not only on accountants' knowledge and skills but also on the fields where accountants work with other professionals in order to understand how accountants view who they are in relation to their non-accountant colleagues.

As MoSF was made up of these elite public servants, they had their own distinct habitus: perfectionist and exclusive. Eric explained the perfectionist habitus with an example of a spelling error:

Assume that there are spelling errors when they (MoSF's high ranking officials) read a report. If they found the first error, they would recognise it. If they found the second error, they would shake their hands, and if they found the third one, they would chuck it away, saying, 'I cannot read this any longer'. If a supervisor happened to find a spelling error, they would focus on the errors. They should try to read and understand the report, but they could not read any more because they are upset. I don't know whether it is like this in other ministries, but MoSF is very perfectionist.

This perfectionist habitus kept outside actors uninformed about the accrual accounting adoption process in the central government and delayed the production of accrual-based financial statements. While the central government decided to adopt accrual accounting immediately after the Asian Financial Crisis, it was only by the 2007 revision to the *National Account Act* that this decision was enforced, and there were additional years of delay until its first accrual-based financial statements were released to the public in May 2012 for the 2011 fiscal year. MoSF implemented accrual accounting and published its accrual-based financial statements only when deemed perfect. In contrast, MoPAS, which was in charge of the accrual accounting project for local and provincial governments, implemented accrual accounting in local and provincial governments in 2007 without much delay immediately after this decision was enforced by the 2005 revision to the *Local Finance Act*.

Eric further explained MoSF's perfectionism and exclusivity by comparing its practices with MoPAS:

MoSF is quite different. We do things bit by bit by delving into them and by investigating them until we reach perfection. Only when things are perfect do we release them to the public.... This thing also is not proper to say but MoPAS treats others very well. It treats professors, opinion leaders and media very well.... But MoSF is different. We exclude others. We think like 'we have more knowledge than others, so we are the ones who can get things done. All these things depend on us.' Our work style is quite different.

Eric's statement shows the difference between MoSF and MoPAS in engaging external experts. While MoPAS involved external experts in their accounting-standard-setting process and informed the public of its progress, MoSF was reluctant to engage external experts, and did not inform the public of its adoption process until it was ready. Bill, an academic who collaborated with MoPAS, attributed the delay in the central government to this exclusive habitus of MoSF's bureaucrats, as seen in the example of Eric:

MoSF employed an accountant as a deputy director. His name is Eric. He made all the accounting standards by himself. Our team worked with MoPAS, and there was an accounting standards advisory board made up of professors, and we had discussions, and we listened to working-level staff. However, in MoSF, he did it all by himself, disregarding the accounting standards advisory board. This is why it was difficult for the central government's draft to be converted into accounting standards.

Bill's statement suggests that, whereas Eric attributed the delay of accrual accounting adoption in the central government to MoSF's perfectionist habitus, Bill attributed it to MoSF's exclusive habitus that Eric had already adopted. While we were not able to judge whether the delay was attributable to a perfectionist or an exclusive habitus, we understood that the elite, perfectionist and exclusive bureaucratic habitus shared by MoSF's public

servants left accountants who did not share this habitus marginalised. These marginalised accountants took a di-vision strategy to obscure differences between themselves and the elite public servants, thereby forsaking their professional accountant identity but adopting and securing a bureaucratic organisational identity.

## 11. Concluding discussion

These stories of accountants led us to understand why and how accountants who move from accounting firms to public service take certain strategies to handle their identity insecurity. We found that Korean accountants at Big-4 firms felt insecure because overtime was taken for granted and they were required to win new work for firms to be promoted to partner, just as in Western countries (Ladva and Andrew, 2014; Lupu and Empson, 2015; Spence et al., 2015), and they saw public service as an attractive workplace which could set them free from this insecurity. Due to the neoliberal turn in Korea and associated NPM reforms, including the accrual accounting adoption circa 2000 which encouraged the public sector to recruit private-sector professionals, a small number of accountants were able to join the public service. These accountants achieved a better work-life balance and improved their job security; they did not need to attract new work to grow the business, and nor were they expected to work overtime.

However, they faced different types of insecurities caused by their considerably reduced salaries, by belonging to a minority group amongst colleagues, and by the negative perceptions of the accounting/costing role in public service. First, in the role-image-identity nexus they felt insecure because of a gap between the stereotypical image of an accountant as a high-income earner and the actual medium-income earner identity held while still performing the breadwinner role in the household (Warren and Parker, 2009; Taylor and Scapens, 2016). Second, they were aware that they were different to the mainstream public servants and formed a minority identity (although there was neither systematic discrimination against them nor disadvantages in the internal promotion process) because they had neither passed the public service entry examinations nor gone through the professional public service training, which played a rite of passage role constructing the dominant bureaucratic habitus, capital and identity (Bourdieu, 1991; Kornberger et al., 2011). Third, while the accountants' knowledge was acknowledged by their colleagues in most central government departments, in some departments accounting/costing was perceived as a demeaning rather than a rewarding role (Morales and Lambert, 2013) and had weak, if not negative, symbolic capital that perpetuated the bean-counter image and constructed a second-class citizen identity (Friedman and Lyne, 2001, Jeacle, 2008; Spence et al., 2015, 2016).

To handle these insecurity issues, accountants took a di-vision strategy that obscured the differences between themselves and typical public servants (Bourdieu, 1991). Once accountants joined the central government departments, their new colleagues called them by bureaucratic designations that disclosed a certain public service level in the bureaucratic hierarchy, which then kicked off their identity transition process from a professional accountant identity to a bureaucratic organisational identity. The di-vision strategy was put into practice by avoiding costing/accounting work and undertaking more policy-related roles to mitigate the risk of perpetuating the bean-counter stereotypical image which resulted in the second-class citizen identity. After they moved out of accounting/costing roles, some accountants pursued further di-vision by de-emphasising their CPA credentials, in particular by removing it from their business cards and by disclosing only their bureaucratic designations, thereby further forsaking their professional accountant identity and reinforcing

their bureaucratic organisational identity. This strategy of the accountants at an individual micro-level makes sense when we consider the symbolic devaluation of the KICPA qualifications at the societal level and accountants' habitus and capital, which were less valued than the bureaucratic habitus and capital at the organisational level. The former was caused by the increase in the number of newly qualified accountants and the gradual decrease in the proportion of elite university graduates in its membership. This finding challenges Bourdieu's (1991) argument that symbolic capital of a professional qualification is not dependent on supply and demand in labour markets but sustained by its symbolic scarcity, because now we understand that the symbolic scarcity can be affected by the constant increase in the supply of KICPA qualifications.

These findings contribute to the literature on accountant identity, as well as public sector reforms. First, insecurity and associated overtime is not limited to Western Big-4 firms but constitutes a worldwide problem (Ladva and Andrew, 2014; Lupu and Empson, 2015; Spence et al., 2015). Yet, it seems to be hard to set accountants free from their insecurity problems no matter where they operate as long as they seek the approval of others. Second, although there have been considerable attempts to remove the traditional bean-counter image at a macro-institutional level (Friedman and Lyne, 2001; Jeacle, 2008), including the transition from traditional accounting work to more management, communication and policy-related work in the accounting profession at global level (Parker, 2001; Warren and Parker, 2009), we found that this image persisted in the Korean public service. Thus, at a micro-individual level, accountants tried to avoid demeaning accounting/costing roles and detach themselves from this image (Morales and Lambert, 2013). We therefore argue that individual accountants' identity work involves their effort to change both what they do and others' perception of what they do, thereby changing others' perception of who they are (Warren and Parker, 2009; Taylor and Scapens, 2016; Englund and Gerdin, 2018). Third, in line with Warren and Alzola (2009) and Guo (2018), who argued that the symbolic capital of accounting credentials shapes accountants' identity strategies, we found that the weakened symbolic capital of the KICPA qualification led to accountants' di-vision strategy. This finding also suggests that the symbolic capital of accounting credentials cannot be generalised but is field-specific and thus institutionally and socially constructed (Spence et al., 2016). Finally, our findings extend the public-sector reform literature, where it has been reported that public-sector reforms have made accountants more powerful in the public sector (Power, 1997; Guthrie, 1998; Gendron et al., 2007; Groot and Budding, 2008; Lapsley et al., 2009; Christensen et al., 2018). However, this was not the case in the Korean public service, where accountants' habitus and capital were less valued than the bureaucratic habitus and capital, and thus they dismantled their professional accountant habitus and identity and adopted bureaucratic ones. This finding suggests that accountants' power and dominance should not be taken for granted in public service, because it depends on whose habitus and capital are more valued in a particular organisational field within their broader society.

This paper is not without limitations. We relied on a small number of interviews, albeit triangulated with documentary sources. We tried to conduct more interviews, but it was not easy due to the laconic bureaucratic habitus that accountants had adopted, which Jason testified to:

A public servant would not want to be interviewed. They are always like that. That is their disposition. They call it risk management, at which the government departments are way better than accountants. They don't use superfluous words, because of the

huge influence they have.... That's their culture. I think it is a good culture. Public servants should have that sort of culture.

For future research, we suggest a longitudinal study, which would enable researchers to examine how an accountant's identity evolves over time, where there is a limited number of willing participants (Gendron and Spira, 2010).

Finally, habitus and capital depend on fields, and Korean fields have a unique history, tradition and culture; therefore, the habitus and capital of social actors generated in Korea must be different from those in other countries. A comparative study is therefore recommended. Comparisons between one context, in which accounting qualifications are highly valued, and another, in which the accounting profession is relatively weak, would further enhance our understanding of accountant identity and the strategic use of the symbolic capital of accounting.

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## Appendix. Interview participants

English pseudonyms	Position	Workplace (and previous experience where applicable)	Education at elite universities	Date and length of interview
KICPA-qualified accountants				
1) Justin	Research fellow	KICPA headquarter	SNU	4 Feb 2010 46 minutes
2) Blake	Accountant	Seconded from PwC to MoSF	SNU	5 Feb 2010 34 minutes
3) Tony	Public service level 5	MoSF since 2007 after 5 years at a local accounting firm	N/A	18 Feb 2010 Did not consent to recording
4) Jason	Manager	KPMG	SNU	19 Feb 2010 40 minutes
5) Alice	Public service level 5	MoSF since 2004 after 6 years at PwC	N/A	2 Mar 2010 34 minutes
6) Jeff	Accountant	Seconded from KICPA to MoPAS	SNU	3 Mar 2010 31 minutes
7) Frank	Public service level 5	MoU since 2008 after 1 year in PwC and 4 years in KPMG	Korea	3 Mar 2010 23 minutes
8) Andrew	Manager	PwC	SNU	6 Apr 2010 23 minutes
9) Eric	Public service level 4	MoSF since 2001 after 7 years at Deloitte	Yonsei	11 May 2010 77 minutes
10) Tyson	Public service level 6	DAPA since 2006 after 4 years at PwC	Yonsei	7 Jun 2010 27 minutes
11) Michael	Public service level 5	BAI since 2002 with no experience in accounting firms	N/A	11 Jun 2010 38 minutes
12) Oliver	Public service level 6	BAI since 2006 after 3 years at KPMG	Yonsei	24 Jun 2010 39 minutes
Other participants				
13) Leo	Public service level 6	MoPAS	N/A	3 Mar 2010 57 minutes
14) Sean	Public service level 6	BAI	SNU	16 Mar 2010 10 minutes
15) Shane	Public service level 5	BAI	Korea	31 Mar 2010 Did not consent to recording
16) Bill	Professor	Keimyung University	SNU	14 June 2010 71 minutes
17) Jack	Public service level 5	MoU	SNU	12 Jul 2010
18) Eugene	Public service level 5	MoU	N/A	Did not consent to recording

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<sup>i</sup> We acknowledge the existence of studies on credentialism in other theoretical traditions, such as Weber's (1968) sociology (Brown, 2001), and in other disciplines (Edwards, 2014) and even on the effect of credentialism on professional identity (Zikic and Richardson, 2016). However, we chose to rely on Bourdieu's notions of capital, because different forms of capital constitute a more comprehensive and potent theoretical framework with credentials being one form of capital.

<sup>ii</sup> Unlike Lupu et al. (2018), we did not examine the individuals' deep congealed habitus shaped by their childhood upbringing. Instead, we focused on their work-context habitus to understand their professional and organisational identities.

<sup>iii</sup> Since 1968, when the *Certified Public Accountant Act* was first legislated, there has been an article stipulating the exclusive use of the designation. Whereas this article did not mandate KICPA holders to use the 'accountant' designation, it prohibited non-certified practitioners from using it.

<sup>iv</sup> In Korean public service, level 9 was the lowest and level 1 was the highest rank. Those at levels 6-9 were on practical services, while those at level 5 or above would take more managerial roles (Kim, 2000). Previously when there was no codified rule for the designation use, lower ranking public servants used to sometimes have the more casual titles of Mr/Ms. Yet, higher ranking ones had been referred to by official designations although there was no rule to mandate this designation use.

<sup>v</sup> English pseudonyms have been used for convenience and to protect the participants' privacy.

<sup>vi</sup> We juxtaposed the Korean and English sides in the figures after obscuring the holders' personal details in blue, except for the last four digits of their phone numbers to verify that both sides belong to the same person. English translations within green-coloured boxes were provided where necessary.

<sup>vii</sup> At BAI most employees were involved in financial audits and thus referred to by the 'auditor' designation regardless of their rank and background.

<sup>viii</sup> In Korea it was more difficult to differentiate the symbolic capital of accounting, that of accountants and that of accounting qualifications/designations than in other jurisdictions, because only those who had passed the KICPA qualification examinations were eligible to join the KICPA and to legally use the 'accountant' designation. In comparison, an unqualified practitioner was merely called a 'clerk' and what they did was considered 'general affairs', whereas what an accountant would do was considered to be accounting regardless of the actual substance of the work, just as in the early 20th century UK context (Kirkham and Loft, 1993).

<sup>ix</sup> This business card is another piece of evidence for the argument that Korean social actors had the freedom to choose and disclose their designations and credentials on their cards. Here, while Andrew disclosed neither his organisational designation (manager) nor his professional qualifications on the Korean side, he showed his CPA qualification on the English side.

<sup>x</sup> The table covers from 1994 to 2009 because the most senior accountant among the interviewees passed the KICPA examinations in 1994 and interviews were conducted prior to 2010 examinations.

<sup>xi</sup> We have noted that, unlike most other social actors, Alice and Eric did not disclose their mobile phone numbers on their cards. We argue that this non-disclosure is circumstantial evidence of MoSF's exclusive habitus, which is further explored in Section 10.2.