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SILENT PHATIC BLOCKAGES: CONTEXTUALISING RELATIONS IN ENTREPRENEURIAL ECOSYSTEM

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ABSTRACT

The entrepreneurial ecosystem (hereafter EE) has recently gained considerable attention from academics, policymakers, and practitioners. Although the existing conceptual models in the literature on this critical phenomenon make a valuable contribution to understanding entrepreneurship from a process perspective, they miss explaining the complex structural relationships of the ecosystem and the cyclical process of entrepreneurship. This study adopts a relational perspective by following three-level, iterative systematic analytical stages with the help of MAXQDA to analyse 42 in-depth and semi-structured interviews with key EE stakeholders. Our findings signal some degree of toxicity embedded in the ecosystem's social, cultural, material and structural attributes. The discovery mainly contributes to the EE literature by reframing some silent but critical tensions and providing a renewed view of ecosystem relations through reticulating layers around entrepreneurs. This study also provides some insights into attributes of emerging EEs, which are not entirely framed as overarching tension categories.

KEYWORDS: *Entrepreneurial ecosystem, coevolutionary dynamics, blockage(s), relationship*

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INTRODUCTION

Entrepreneurial ecosystem (hereafter EE) has emerged as a field, that emphasises the influence of the wider ecological environment in which firms operate and offers a fresh and distinctive perspective on the geographical clustering of economic activity. EE is defined as ‘*a set of interconnected entrepreneurial actors, organisations, institutions and processes which formally and informally coalesce to connect, mediate and govern the performance within the local entrepreneurial environment*’ (Mason and Brown, 2014, p. 5). EE concept helps to understand how new venture formation occurs in a community of interdependent actors (Cavallo et al., 2021) and why some regions are more conducive to producing successful ventures than others (Scott et al., 2021). EEs have gained considerable attention from academics, policymakers, and practitioners over a relatively short period of time (Chao and Shi, 2020; Shwetzzer et al., 2019; Wurth et al., 2022).

The policy excitement has prominently led to multi-intellectual academic inquiries (Mason and Brown, 2014) and the conceptualisation of EE in the literature. However, EEs stay “metaphorically” with unclear relationships (Wurth et al., 2022) and still harbour some fundamental conceptual, theoretical, and methodological questions (Stam and Spigel, 2017). EE scholars call for developing new theories, and reframing and reconceptualising the relationships in EEs with empirical findings that help understand the phenomenon from multiple perspectives (Audretsch et al., 2019).

This study responds to the above calls in several ways. First, it addresses the need to recontextualise EE tensions as phatic blockages from an emerging economy perspective to reveal ecosystem-specific attributes. Adopting a relational perspective which provides pertinent insights about how ecosystem attributes develop in tandem, not in isolation (Spigel, 2017), this study contributes to the EE literature by underlining the nature of the relationships and cultivating an ecosystem-wide understanding of the rested interdependencies of each component. These blockages will help develop exclusive road maps to overcome ecosystem structural, behavioural and mentality-based difficulties. Second, discovering blockages of an emerging EE signals a shift in focus on individualised factors toward revealing multiple possibilities hidden in interactions. It advances EE theory by showing the degree of deviation from individualised aspects towards collective enactment in EE since the interactions among the blockages help to understand the EE social, material, and cultural dynamics. This study starts to reticulate layers around entrepreneurs to show the relational aspect of the ecosystem, responding to the call for the agency of entrepreneurial actors to create and transform their contexts (Wurth et al., 2022).

Entrepreneurial Ecosystem and Relational Dynamics

Since the Marshallian industrial districts, studies are all surrounded with the idea that factors outside an organisation can potentially stimulate capacity to create firm-level competitive advantage (Wurth et al., 2022). Based on these valuable efforts, the EE approach emerged to extend our understanding of a company as a part of a business ecosystem (Moore, 1993) to the coevolving nature of successful businesses and their accompanying relations which include particular stakeholders. Following such diverse and eclectic inquiries, several efforts have been made to explain EE with a larger degree of interpretive flexibility of the phenomenon (Brown and Mason, 2017; Shwetzzer et al., 2019). Those efforts for framing EE often refer to “*interconnectedness, interaction, interdependence*”, indicating mutual dependency of several factors intervening in the

entrepreneurship process and principally acknowledging the leading role of “entrepreneurs” for value creation with their aspirations, abilities and attitudes.

There are also two mainstreams of EE theoretical models in the literature. The first one elaborates on models or frameworks of EE’s elements, components, domains, or pillars (Feld, 2012; Isenberg, 2010). EE research has been expanded by combining the EE components with that of outputs/outcomes, towards more causal depth with some ontological layers. The novelty of those efforts is to categorise the elements, show interactions among them, and create some causal layers to map the overall ecosystem (Stam, 2015; Stam and Spigel, 2017). In this mainstream, the main input disrupting the state of equilibrium and constructing new structural realities in the EE is still “individual entrepreneurs”. The vibrancy of the system can be seen through the level of “new firm creation”, rather than just how diverse actors and the changing nature of their interactions alter the entrepreneurial outcomes. Scholars have also shifted their concerns towards questioning how structures can support and reinforce ecosystem creation (Chen et al., 2020). Although this mainstream tries to give a holistic/comprehensive picture of EE, they still fall behind in explaining complex patterns of relationships and their reproductive capacity towards attaining entrepreneurial outcomes. This situation necessitates welcoming heterogeneity which is already considered a distinguished feature as EE actors and factors need to be connected for sufficient ecosystem development.

The second mainstream has been formulated around the EE dynamics view, being ascribed as an important meaning of how actors may influence the pattern of interactions to alter entrepreneurial outcomes (Audretsch et al., 2021). Therefore, EE is based on value-added connections among distinct components interacting in diverse network configurations (Purbasari et al., 2020a). The depth and quality of those connections would affect the evolution and outcomes for individuals and the overall ecosystem in terms of innovative capacity and resilient business environments (Fernandes and Ferreira, 2022). Such interrelationship act as a glue (Scott et al., 2021), bringing all parties/stakeholders with their respective interests into a common ground through the sharing of knowledge, skills, ideas, and resources (Purbasari et al., 2020a; Purbasari et al., 2020b).

Entrepreneurship scholars have gone beyond the static understanding of EE by constructing frameworks and/or models that incorporate particular typologies or taxonomies as well as policy suggestions. This mainstream corresponds to complex economic systems in which agents at the micro-level experiment interact with one another and with macro-level agents to form a constantly evolving system. This new value generation is an emergent characteristic of the entrepreneurial ecosystem's complex structure of economic players and their interactions.

The co-evolutionary dynamics of EEs result from the interactions among different actors within the ecosystem when they have different motivations and conflicts (Feldman and Lowe, 2018). EE dynamics are also triggered by the uncertainties that entrepreneurs have to cope with, either individually or collectively. At the same time, external actors may act in divergent ways, affecting the coherence of the entire value co-creation in which the new venture may emerge (Wurth et al., 2022). Empirical studies have not fully captured the genesis and evolution of EEs; little consideration of the context in which EE emerge is made; or the network of interactions in the EEs has not been sufficiently explored (Audretsch et al., 2021). These show that the literature on EEs needs more attention, particularly to the co-evolutionary dynamics. Therefore, identifying what blockages interfere with EE dynamics is useful to extend the theory and understanding of EE dynamics.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

Study Context

This study uses Technology Development Zones (TDZs) in Turkey as an EE, with a focus on Istanbul. Turkish TDZs were established with Law No. 4691 enacted in 2001 to facilitate the production and commercialisation of technological knowledge in Turkey. Then, they became essential sites for entrepreneurs, researchers, and academics to develop new products and/or services, to improve of Turkey's overall innovative capacity (*Statistics of Turkish Ministry of Industry and Technology, 2022*).

Data Collection

Through utilizing theoretical sampling (Charmaz et al., 2014; Bishop et al 2018), we structure layers around entrepreneurs who are founders of startups from different business verticals (business genres) mostly at pre-seed or seed stage of investment. Then we continue with other participants of the EE who have prior-entrepreneurial experience but now align themselves with different multiple-identities. Under this category, we have follow-up discussions with mentors, coaches, subject matter experts, professional consultants, academics, investors³, head of investment networks and heads of startup support programs⁴. The study includes participants with multiple roles in the ecosystem to attain perspective variation (Stephens et al., 2019). It helps ensure multivocality, understand their interactions within the EE and reveal how they coevolve with the ecosystem.

Data were collected over a long period of time from different sources. Field observations started in 2016. In total, 56 hours of ethnographic fieldwork, observing participants at various meetings and networking events, were captured. The first author was particularly involved in the field by having dinners with participants, organising occasional meetups, participating in ecosystem events for networking, sharing knowledge, and engaging with startups as an advisory board member.

42 semi-structured in-depth interviews and follow-up interviews were conducted between 2021 and 2023. The inclusive nature of interviews allows a stream of consciousness and rich descriptive data (Gioia and Thomas, 1996). During data collection, we kept records of field notes and interview transcripts. Upon completing an interview, we transcribed the data and organised debriefing sessions as a research team.

 Insert Table 1. About here

³ Independent and accredited investors who are authorised by the government and so acting with an institutional identity are all included in the study.

⁴ Startup support programs refer to institutions named incubators (pre-post incubation), accelerators or any other public and private initiatives whose first and foremost aim is to develop technology and support innovation activities.

Data Analysis Approach and Stages

Gioia's grounded theory approach (Gioia et al., 2012) was adapted to analyse the data more systematically and analytically. The uniqueness of this methodology lies in its capacity to generate credible explanations and/or interpretations of data. Based on this approach, three-order analyses are performed to discover themes and patterns in events and informants' accounts (Gioia and Chittipeddi, 1991; Gioia et al., 2012). An iterative and reflective process was followed to establish trustworthiness. *MAXQDA 2022* is also used as a data analysis tool to enhance our ability to search for, store, sort, and retrieve materials while also providing transparency in the research process (Corbin and Strauss, 2008). Due to the iterative, cyclical, and non-linear nature of qualitative data preliminary analyses were conducted acknowledging 24 hours rule to capitalise on the immediacy of the data (Gioia and Thomas, 1996) and the researcher's insight.

We initially approached the data to familiarise ourselves and to gain initial insights about what is happening in the data in terms of views, beliefs, feelings, assumptions, and ideologies (Creswell 2007). We started structuring tentative conceptual categories in these live and recorded sessions to align ourselves with initial coding. Then, we moved to more focused coding to create hierarchies in the coding framework. This process principally involves progression from semantic description to patterned interpretation (Braun and Clarke, 2006). While revisiting and digging into the data to identify coherent patterns, we immerse ourselves in the data to search for themes and constantly review them with the literature. As it is frequently performed in Gioia's Methodology as the first level analysis, this is a descriptive stage in a sense that discloses elements of the informant's meaning systems. Acknowledging the need to reconsider the data and take it to the upper level to identify any underlying dimensions or patterns in the data (Gioia and Chittipeddi, 1991; Gioia and Thomas, 1996), we moved further in the analysis through more focused coding. We used the descriptive insights gained from the previous stage and prepared the data analysis process towards aggregated dimensions in a structure of a relationship (Gioia et al., 1994). On this higher and more abstract analytical dimension, the second-order themes have been developed by debunking the real meaning by assigning inclusive labels to the first-order categories. We still retrieved the meanings from the data at this stage. Lastly, as the last stage, we stretched the analysis towards aggregated dimensions through theoretical coding, which is operating at a more abstract level, ideas, terms, logics, models, and perspectives that can be extracted and integrated into a coherent theory and/or conceptual model (Charmaz et al., 2018).

FINDINGS

This study reveals four interrelated blockages that signal social, cultural, structural and material attributes/characteristics of the ecosystem as visualised in Figure 1.

 Insert Figure 1. About here

Four Phatic Blockages

A prominent category of ecosystem blockages emerged from the analysis. We name it “phatic blockages” to imply the tensions embedded in the ecosystem-wide relationships. “**Closed Circle Community**” is used to denote an ecosystem field that is not welcoming and seemingly makes it impossible for any individual player to engage with the ecosystem easily. “**Patronising**” implies attitudes emphasizing high power distance, particularly towards entrepreneurs, and incorporates certain underlying norms controlling investor and entrepreneur relations. “**Unhealthy power dynamics**” signals relatively unleveraged/unbalanced positioning of players in the ecosystem. The last category, “**Dysfunctional Network Structure**” is used to explain networking dynamics considering the type, length, power and impact of the relationships in the ecosystem.

*EE is a Closed Circle Community*⁵

The first emergent phatic blockage is called *closed circle community*, which has also been articulated around *invisible entry barriers*, *well-accepted storytelling*, *actor-based ecosystem field*, *popularity fetish*, *ego-system existence*, and *group nepotism*. EEs seem to become a protected area and are very challenging for ‘outsiders’ or new ventures to step in. They are invisible barriers in the EEs irrespective of entrepreneurs themselves, their business models or what they are planning to do. For example:

“If you are in that clan, you are good, and you can develop a relationship with others. If you are outside of it, no one cares about you. It is also difficult to get into that circle”. (P13)

This study also reveals some sub-components which constitute this closed-circle community in the ecosystem. There are some **invisible barriers** in the EEs irrespective of entrepreneurs, their business models or what they are planning to do. The universities are sometimes powerful to create a diasporic effect on the ecosystem, more particularly on investment decisions:

“We support people in the ecosystem like we support teams. Just as METU[Middle Eastern Technical University] members support people from METU, oh, I should not forget Bogazici[University] as well, but they also support each other. I am very confident this would open a way for investment for anyone who graduated from Bogazici. Okay, maybe it won't be a very serious investment, but at least it opens up things that can help him on this path”. (P29)

If entrepreneurs want to legitimise themselves, they need to penetrate that barrier. However, the problem is “how” they can penetrate if the barriers are invisible, and the ecosystem apparently invites entrepreneurs to be part of it. The rules of the game have already been prepared and the roles have been determined for each actor, others still are waiting to be accepted under higher uncertainty, within which acceptance criteria are still vague and not easily comprehended by the other actors. An important reflection of this feature of a closed circle community is how the stories

⁵ This Second-order categorization implies an ecosystem field characterized as closed, making it impossible for an individual player to engage with it/ other players.

are created and shared in the ecosystem. This might be considered the rule of this ecosystem game where good storytellers are champions irrespective of what is actually happening. If you are good at telling yourself, telling your success and telling how hard you did, you may be followed. This is how the discourse of the ecosystem has been developed around hard-working myths. Besides **well-accepted storytelling**, another finding specifies that there are dominant **actors in the field** around whom all the ecosystem interaction seems to circulate. From the in-depth discussions, it might be revealed that ecosystem events and/or meetups are organised by the same institutions/programs, invited people are the same for these social gatherings, the same people are at the stage, the same people are popular with whom many entrepreneurs align themselves, attribute all success to them and believe their power to lead them in this circle:

“First of all, the most important thing for us to be on the ladder of a startup is to join that incubation program, and be in partnership with that guy. He has a huge impact on our business. In fact, without hesitation, I can say that he is the greatest pioneer in the field. As a general manager of that program, he supported us by being our first customer and contributed to our growth.” (P7).

In the ecosystem, since besides the actors the channels of communication are still limited, there seems to be a **popularity fetish** implying that everyone chasing the same thing, using the same terminology, accepting the value of the most popular domains, genres and/or business verticals. This might be a result of the fact that if the legitimacy of one domain is gained, the field becomes safer [for entrepreneurs, mentors, investors or for any incubation/accelerator program] than the other unknown playgrounds. This is how the community is built around the same language, same behaviours, and same mentality which is also explained as:

“If someone uses OKRs [Objectives and Key Results] and seems to be successful, everyone says, ok let’s do it. It’s questionable how well they do, but at least we need something like that. OKR is the popular Google name for strategy execution. I have been telling this for 10 years, no one was buying this concept, they become very interested when they are OKR....but OKR became chewing gum..” (P27).

As exemplified by this excerpt, the ecosystem has started to create its own lexicon and utilise the overall terminology used in entrepreneurship literature to gather people to the same level for communication. However, this seems to create superficial communication and new entrepreneurial communities act with the belief that it will lead to success by all odds.

The findings also show how this closed circle community has been developed through unnamed cartelisation, mostly called *ego-system existence* instead of the ecosystem. The ego and its ignorance of managing it seems to dominate the relationship dynamics in the ecosystem in several ways:

“Many accelerators/incubators see us [entrepreneurs] like “pawns”; we as entrepreneurs are not creating the real value. However, they can’t create any value without us” (P25).
“Sometimes it can be difficult to reach some people because they are ‘too busy’ - something I say “to be loved” in the ecosystem matters. If you are in the circle, you can reach those ‘busy’ people at any time” (P19).

Entrepreneurs still feel that the other actors do not recognise them as much as they deserve. Even though these actors are aware of and questioning who would probably create a greater value for the economy, they haven't come closer to entrepreneurs' expectations. Sometimes, what other active-actors offer entrepreneurs is not of importance, but rather that the ways of engagement with this close circle community do matter for entrepreneurs on the way to being accepted as "valuable". The ego-system therefore prevents other active-actors from recognising entrepreneurs as active actors just like themselves shaping the field and lacking to develop any reinforcement mechanisms/tools to boost the feeling of "being of great value". In addition to this, in line with the findings, we can move the discussion a little bit further with the following excerpt explaining how difficult is to be accepted if you do not know anybody or if you do define yourself with someone else as it is shown under the category of "**group nepotism**" which implies granting privileges to people and/or groups closer to you without considering human capital or resources they could bring (Cruz et al., 2013) but how they are associated with you:

"We live in an environment where you can only do your business if you know somebody. It is incredibly difficult to exist. For example, I have a unique service that can solve your problem, but you don't take my product into consideration because you support someone else, even if theirs cannot solve your problem completely" (P11).

The first emergent category of findings reveals that the EE is surrounded by certain actors and settled norms, which make engaging newcomers challenging. The presence of this blank wall creates a tight circle where principles are unknown yet to communicate with outsiders, therefore the playing pitch is so endogenic that more carving is required (to be known).

Patronising behaviour's in the EE

The analysis shows a full circle around investor-entrepreneur relations. On the one hand, there are entrepreneurs who react investors' power imbalances by speaking up in order to be treated as equals in each negotiation. On the other hand, investors tend to see themselves as *God* and do not hide their arrogance towards entrepreneurs. It is notable from the findings that investors show a strong desire for power in their relationship with entrepreneurs. For example:

"They [investors] expect respect and admiration. There is no way for a startup founder to sit with crossing legs to receive money from investors. It is such a strange climate in which one might think: I am giving money out to you [business founder], you now should act like my employee". (P35)

The underlying reason might be the mentality of giving money with which investors see themselves as the saviour of entrepreneurs. In line with the implicit assumption in entrepreneurship literature that investors retain a powerful position in any relation with entrepreneurs (Waldron et al., 2022), they expect respect from founders. This might hinder multivocality, where entrepreneurs can exercise control through which they have a right to interact with the balanced term (Waldron et al., 2022). Therefore, the relationship between an investor and an entrepreneur became the employee-employer type where entrepreneurs bowed themselves to the investor's hierarchy.

Another prominent factor accompanying this relationship is the *tight money pressure* that investors put on the shoulders of entrepreneurs. As such, the investment process is associated with the game named "wolf and lamb":

“The investing process is a game of wolf and lamb. It is not enough to cast around for oneself, you also survive somehow, so you must bite the wolf. The investor is like a wolf who gives money, but it is not so simple. Handling someone else's money is not as simple as you think, it is the most difficult task you have ever undertaken.” (P10).

However, investors are looking for guaranteed investment options to decrease risks on returns [of investments]. Investors act with a limited budget; the economic climate frequently provides investors easiest ways for generating income; therefore startup investment is limited to certain, popular verticals where the rate of return on investment is higher, as mentioned by a study participant:

“Investors are hunting for guaranteed ways to invest. There are certain business genres under which projects are very easy to understand. They have certain metrics, and when you match those metrics, investors start the talks, but it takes a long time due to their limited budgets” (P30).

“Since money is expensive in Turkey and the ecosystem is not yet developed, not enough money is available for startups. There is a huge deficiency in the ecosystem. This will be ongoing” (P28).

This situation also reflects the “**misalignment of expectations**” of both sides, sometimes causing the dissolution of the investment process. Entrepreneurs and investors seem to have difficulties finding common ground and moving forward. It is salient that they are incapable of utilising this engagement to reach value-added outcomes

“Giving \$30,000 is a big decision for some investors, but it is only an hour's pay for another. It all depends on how much cash you have to invest and how much you are willing to risk. If you want to invest a total of \$100,000 yearly, you have a different profile from someone with \$5,000,000 to invest. You have to pull the trigger, accept the risk and are able to withstand it. Reality shows its face when things start to be upside down. In such cases, investors' attitudes and behaviours can have an impact on everything. Anxiety can also affect everything, and people start blaming each other.” (P41)

“There was a negotiation but no such thing as a deal. Then we saw the term sheet stating that you must keep all the money in interest-free banking accounts. We could not put it in any other bank account. The share they would receive accounted for approximately 2 to 3 per cent, but they asked for reports from the board of directors for each expenditure over 40 thousand and there should be a member on the board from them. Only with 2 to 3 per cent, what?” (P25).

Investors sometimes provide inconsistent assessments of startups, as quoted from the interviews: *“He stated you are absolutely amazing, your partners are great too, but I am not investing in you, cause we are searching for a co-founder who has previously served as the CEO of a firm and managed a team of 100 employees. And I said, you're not searching for a startup, bro[ther]; you're looking for an employee and I'm not such a profile you are looking for” (P16).* These assessments can create a sizzling effect during the investment process, as one participant

outlined that the mechanism either in the format of a venture studio or startup studio can help to settle healthier communication:

“The parties you are talking about are not at the same level: There is no way bringing these parties to the same level, therefore, whether it is a venture studio or growth agency, such things should be settled and the very first concern of these entities should not be the money” (P27).

There appears a need to structure a mediating layer between entrepreneurs and investors to ensure a fair game for both parties. Such a mediating layer can protect the money of investors and prepare entrepreneurs to scale their businesses to create a win-win, ideal situation for both parties. Along with these inconsistencies, participants also discussed *transaction myopia* which refers to making judgements based only on transaction volume, regardless of the stage of the firm. This myopia frequently prevents investors from grasping the real value of the proposed business model. Entrepreneurs mainly complain about an obsession with monthly recurring revenue [MRR] at the pre-seed stage without ignoring the product's core value.

“Do you know what an invoice means? I want to play for guarantee [my brother]. I will not take your risk. If you've already crossed that risky road and found your customer now, I'll play to scale, it means I'll secure my ass. What exactly does this mean? It means we are losing incredible values at the seed stage. Therefore, I believe this is the most important imbalance in the investor-entrepreneur relationship...” (P11)

“The idea should be questioned at this pre-seed, or seed stage, I mean the value of the idea, the multiplier effect of it, the team etc. However, as entrepreneurs at this stage, we are mostly questioned with MRR [Monthly Recurring Revenue], the only thing they ask in an investment meeting” (P15).

This transaction obsession may come from lacking the overall understanding of the exclusive nature of startup investing and lacking the necessary actions to take to further understand the perks of this hidden garden. As a necessary implication from the findings, investors are seen as **unprepared** for the startup investment process with expecting full readiness from startups. Even, it seems that they are not willing to prepare themselves for this:

“History of angel networking in Turkey dates back to the presence of experienced investors and sophisticated businessmen from the classical world of business. They have money, network and professional experience in working with large corporations. Although, this type of structuring for investment seems to be good, I am still thinking that these networks are really far away from understanding the dynamics of tech investing, what I only see instead is a man trying to dominate everything, push for certain rights...” (P41)

Findings signal behavioural mismatch more specifically between entrepreneurs and investors under the aggregated dimension of patronising. Although acknowledging that these two parties are not the only bilateral partners in the ecosystem, their relationship has the capacity to determine some ecosystem results.

Unhealthy power dynamics in the EE interactions

Although investor patronising might be associated with an unhealthy, unequal, and unleveraged relationship, some other forms of unhealthy power dynamics are found in this study. It is the tension in the ecosystem of an **exploitative** attitude:

“They wear entrepreneurs out, especially during meetings. Investors, are humiliating entrepreneurs by saying that “Is this the product? You are not Newton; you know, anyone can do it.” Entrepreneurs immediately feel that they are offended, if they aren’t, they nonetheless carry on as entrepreneurs.” (P35).

This may be an expected situation in ecosystems where the basic requirements have not yet been determined and a system has not yet been maturely developed. Institutional voids, which refer to weak or absent formal institutions compounded by uncertainty (Sydow et al., 2020), give people a certain degree of latitude to act on them. A participant also explained how people penetrate into these indistinct voids as:

“A few months ago, I saw the deposited money was requested back, and it was just a round of angels. One angel persuaded all the other investors individually by accusing the entrepreneur of misleading information. This was entirely up to one person’s ability to persuade others, then procedures and rules disappear. It is a really dangerous thing. Because as an entrepreneur you put all your life into what you are doing...” (P22).

Some entrepreneurs also approached the relational gap by emphasising “**devaluing**” people whose real value is not truly understood and appreciated. This also signals an entrepreneur's very basic, sometimes overlooked need of “being seen/noticed” irrespective of “who s/he is”:

“Investors in Turkey do not value entrepreneurs. Investors sit down at the negotiation table with their potential partners, but they ignore us, and they act like they are buying our company. Because of this mentality, I am losing my faith in those kinds of investors” (P25).

Under the aggregated dimension of unhealthy power dynamics, there is also another intriguing category of finding, which we labelled as “**co-destructiveness**” in an ecosystem referring to the degree of accidentally or intentionally hindering others while interacting, that would potentially prevent the components of the ecosystem from evolving together and sustaining the loop of collaboration. In fact, the praxis of entrepreneurship necessitates being able to handle different things at the same time and to cope with more than one problem. This is how you move from one problem area to another as an entrepreneur. However, while focusing on many business-related problems participants expressed that a different field of struggle in the ecosystem was already built for entrepreneurs that are directly/surprisingly coming from their entrepreneur friends, investors or other potential partners:

“During the investment meetings, one investor referred us to one of his friends who might be interested in what we are doing. Then he called that person to introduce us, he continued to explain how good we were on the phone. Then, we pitched that guy, and during the pitch,

he listened very carefully. However, then he told us that he invested in another startup with a very identical idea and business model to ours, and he admitted that the guys inside the company are developing exactly the same product. This is a person that the ecosystem knows very well.” (P14)

This tension also couples with some **difficulties in gaining legitimacy**, which becomes another struggle for entrepreneurs irrespective of engagement with the ecosystem. They have been trying to say that “ *we are here, we are real, and we are capable of doing this business*” with investors and other ecosystem actors, including customers:

“In fact, I believe this makes creating such a system for the first time in Turkey so challenging. because when they accept you, startup support programmes and other facilities publish a bulletin. Your recognition may be raised once again whenever your name is in the bulletin or your investors might be in your help. The most important aspect of doing business in Turkey is somehow demonstrating yourself to everyone .” (P33)

In this context, the data suggest unhealthy power dynamics in the ecosystem, explaining why a synergistic impact could not be achieved so far and why ecosystem actors must collaborate and become partners to provide momentum for long-term ecosystem growth.

Dysfunctional network structure in the EE

EE stakeholders highlighted the importance of creating an effective network, but they could not achieve the desired networking effect. The overall design of the ecosystem seems complex to many stakeholders. The ecosystem is *fragmented*:

“This current system in Turkey is so confusing and slows down entrepreneurs. I have always been talking about this. I know entrepreneurs want to build contacts with people. This is how they engage with the other parts of the ecosystem and how they benefit from each other. Yet, the method of doing it is very haphazard, unconscious, and random. For example, entrepreneurs want to get a 1512 [the Individual Young Initiative Program] grant from the Technological and Scientific Council of Turkey[TUBITAK]; at the same time, they are chasing other accelerator programs to find a place, how come it is possible?” (P26).

Such *unmethodical mapping of the ecosystem* also reflects how entrepreneurs build contacts with other entrepreneurs on the way to creating an entrepreneurial community:

“As far as I have seen, investors seem to act collectively, but entrepreneurs seem to take responsibility for themselves only. There is no mechanism where ecosystem’s players collaborate or cooperate in a way that benefits entrepreneurs. This is probably because of the developing nature of the ecosystem, which is not yet settled” (P33).

Since there is no systematic mapping for networking, entrepreneurs rely on acquaintance contacts to enchain them with possible investors. For example, if somebody knows them, likes their business model and is willing to invest, he/she may probably invite others in their network to be part of that business. This is how entrepreneurs create a further channel for

themselves just persuading someone very influential to catch the other investors' attention, as one participant explains:

"How did I meet my investor Omar Abi[brother]? We did not have much conversation about investment at the beginning. One day I created an image processing tool, a module to provide health insurance with photography. I shared it on LinkedIn. Omer tried first, and we contacted him. He said, "I will invest in your business", after introducing me to bro Okan. It was how I met him and how we became so close. When Okan came, Omer referred us straight to that investor" (P16).

Quanxi (relationships) can be time-saving, particularly if the business is legitimate and/or visible to investors and other players in the ecosystem. It is another way of building trust in the relationship to a certain degree. However, such relationships can create a *weak spinoff effect* that is effect nurture or develop additional areas which may contribute to other startups in the ecosystem:

YEMEKSEPETI [Turkish online food delivery company] was not able to create different spinoffs from within. It did not launch a system to incubate other entrepreneurs as a network... It's not about the money, it is about the limits we set ourselves. How many of startup (co)founders have you seen invested in other startups, ha?" (P3).
"Let's establish B2B portals, enable companies sell, buy and market their products through this portal inside the ecosystem. If we are unable to do so let's invite these firms to the conference and introduce each of them in-person, and let Technoparks market the products of these invited firms. If another startup makes a product that is nearly identical to yours let's work together. Unfortunately companies do not know each other, they do not recognise each other's services" .(P31)

Participants emphasize the side-effects of dysfunctionality in ecosystem networking especially through discussing the fragmented nature of networking, unsystematic mapping in expanding each individual [network] reach and the weak spin-off effect that is behind establishing an expected return from each interaction.

In short, stakeholders seem concerned about popularity fetish under a closed circle community, misalignment of expectations and investor as the God under the patronising, co-destructiveness and difficulty in gaining legitimacy under the unhealthy power dynamics and unmethodical mapping on ecosystem under the dysfunctional network structure. These emergent categories are so inextricably related to one another, implying deep-seated interactions that are inseparable in numerous ways.

 Insert Figure 2. About here

Some of the Phatic Blockage categories are manifested prominently as seen in the Table of code variables showing the coded segments in all documents.

 Insert Table 2. About here

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

This study is mainly provoked by excitement to understand “ how do entrepreneurial ecosystem dynamics coevolve around each ecosystem components?”. The study also reframed this interest in learning "how do entrepreneurs create and sustain ties with EE?" while maintaining an ecosystem focus/perspective.

Theoretical Implications

Emerging theoretical perspectives on entrepreneurship envision it as a dynamic process in which many factors are harmonised and disjoint but operate in their embedded specific contexts, so the understanding of the entrepreneurial process has already shifted towards an interaction among the stakeholders (Björklund and Krueger, 2015). This potentially shows how entrepreneurs as economic agents interact with each other and other stakeholders to form a sustaining and coevolving system. It is the place [entrepreneurial ecosystem] where such complex relationships are constructed with different technologies, institutions, and organisational arrangements (Arthur, 2013; Feldman, 2014). Although the outputs from such traded interactions are scrutinised widely, we need to understand the effects of untraded (invisible) interdependencies, primarily to extend the element-specific knowledge to ecosystem-wide understanding. (Wurth et.al., 2022). This study answers an important call for a critical understanding of EEs in emerging countries from theoretical and practical perspectives (Cao and Shi, 2020; Lingelbach et al., 2005) by proposing a dynamic perspective to show the co-evolutionary aspect of EE elements and changing nature of their relations. We built our understanding of the inseparability of an entrepreneur and ecosystem (Björklund and Krueger, 2016) to show the “how’s” affecting the key co-evolutionary characteristics. While doing this, we discovered some tensions, which are also called “ecosystem blockage(s)”, so the relational aspect has been deconstructed into several layers. We move further to understand the essence of interdependencies between components (Mack and Mayer, 2016) so as to interpret social, material, cultural and structural aspects of EEs. In this capacity, ecosystem-wide blockages advance the current debates on individualised cycles of action and cognition (Hoyke et al., 2019) and dynamic relationships situated among entrepreneurial actions and the environment to understand inherent connectedness.

This study reflects and incorporates salient features of emerging economies allowing us to extend existing frameworks with context-specific variables. Therefore this study makes it possible to create rigorous and comprehensive research in terms of EE dynamics (Stam and Spigel 2016) with having a relatively high capacity for contributing entrepreneurship policy designs in another emerging economy (Cao and Shi, 2020). Despite the fact that entrepreneurship is considered a local phenomenon, boundary-specific, and sensitive to contextual influences (Biru et al., 2021), national entrepreneurial cultures across developing countries have been found to be quite similar.

Practical Implications

The study opens a way towards unveiling blocking in the ecosystem, initiating restored actions and moulding the interaction of the entrepreneurial ecosystem components. There seems to be salient acceptance of these factors without explicitly labelling them, and the ecosystem field has been dominated by pessimistic feelings. Those pessimistic feelings are not necessarily counter-productive; they can trigger entrepreneurial thinking towards unblocking mechanisms. Recognizing the necessity to examine ecosystem tensions, the study acknowledges them as the fundamental essence of a developing ecosystem, and the findings lead to some ideas for expanding our current understanding of the features of emerging ecosystems, which are likely to involve some socio-cultural "toxicity". Ecosystem toxicity may be inherent in relationships, and it is in a collective mind that governs the ecosystem. Hence, critical evaluation and conceptualisation of some ecosystem attributes can help to develop unique approaches.

Policy Implications

The findings presented in the study have some policy implications for emerging entrepreneurial ecosystems as well. Discovering ecosystem-based blockages which are also creating toxicity at a certain extent in relation would lead the questioning multiple identities and responsibilities of each component in the ecosystem, then relative re-positioning of these components could be assured towards co-creation. This questioning and adjustment of knowledge would dispel deep-seated assumptions in the process of establishing a new institutional environment. Therefore governments may devise polyphonic/diverse strategies to their highest benefit towards a policy for an entrepreneurial economy.

Limitations and Future Research

Acknowledging that this study is not free from limitations, it would provide some insights for future research. Firstly, longitudinal studies with the archival investigation (ecosystem reports, media coverage/popular press outputs, relevant regulations, public statements) will help to advance EE contextualised research by adding some spatial and temporal dimensions. It will be good to broaden the future studies towards investors, entrepreneurial support program managers and/or administrative staff, technology transfer offices in universities and government representatives and explain how they engage in the ecosystem, to construct a more inclusive view of the relationship dynamics. This study mainly questions "Phatic Blockages" however there is also a need to investigate other types of blockages such as behavioural, system/structural-related or mindset which would give a detailed pattern of interaction and relevant unblocking efforts that act on blockages. Therefore, unblocking mechanisms that are built towards confining blockages could also be advanced in the future.

The study's findings also have a close connection with emerging perspectives of bricolage and effectuation in ecosystem research in several ways. Since it is emphasising the relational aspect in which entrepreneurs and their surrounding community is evolving and this relational aspect has also been deconstructed into several layers in terms of blockages. Thus, effectuation and bricolage would be an option to alternatively discover mechanisms for coping ecosystem blockages. Then deep-seated logic operating behind each mechanism can be discovered through utilising principles of effectuation and bricolage (Ahmed et. al., 2022).

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TABLE 1. Profile of study participants and Interviews' Duration

Participant Labels	Business Vertical(s)	Age	Gender	Education	Role in the ecosystem	EE experience ** (year)	Duration (in min.)
P1	Fintech	34	Male	B.A.	Entrepreneur	10	90
P2	Fintech	40	Male	B. A	Entrepreneur	11	90
P3	IT Agency	46	Male	MBA	(Serial) Entrepreneur	14	45
P4	Fintech	48	Male	M.Sc.	Entrepreneur	4	54
P5	Autotech/ Fintech	43	Male	MBA	Entrepreneur	7	62
P6	HrTech	39	Female	MBA	(Serial) Entrepreneur	10	46
P7	HrTech	42	Male	B.A.	Entrepreneur	8	65
P8	Deeptech	37	Male	PhD.	Entrepreneur	4	49
P9	MarTech	48	Male	B.Sc.	Entrepreneur	3	54
P10	InsureTech/ Fintech	42	Male	B.Sc.	Entrepreneur	7	57
P11	Deeptech	38	Male	PhD.	Entrepreneur, sales and business development mentor	9	58
P12	Deeptech/ Biotech	24	Male	B.Sc.	(Serial) Entrepreneur	4	40
P13	Consultancy	41	Female	MBA	(Serial) Entrepreneur, investor and mentor	10	56
P14	Healthech	38	Male	B. A	(Serial) Entrepreneur	7	43
P15	Saas/AI	38	Female	PhD. (c)	Entrepreneur	3	30
P16	InsureTech/ Fintech	33	Male	Associate Degree	Entrepreneur	6	52
P17	Consultancy	42	Male	B.Sc.	Entrepreneur	5.5	51
P18	Marketplace	28	Male	MBA	Entrepreneur	3	47
P19	Marketplace	24	Female	B.A.	Entrepreneur	2.5	47
P20	EduTech	42	Male	MBA, M.Sc.	(Serial) Entrepreneur, startup mentor, accelerator manager	12	56

TABLE 1. Continued

Participant Labels*	Business Vertical(s) **	Age	Gender	Education	Role in the ecosystem	EE experience (year)	Duration (in min.)
P21	IT Consultancy	51	Male	M.Sc.	Entrepreneur, senior consultant	7	42
P22	AutoTech/ Mobility	28	Female	B.A.	Entrepreneur	4	45
P23	Investment Network	33	Male	B.A	Entrepreneur, angel investment fund manager	9	44
P24	Growth Consultancy	53	Male	PhD.	(Serial) Entrepreneur, startup mentor, tech transfer and finance professional	15+	65
P25	PropTech	40	Female	B.A	Entrepreneur	3	89
P26	Growth Consultancy	55	Female	B.A	Startup Mentor, coach and senior consultant	6.5	90
P27	Growth Consultancy	49	Male	PhD. dropout	Startup mentor, coach and senior consultant	15+	55
P28	PropTech	31	Male	M.Sc., MA	Entrepreneur	4	41
P29	Growth Consultancy	40	Female	MBA	Entrepreneur, startup mentor and coach	8	63
P30	SaaS	39	Male	PhD.	(Serial) entrepreneur	10	72
P31	Software Consultancy	37	Male	PhD. (c)	Entrepreneur	3	61
P32	Foreign Trade Platform	42	Male	PhD. (c)	Entrepreneur, growth advisor, mentor and coach	9	64
P33	Enter/EduTech	26	Male	M.Sc.	Entrepreneur	1	62
P34	Wellbeing	41	Female	M.Sc.	(Serial) Entrepreneur	7	64
P35	OT/AI	36	Female	PhD. (c)	Entrepreneur	5.5	57
P36	Mechanics and SaaS	44	Male	PhD. (c)	Entrepreneur	4	65
P37	Growth Consultancy	54	Male	MBA	Startup investor, mentor and coach	12	45

TABLE 1. Continued

Participant Labels*	Business Vertical(s) **	Age	Gender	Education	Business background	EE experience (year)	Duration (in min.)
P38	Autotech /Fintech/ Retailtech/ Foodtech	58	Male	MBA	Entrepreneur and Investor	7	49
P39	Growth Consultancy	38	Male	MA	Entrepreneur, Mentor,	5.5	45
P40	Cybersecurity/ CRM/ Crowdfunding	44	Male	B.A	Serial Entrepreneur, mentor, crowdfunding platform (Founder)	7	62
P41	Autotech / Transportation and mobility/ Investment Platform	47	Female	MBA	Serial Entrepreneur, mentor, investor	15+	40
P42	Technology Development Foundation/ VC	55	Male	Ph.D	Entrepreneur, mentor, investor, technology and innovation support program admin.	15+	79

Note: *Interviewees are labelled as of the interview date and put in order respectively in the Table.

**Business verticals imply niches of the market with specific customer segment. The relevant business verticals are retrieved from <https://startups.watch/>.

***EE denotes Entrepreneurial Ecosystem.

Figure 1. Hierarchical Data Structure- Code and Subcodes Model

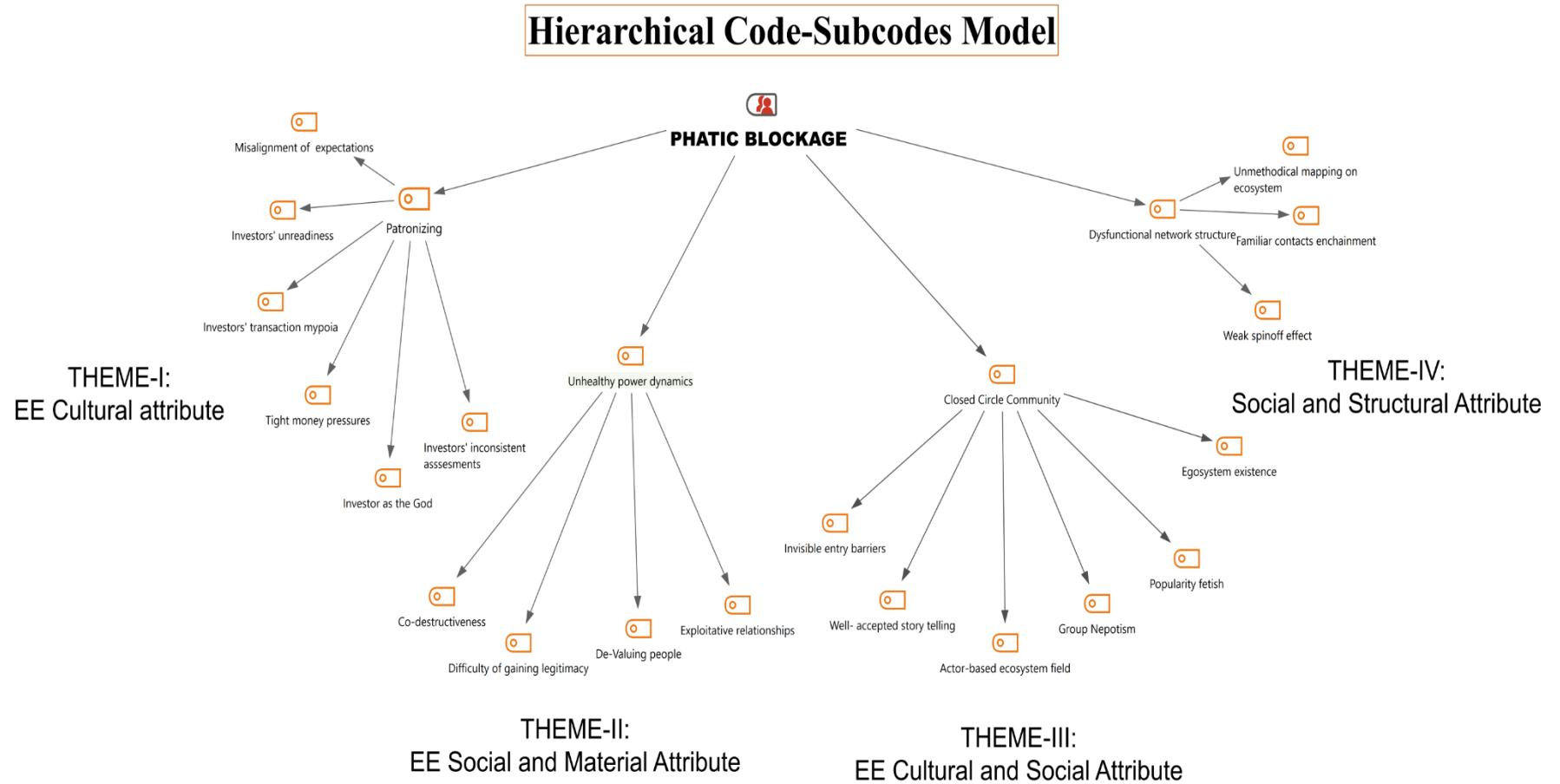


Figure 2. Code co-occurrence Map on Phatic Blockages

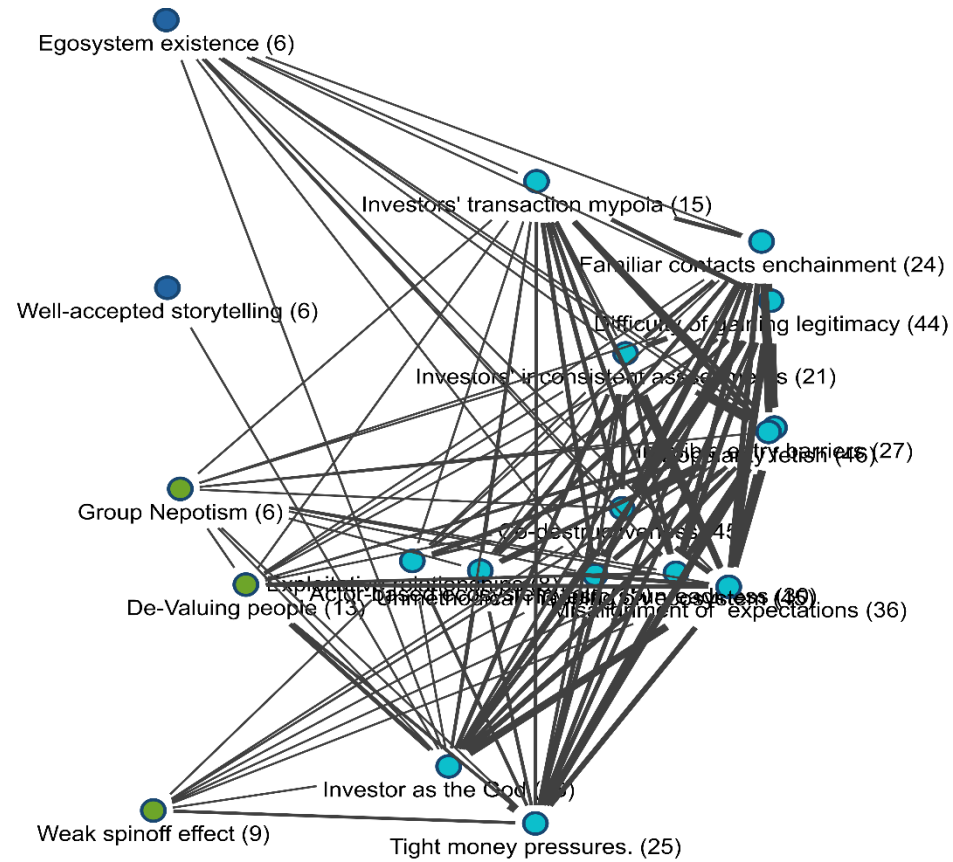


TABLE 2. Phatic Blockage Coded Segments

Second Order Themes with first order categories	# Of Coded Segments (In All Documents)
Closed Circle Community \Popularity fetish	46
Unhealthy power dynamics \Co-destructiveness	45
Dysfunctional network structure \Unmethodical mapping on ecosystem	45
Unhealthy power dynamics \Difficulty of gaining legitimacy	44
Investor patronizing \Misalignment of expectations	36
Investor patronizing \Investor as the God	33
Investor patronizing \Investors' unreadiness	30
Closed Circle Community \Invisible entry barriers	27
Investor patronizing \Tight money pressures.	25
Dysfunctional network structure \Familiar contacts enchainment	24
Investor patronizing \Investors' inconsistent assessments	21
Investor patronizing \Investors' transaction myopia	15
Closed Circle Community \Actor-based ecosystem field	15
Unhealthy power dynamics \De-Valuing people	13
Deep-seated distrust \Actor-based distrust	10
Dysfunctional network structure \Weak spinoff effect	9
Unhealthy power dynamics \Abusive relationships	8
Closed Circle Community \Egosystem existence	7
Closed Circle Community \Championing good storytellers	6
Closed Circle Community \Collectivist Nepotism	6