Research Policy 50 (2021) 104274

Contents lists available at ScienceDirect

Research Policy

journal homepage: www.elsevier.com/locate/respol

Exploring docility: A behavioral approach to interventions in business incubation

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ARTICLE INFO

JEL codes:
D90
M13
O32

Keywords:
Business incubation
Coaching behavior
Docility
New venture creation
Startups

ABSTRACT

The business incubation process evolves through coach-incubatee interactions rather than merely institutional intervention. We contribute to a behavioral understanding of this process by exploring the determinants and expression of docility, a fundamental human behavior. Our findings suggest that business coaches' perceptions of stakeholder value creation needs and their experience of incubatees' proactive behavior are essential determinants of coaching behavior. These behavioral determinants lead coaches to place idiosyncratic expectations on and become responsive to incubatees, and this is reflected in the range of their interventions in new venture creation. From a behavioral perspective, the outcome of coaches' interventions is a shared understanding of how to navigate the ambiguous and uncertain aspects of new venturing. Adopting a behavioral approach thus helps us to reframe business incubation—previously regarded to be a structured process—as a flexible process, more accurately capturing its role in facilitating the highly uncertain process of new venture creation.

1. Introduction

Bounded rationality, the limited decision-making capabilities due to the boundaries of human knowledge and knowability (March & Simon, 1958; Simon, 1955), is accentuated in the inherently uncertain process of new venture creation (Alvarez & Barney, 2005; Townsend, Hunt, McMullen, & Sarasvathy, 2018). Bounded rationality leads to a dependence on "suggestions, recommendations, persuasion, and information obtained through social channels as a significant basis for decision making" (Simon, 1972, 1993: 156). This dependence on others presents intervention opportunities for social actors interested in promoting new venture creation (Cohen, Bingham, & Hallen, 2019; Nair, Gaim, & Dimov, 2020). One such opportunity for intervention is business incubation.

Business incubators are organizations that facilitate boundary spanning of the resources required for new venture creation (Bergek and Norrman, 2008; Bruneel et al., 2012). The knowledge that results is then internalized for other client startups to reuse, thereby considerably reducing the time and resources spent on searches (Jansen et al., 2006; Zahra and George, 2002). Incubators thus become repositories of institutionalized knowledge on best practices in the creation of new ventures. However, forcing new ventures to go through standardized processes in order to learn from best practices and models comes at the cost of diversity, particularly among new ventures that are pursuing uncertain and novel ends (Nair et al., 2020; Sarasvathy, 2001). In an uncertain environment, conformity with institutionalized knowledge and practices is likely to stifle innovation (Levitt and March, 1988; Miron-Spektor et al., 2011), the very essence of entrepreneurial behavior (Aldrich, 1999). As a result, there is considerable skepticism about how effective business incubation really is (Hong et al., 2017; Schwartz, 2013).

One reason for this conceptual tension is that research tends to consider interventions from an institutional perspective (Dutt et al., 2016), ignoring elements of the individual (Ács et al., 2014; Autio et al., 2014). Given that boundedly rational founders of new ventures have to rely on external stakeholders (such as business coaches) to make novel and complex decisions under conditions of high uncertainty (Cohen et al., 2019; Venkataraman, Sarasvathy, Dew, & Forster, 2012), the behavioral determinants and expression of these facilitators, as well as the outcomes they effect, are of significance in the new venture creation process. However, despite its substantial implications for new venture creation, stakeholder behavior and how stakeholders intervene in different situations remain poorly understood concepts, particularly in the business incubation literature (Lefebvre et al., 2015).

Herbert Simon argued that the specific human behavior he termed "docility" is key to understanding exchanges between actors in contexts

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https://doi.org/10.1016/j.respol.2021.104274
Received 7 August 2019; Received in revised form 12 March 2021; Accepted 23 April 2021
Available online 14 May 2021

of bounded rationality (Simon, 1990, 1993). Docility, an evolved behavior of human beings (Knudsen, 2003), is a purposive and reciprocal willingness to give and take advice, to make and accept suggestions, to be persuaded and dissuaded, to be consulted and to consult others, to offer and accept instructions, and to engage in sensegiving and sensemaking; it therefore influences individuals' habits, goals, and impulses (Augier and Sarasvathy, 2004; Dewey, 1922; Secchi, 2009; Simon, 1959, 1993). In the context of business incubation, the behavioral construct of docility might enable an understanding of how stakeholders engage in interventions in new venture creation (Dew et al., 2008; York et al., 2013). In this study, therefore, we approach interventions from a behavioral perspective (Bird et al., 2012) to answer the following research question: what role does the docility of the business coach play in the incubation process?

By developing a behavioral understanding that better clarifies how incubators facilitate the uncertain process of new venture creation, we enhance the existing institutional, social capital-, and resource-based perspectives on business incubation (Aaboen, 2009; Amezcua et al., 2013; Dutt et al., 2016; Mian et al., 2016; Scillitoe and Chakrabarti, 2010). The behavioral understanding of interventions developed herein helps to explain the involvement of diverse stakeholders in the incubation process and the social value that this involvement generates. We also contribute to business incubation literature by showing how specific behavioral interventions and shared understandings help overcome the architectural rigidity of business incubation, making it more attuned to the uncertain nature of new venturing that it facilitates. Our study, therefore, has practical implications for the field of business incubation.

2. Docility in the context of business incubation

2.1. Business incubation

Support systems such as business incubators, accelerators, and coworking spaces are structural elements of an entrepreneurial ecosystem, and they provide support to new ventures at various stages of their development (Autio et al., 2018; Clayton et al., 2018; Spigel, 2017). Business incubators facilitate entrepreneurial learning for new ventures by providing a well-developed technological and business infrastructure, business support services, and networking opportunities (Bergek and Norrman, 2008; McAdam et al., 2006; Peters et al., 2004). Business incubators can be based in physical locations or on the Internet (Nowak and Grantham, 2000). Over the last two decades, rapid advances in technology and the increasing number of knowledge-based firms have encouraged incubators to change their models to go beyond physical investment (Aerts et al., 2007; Grimaldi and Grandi, 2005) and to provide more intangible and high-value services (Aaboen, 2009). In particular, with the realization that technological innovation alone does not lead to venture success (Teece, 2010), incubators' focus is shifting toward assisted entrepreneurial value creation and capture (Bøllingtoft and Ulhøi, 2005).

Value creation is the "relative amount of value that is subjectively realized by a target which is the focus of value creation, whether individual, organization or society" (Lepak et al., 2007, p. 182). New venture creation is the process of new value creation (Ambos and Birkinshaw, 2010; Bruyat and Julien, 2001), in which incubators employ various means to nurture the value creation process (Clarysse et al., 2005; Mian, 1996; Scillitoe and Chakrabarti, 2010). Entrepreneurial value creation occurs not in a vacuum (Shafer et al., 2005), but within a value network that extends the new venture's resources (Hamel, 2002). This network includes customers, suppliers, partners, distribution channels, and coalitions. These insights have emerged from 25 years of revitalization and scholarly inquiry in the field of economic sociology (Hoang and Antoncic, 2003), which has shown how entrepreneurs are closely connected through their social relationships within a broader network of actors (Aldrich and Zimmer, 1986; Thornton, 1999). It follows from these insights that incubators can be considered as social organizations (Bradley and McDonald, 2011) that foster collaboration with customers, funding agencies, and other stakeholders to address business challenges and opportunities. Models of incubation should therefore be based on entrepreneurial learning from this diverse range of stakeholders (Minniti and Bygrave, 2001).

Business incubation involves a number of different phases (Nair and Blomquist, 2019). In the selection phase, applicants are evaluated for their suitability for incubation (Bergek and Norrman, 2008): this selection is necessary because business incubators work with limited resources (Aerts et al., 2007; Merrifield, 1987). In the next phase, the selected startups are provided with business support and mediation, including business development activities (such as coaching and entrepreneurial training) and access to services concerning general business matters (such as office space, accounting, legal advice, advertising, and financial assistance). During this stage, the incubator acts as an intermediary between the incubatees and the external environment; through institutionalized networks, the boundary-spanning function facilitates access to different types of resources and services (Bruneel et al., 2012; Lynn et al., 1996). The aim is to develop robust business and social networks of the types that bring value to startups in the form of intellectual and material resources (Cooper et al., 2012). Finally, the exit phase is when the startups leave the business incubator. Not all incubators have strict exit policies, but many of them limit the length of time that a startup can spend in the incubator (typically between three and five years) (Bergek and Norrman, 2008; Bøllingtoft, 2012).

The study of business incubation draws extensively upon social capital theory and network theory, reflecting the fact that relationship network building is incubation's primary function (Bøllingtoft and Ulhøi, 2005; Bruneel et al., 2012; Hansen et al., 2000; Lesser, 2000; Nahapiet and Ghoshal, 2000; Scillitoe and Chakrabarti, 2010; Soetanto and Jack, 2016). A body of literature has therefore developed around incubation support for network and asset creation and for the formation and strengthening of network ties. However, this perspective has generally ignored the behavioral and cognitive dimensions of business incubation (Battisti and McAdam, 2012), failing to take account of the inherent tensions in using a structured incubation process to facilitate new venture creation. As a result, much of the existing literature on incubation is limited by the simplistic assumption that particular resources and models are critical. In fact, how business coaches intervene in different situations is a more important factor, and a focus on their behavior is required to understand it better.

In practice, business incubation is based on interventions that enable a new venture to progress from the selection stage through the support stage and on to the exit stage. Business coaches are actors who intervene by offering advice on the value creation activities that enable successful incubation. The literature on business incubation has tended to conceptualize these interventions as either consensual or conflictual and as either strong or weak (Radu Lefebvre and Redien-Collot, 2013; van Weele et al., 2017). There are also accounts of interventions such as of how the T- Hub incubator in Kenya facilitates serendipitous encounters (Busch and Barkema, 2020). However, the literature has not explored how different kinds of interventions come together within incubators, particularly from a behavioral perspective. This lack of understanding is despite recognition of the importance of shared cognitions and relationship quality between incubatees and business coaches for realization of the performance benefits associated with learning and knowledge transfer (Fang et al., 2010; Rice, 2002). It has been established that incubators use interpersonal communication strategies to influence incubatee behavior in ways that encourage transformative experiential learning (Radu Lefebvre and Redien-Collot, 2013). Nonetheless, studies that take account of the behavior of participants in business incubation have focused on incubatees and neglected the behavioral dimensions of coaches' interventions (Lefebvre et al., 2015).

2.2. Docility

The fundamental human behavioral characteristic of docility (Dewey, 1922, p. 97; Simon, 1959, 1993) has evoked renewed interest in the literature on intersubjective interactions and agreement in entrepreneurship (Augier and Sarasvathy, 2004; Dew et al., 2008; Karri and Goel, 2008; Venkataraman et al., 2012; York et al., 2013). Docility is considered one of the central assumptions of behavioral theories of entrepreneurship (Dew et al., 2008). Simon (1945) argued that docility is observable in the behavior of both individuals and organizations. His definition has both cognitive and motivational components (Knudsen, 2003): in cognitive terms, docility is the tendency to form beliefs from information received from legitimate or qualified sources; in motivational terms, it is the ability to accept information on the basis of social approval rather than individually held motives that are not socially acquired. Empirical research has shown that people value advice highly, even when it is from non-experts, and there is a body of experimental work that supports Simon's observation that people are, to a reasonable degree, docile (e.g., Çelen et al., 2010; Schotter, 2003). The susceptibility of individuals to social influence and persuasion thus has positive and complex behavioral connotations that extend beyond the passivity or meekness suggested in the popular dictionary definition of "docility" (Simon, 1993, 2009).

It is useful to contrast docility with other concepts in which social influence plays an important role, such as compliance and conformity. Compliance is a form of submission in which the target is urged, through implicit or explicit requests, to respond in a desired way (Cialdini and Goldstein, 2004), often so that an advantage can be gained over the target. Conformity has been defined as "the public avowal of a belief or attitude at variance with one's prior position, which avowal tends to correspond to the position approved by the group in which the avowal occurs" (Hardy, 1957, p. 289). Although docility differs from passive submission, it represents a conformist view of learning that emphasizes the cognitive limitations of individuals and therefore their reliance on social cues (Miller and Lin, 2010). Unlike conformity, however, docility does not have a homogenizing effect on groups that "penalize[s] individuals who deviate from accepted norms" (Bernheim, 1994). Instead, its purposive goal-seeking nature tends to result in differences being accepted; bounded rationality means that a docile person cannot acquire personally advantageous learning without being exposed to altruistic influences (Simon, 1990).

2.3. Docility and the incubation process

We believe that the study of docility is of particular relevance to business incubation. Docility is a fundamental human behavior that affects trust, altruism, and opportunism (Knudsen, 2003; Ossola, 2013). Docility also acts as a mechanism for the social exchange of aid and resources through mentoring, teamwork, coaching, and deep collaboration; learning, and giving and accepting advice are its central elements (McMillan, 2016a). All of these behavioral aspects are relevant in the context of how stakeholders interact with entrepreneurs in the early stages of new venturing and, therefore, are of particular significance in business incubation (see Ciuchta et al., 2017; Scarbrough et al., 2013; Vedel and Gabarret, 2014).

Given bounded rationality, the coaching that is provided to incubatees is generally based not on "objective evidence" but on "tapping into a well-known set of values," which may vary across contexts and can even come into conflict within a given context (Knudsen, 2003, p. 231). In such an uncertain environment, accepting non-validated advice can provide an advantage in dealing with the pervasive bounded rationality. For instance, a docile, coachable entrepreneur can learn from other stakeholders in the incubation process, reducing uncertainty by taking advantage of "an expanded set of public-private partnership opportunities" (York et al., 2013, p. 307). Such an understanding of interactions between entrepreneurs and those who advise them is unique to the behavioral construct of docility (Knudsen, 2003, p. 231). Moreover, understanding docility is relevant in this context because the motives of those engaged in interventions may not be entirely altruistic nor opportunistic. As Simon argues, docility is not necessarily an altruistic behavior; it is an "enlightened selfishness" in which those who intervene might be aiming to contribute to the good of society rather than of the individual (Simon, 1991, p. 35).

However, because docility has been regarded as a fundamental human behavior, there are no empirical studies that explain how it arises or how its expression contributes to specific stakeholder interventions in new venture creation. Similarly, we know little about how the participants' behavior in intervention mechanisms can influence the process. Thus, a focus on docility could clarify the diverse behavioral intentions and interventions of those intervening to support new venture creation. A focus on docility could, therefore, provide a better behavioral understanding of the process of incubation, making it possible to enhance its effectiveness.

3. Methods

3.1. The business incubation context

This article emerged from an investigation of business incubation practices in Sweden. In contrast to previous studies on business incubation (Lamine et al., 2016; Mian et al., 2016), we examine how the behavior of those engaged in interventions affects the process, thereby addressing the absence of a behavioral viewpoint in the literature on supporting new venture creation (Ács et al., 2014; Autio et al., 2014; Delmar and Shane, 2003). The role of the individual and individual action has either not been considered or has been expected to appear automatically (Ács et al., 2014). Following Benner and Tushman (2015), we argue that an inductive and problem-oriented investigation of the phenomenon of business incubation helps to explain its paradoxical nature. To create an understanding of the unexplored phenomenon of the behavioral influence of interventions in business incubation, we use a grounded theory approach (Corbin and Strauss, 2008).

The aim of our initial data collection process was to identify the general elements of business incubation and to guide the development of the interview design for the second stage (Glaser, 2017). The research team visited five incubators (three publicly funded and two privately funded) and conducted interviews with incubator managers, business coaches, and incubatees. We collected secondary data, such as internal documents and coaching material, from these incubators. We also conducted interviews with other actors in the incubation process, including angel investors, venture capitalists, and university innovation officers (see Table 1.1 for the data sources used in stage 1). The interviews were mostly unstructured but followed Spradley's (2016) approach of using "grand tour questions" to highlight the range of critical actors, artifacts, and practices that are associated with new venturing in the incubator setting. We began by allowing the interviewees to talk about whatever they thought was necessary; then, we asked follow-up questions that guided us back to the issues within our research objective. To corroborate the data, we conducted additional interviews with coaches and incubatees and collected archival data from the incubators (Lyon et al., 2000). The need for a behavioral approach was reinforced during these field investigations, where we found, in the words of one incubator manager, that "*in the end, the projects, they unfold mostly between the startup team and the business coach.*"

3.2. Data sampling, sources, and collection

In the second stage (see Table 1), sampling considerations were based on the heterogeneity of business incubation (Amezcua et al., 2013; Bøllingtoft and Ulhøi, 2005) and on the theory that broad sampling helps to generate new theoretical insights (Corbin and Strauss, 2008; Gibson and Hartman, 2013; Glaser, 2017). Incubation forms part of national

Table 1
Overview of data sources.

1.1 Data sources used in stage 1			
Sources	Interview (no.)	Additional data sources	Description
CEOs	3	Websites; Documents on incubation models	Managers/CEOs who are responsible for overall incubation programs
Business coaches	9	n/a	Coaches who are responsible for each startup projects and deal with them on a regular basis
Angel investors/ Venture capitalists	4	n/a	Investors who have made investments in startups based in incubators
University innovation office	2	Websites	Employees at universities who are responsible for screening student projects for recommending to incubation programs
Incubatees	7	Websites	Incubatees who are currently undergoing incubation
1.2 Data sources used in stage 2 *(includes relevant ones from stage 1)*			
CEOs	4	Websites; 5 documents on incubation models	Managers/CEOs who are responsible for overall incubation programs
Business coaches	29	12 coaching material items	Coaches who are responsible for each startup projects and deal with them on a regular basis
Incubatees (current)	23	Websites	Incubatees who are currently undergoing incubation
Incubatees (exited)	8	Websites	Exited incubatees who have undergone incubation within the last three years.
Interactions	12	16 hours' observation	Interactions between coaches and incubatees and among incubatees
Event 1, 2	-	6 hours' observation	Mingle events between incubatees and investors
Event 3, 4	-	10 hours' observation; coaching material	Workshop sessions for incubatees on pitching and business model development
Event 5	-	8 hours' observation; websites; promotion materials.	National level entrepreneurship fair which was attended by business incubators, innovation agencies, banks, and other stakeholders
Event 6	-	4 hours' observation; websites; emails; 5 press items	Inauguration sessions of incubator attended by stakeholders.
1.3 Type of Business Incubators in stage 2			
Pseudonyms	**Description**		**Interviews** (Coaches (C), Incubatees (I), CEOs)
Alpha	University business incubator with a general focus		4C, 4I, CEO
Beta	University business incubator in technology		4C, 4I, CEO
Gamma	University business incubator in life sciences		3C, 4I, CEO
Delta	University-regional business incubator		3C, 3I, CEO
Epsilon	A regional business incubator in a big city		3C, 4I
Zeta	A regional business incubator in a sparsely populated area		3C, 3I
Theta	Regional business incubator with a general focus		3C, 3I
Iota	Regional business incubator in technology		3C, 3I
Kappa	Regional business incubator in life sciences		3C, 3I

systems of innovation where "institutions engender, homogenize, and reinforce individual action: it is a country's institutions that create and disseminate new knowledge and channel it to efficient uses" (Ács et al., 2014, p. 478). Such top-down, policy-driven institutional interventions tend to have a homogenizing influence on constituent organizations at the ground level, including incubators (Ács et al., 2014; Autio et al., 2014). For example, Bergek and Norrman (2008) developed a best practice framework for incubators by analyzing the VINNOVA (the Swedish Governmental Agency for Innovation Systems) program for leadership development and the exchange of experiences and learning between incubators therein. Therefore, we excluded privately funded incubators and focused on those in the Swedish context that are primarily funded by regional governments and heavily influenced by the national innovation agency's goals and policies. We believed that this apparent homogeneity of the cases would provide an appropriate setting in which to study the influence of the behavior of coaches, which would otherwise remain obscure.

Nonetheless, there is considerable heterogeneity between incubators in terms of types, priorities, goals, and operations, as well as in their diverse social, geographical, and strategic foci (Amezcua et al., 2013; Barbero et al., 2012; Bøllingtoft and Ulhøi, 2005; Grimaldi and Grandi, 2005). An instance of such efforts is salient in the following quote from an incubator manager:

> *We always try to look bottom-up rather than top-down. We could look at the very successful incubators in the US for instance, but we will never be able to replicate what they are doing because it's a very bottom-up process. You have to look at what companies do we have here?*

Therefore, our sample comprised a broad range of incubators, including university incubators, regional incubators, incubators with a general focus, and incubators with a technology/life science specialization. Focused interviews were conducted with incubator managers/CEOs, business coaches, and current and exited incubatees. We adopted an increasingly theoretical sampling approach (Oktay, 2012) to take account of the evolving theoretical themes. For example, the emerging theme of *embrace spontaneity* led us to observe mingle events where spontaneous interactions take place. The emerging theme of *idiosyncratic expectations* prompted us to include coaches from specialized incubators and from sparsely populated areas. We also collected secondary data from various sources, including the websites and brochures of incubators (Lyon et al., 2000), in order to understand the incubators and their processes better and to improve the theoretical sampling. Tables 1.2 and 1.3 provide an overview of the data sources we used in this second stage of the study.

Our primary method of data collection involved semi-structured interviews and in situ observations of facilities, events, and interactions. We wrote field notes on observed behavior and triangulated our observations through retrospective interviews with the participants. We conducted separate interviews with individual startup project participants (incubator managers, business coaches, and incubatees), which allowed us to obtain accounts of incidents from different actor perspectives. We also corroborated the interview data with the incubator documents, a triangulation that helped draw our attention to the varied and often divergent perceptions of stakeholders held by business coaches. To ensure researcher triangulation and to minimize researcher bias (Bøllingtoft, 2007), the research team held regular meetings and conducted the interviews in pairs (Eisenhardt, 1989). Two members of the team were present during each of the in-depth interviews with coaches, one interviewing while the other took field notes.

In this second stage of the study, 64 semi-structured interviews were conducted with incubation actors. The interviews ranged in length from 1 hour to 1.5 hours and included both open- and close-ended questions; the responses were audiotaped and transcribed. The interview questions were modified during the process to enable exploration of emerging themes (Spradley, 2016). We continued our interviews until it was clear

that they were adding nothing new to the coding categories (Corbin and Strauss, 2008).

The authors observed more than 16 hours of interactions between incubatees and coaches and among incubatees in locations that included coworking spaces, meeting rooms, and lunch and coffee rooms: space can be used to facilitate learning and interactive behavior (Kok et al., 2011). We also participated in mingle events, which represented a further 28 hours of observation. The mingle events involved incubatees and investors and included two workshop sessions for incubatees on pitching and business model development. We also observed interactions between coaches and potential incubatees at an entrepreneurship fair attended by multiple business incubators. Thanks to the rapport we established with the incubation community over the course of this research (Massa et al., 2017), we were able to follow an incubator from its conception stage through its setting up and subsequent functioning. This helped us to gain profound insights into the motives, stakeholders, and processes of incubation in practice.

3.3. Data analysis

In grounded theory, the research focus is on a process, action, or interaction with distinct steps or phases that occur over time (Creswell and Poth, 2017). Accordingly, our unit of analysis was an intervention by a coach in a new venture creation context of business incubation. Actor behavior consists of meaningful and observable units of goal-oriented action (Bird et al., 2012); our research therefore forms part of a nexus emerging in empirical entrepreneurship research that regards the actions and interactions of entrepreneurs and their stakeholders as an essential unit of analysis (Sarasvathy and Venkataraman, 2011; Venkataraman et al., 2012). We consider as coaches those individuals engaged in interventions and interactions with incubatees at the incubator (in person, by telephone, or by e-mail), regardless of whether they are designated as business coaches, business advisors, innovation officers, incubation managers, technology advisors, or CEOs.

We analyzed our interview, observational, and archival data iteratively, moving back and forth between the raw data and the emerging theory using a constant comparison technique (Corbin and Strauss, 2008; Corley and Gioia, 2004; Locke, 2000). Statements indicating findings were made only if they were corroborated across multiple informants (Scarbrough et al., 2013). In order to converge on a parsimonious set of constructs, we focused on robust findings. The quotes provided in what follows are therefore representative of our data. Fig. 1 provides an overview of the data coding structure, setting out the first-order codes, second-order themes, and aggregate theoretical dimensions that guided our theorizing.

We then examined the assembled data structure, paying particular attention to the co-location of codes (data passages with multiple coding) (Eury et al., 2018). In this way, we arrived at an initial process model of behavioral interventions in business incubation (Fig. 2). Both authors were involved in the data analysis so that the credibility of the findings would not rest solely on the interpretations of a single analyst (Gioia et al., 2010).

4. Findings

This section presents different aspects of coaches' docility: its determinants, its behavioral expression, the actions or interventions that emanate from it, and its potential outcomes.

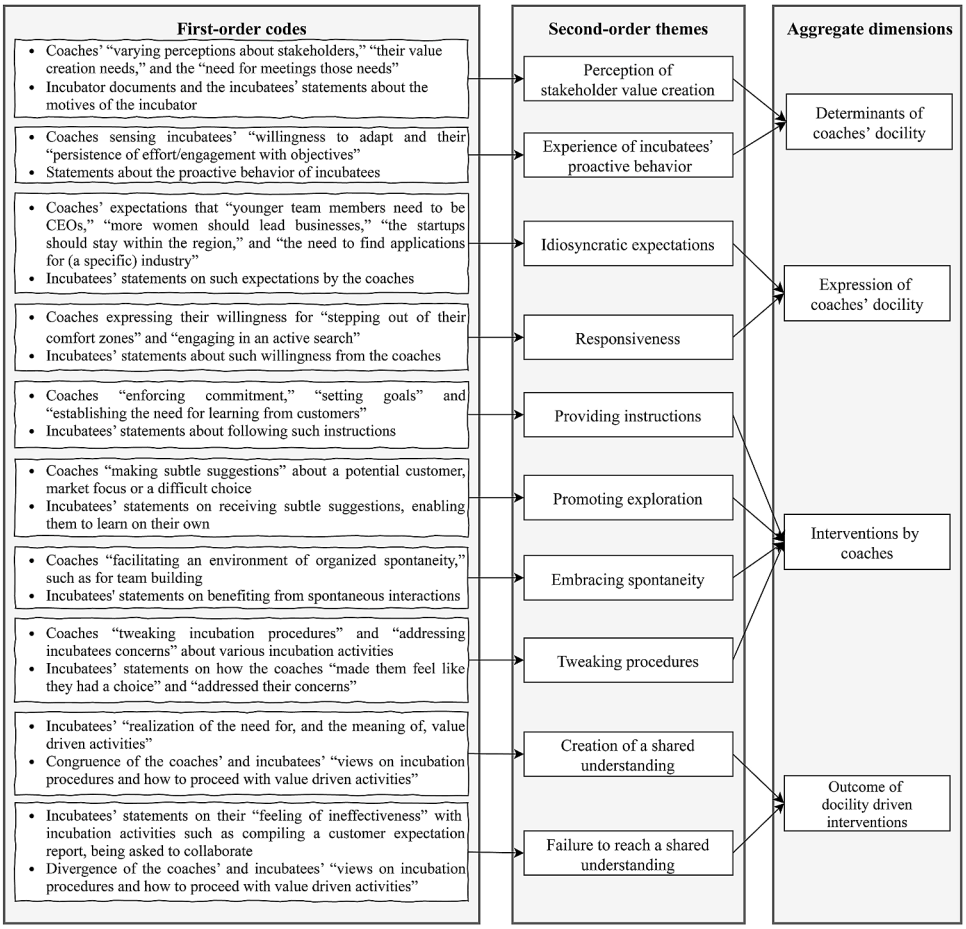

Fig. 1. Overview of the data coding structure

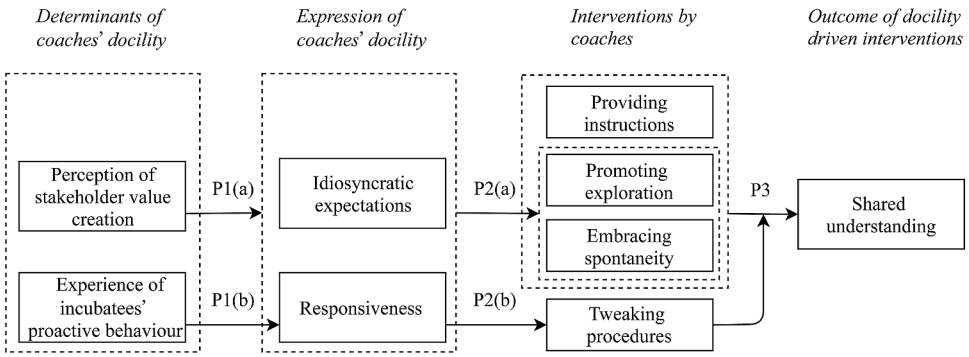

Fig. 2. A process model of behavioral interventions in business incubation

4.1. Determinants of coaches' docility

Our data reveal that the determinants of the coaches' docile behavior were salient (a) in their perception of stakeholder value creation and (b) in their experience of incubatees' proactive behavior. The coaches seemed to have idiosyncratic perceptions of stakeholders and their value creation needs. Docile behavior emerged as their coaching was influenced by their perceptions of the stakeholders, their value creation needs, and the importance of meeting those needs. The coaches had varying notions of whom they were creating value for, as articulated in the following quotes:

> *We need to be the best incubator for technology startups in the country.*

> *One cannot satisfy everyone, and we need to make priorities about how to go forward. I think that the existing needs of the patients [in a healthtech incubator] should have primacy and we should work for that.*

However, the range of perceived stakeholders reflected not only the heterogeneity of the incubators but also the varying perceptions that even coaches within the same incubator held about whom they should create value for. For example, this coach's own belief about the stakeholders differed from the stated objective of the incubator:

> *Fostering entrepreneurship and developing the region, yes, that is part of the spirit, but I believe the primary motive is income generation, return on capital for the investors.*

The coaches, therefore, brought with them into the business incubation process certain perceptions about who the stakeholders were and what value needed to be created for them.

The coaches' experience of the incubatees' proactive behavior was a determinant of their docile behavior. Our data suggest that the coaches, in their interactions, had a positive experience of the incubatees' behaviors, such as their willingness to adapt and the persistence of their efforts and engagement with objectives. This experience appeared to affect the behavior of coaches and to influence their coaching:

> *She is always thinking "what can I do today to add value to my company," unlike him [another incubatee] sitting at home and thinking whether he should have blue or black post-it notes for the next business model session. I feel encouraged to support her and to set up a meeting with a potential investor, or a big client by the next meeting.*

This behavioral influence portrays how coach-incubatee relationships were based on mutual influence in human interaction, a characteristic that differentiates them from leader-follower relationships.

4.2. Expression of coaches' docility

Our data show that the behavioral expression of the coaches' docility was manifested in (a) their idiosyncratic expectations and (b) their responsiveness. The coaches formed and placed expectations on the incubatees on the basis of their perceptions of value creation. The expectations we observed included "younger team members need to be CEOs," "more women should lead businesses," "the startups should stay within the region," and "they need to find applications for (a specific) industry." For example, a coach described how he placed his expectations on the startup:

> *We want to promote younger CEOs. However, it is a delicate issue to deal with and instead of directly asking for the younger [Ph.D. student] to be the CEO of the future company and not the Professor, first I suggested the need for a full-time CEO and then pointed out that it would be difficult for the Professor to commit significant time for the activities of the startup.*

An incubatee noted one such expectation and described it as follows:

> *Sometimes she makes this push saying, "Come on, you can do it. You don't need the guy in the company to be the CEO; you can be … try." It was a mindset change for us in the startup.*

The idiosyncratic expectations of the coaches did not involve an active search, and were based on perceptions and prior experience; responsiveness was expressed in terms of "stepping out of their comfort zones" and "engaging in an active search." A coach described her willingness thus:

> *When there was talk about [the startup] pivoting towards biofuels, as their current focus was not working, I thought it was a chance for me to step out of my comfort zone and see if our process works in other areas as well. So, even though it was not in our scope actually, we told them that we can still work with them and see if we can apply our tools … It was an aha moment for me.*

An incubatee reflected on the coach's willingness to engage in search:

> *Meeting the regulations were very important for us in our project, and we didn't know much about it as it was unchartered territory, but then she was like I will check it out and come back to you in two days.*

4.3. Docility-driven interventions

Our data show that the coaches intervened in new venture creation in four distinct and noticeable ways: (a) providing instructions, (b) promoting exploration, (c) embracing spontaneity, and (d) tweaking procedures. First, the coaches provided instructions to enforce commitment, set goals, and establish the need for learning from customers. It appeared that instructions were provided when the coach felt certainty about how to proceed and about what the incubatees should do. Compliance with such instructions was expected; the startup could be shown the door if they were not willing to follow the coach's instructions. There did not seem to be much leeway for the coaches when they are providing instructions because they are often standardized. An

example of intervention by providing instructions can be seen in this coach's insistence on meeting deadlines:

> *Right now, we are discussing with two teams that are at the end of their first year, and there are a couple of deadlines or critical decisions on the market that will take place one or two months from now. I have told them that keeping those deadlines will decide if we give them an offer of a possibility to stay here for three more months and not to kick them out.*

Second, the coaches promoted exploratory behavior among incubatees. They appeared to promote exploration in contexts of significant ambiguity about how to proceed where they were averse to influencing the decisions of the startup team directly. They promoted exploration by "making subtle suggestions" about a potential customer or market focus or while resolving a difficult choice that the startup was faced with and by "enabling the incubatees to learn on their own." A coach conveyed the following message to an incubatee after suggesting what direction they could take with their idea:

> *What I tell you might not be true – it's my perspective. Your job is to confirm what I tell you is true or not by going outside and asking others.*

Another coach described how he wanted the team to resolve the problem on their own:

> *We have a team right now that have problems … two persons in the team who haven't decided which way to go … we are hands off them, they have to find it out.*

Third, when the coaches faced uncertain situations and were unclear how to proceed, they tended to embrace spontaneity. They seemed to realize that interventions based on unstructured processes and spontaneous interactions were the best way to proceed in uncertain circumstances. In such cases, they intervened by facilitating an environment of organized spontaneity with other stakeholders, which could have unexpected and significant outcomes for the new venture. For example, traditional methods of matchmaking involve recruitment of team members based on the known need for skills. However, in the early stages of a startup, the necessary skills might not be well defined, and it might be more beneficial to embrace this uncertainty by exploiting spontaneity and serendipity in team formation. A coach described how they promoted spontaneous interactions through mingling events:

> *We arrange events where we invite entrepreneurs from the university program, and doers and visionaries and researchers and say, "Hey, you know, just mingle, and create." They get a colored sticker they can put on their shirt indicating if they are a researcher or an entrepreneur, and so forth.*

This was reflected in how an incubatee formed his team:

> *Most of what we learned we learned from other participants in the program. The hackathon provided us with the opportunity to work with others on fun projects … the team had formed in that way.*

Finally, the incubation process did not always lead to satisfaction for the incubatees, and procedures were tweaked to address a perception of ineffectiveness that developed among some of them. The incubatees were a diverse group that included serial entrepreneurs, university students, scientists, inventors, and those working at different levels of innovation. They learned in different ways and had different perceptions about how the incubation process should unfold. Under these circumstances, the coaches intervened by tweaking procedures or addressing concerns. A coach describes one such intervention:

> *He works very hard on his ideas, but every time I bring up customer engagement, he seemed to get further detached from the process as he had a feeling that he knew better than the customer. My greatest challenge was to make him see why he should take the communications course … It was a matter of communicating his ideas effectively. Finally, I was able to impress on him that it's not the focus on the customer, but his lack of skills in dealing with them that was causing the problem.*

A coach explained how he made sure that the incubatees realized why they had failed and that to encourage them to try again:

> *They failed because the market is far, and they had to exit. But the team was a good one; therefore, it's something to encourage them to do again. I wanted them to realize this, and we arranged some meetings to make sure they understood this and not leave the incubator dejected and like a failure.*

4.4. Outcomes of docility-driven interventions

The coaches' interventions, facilitated by their docile behaviors, resulted in a shared understanding of the incubation process between the coaches and the incubatees. It was not always apparent to the incubatees as to why they should follow a particular path or engage in particular activities. However, docility enabled the coaches to reach an understanding with them on these issues, making the incubatees realize the need for, and meaning of, value-driven activities. This could occur without anything being said directly, as this coach explained:

> *I put them in situations where they can learn without me needing to tell them directly, and usually we end up on the same page.*

An incubatee made a similar observation:

> *It was more like making us see the point of why we do things than telling us what to do.*

However, there were also failures to reach a shared understanding when the incubatees had ideas about how to proceed that were not congruent with the coach's views. An incubatee recalled such an incident:

> *It gets quite annoying when they are asking things in that order about NABC* [NABC stands for Need – Approach – Benefit – Competition]. *It is not my way of working, and I had to rephrase their questions to fit my way of asking.*

The successful pursuit of incubation activities might thus depend on the creation of a shared understanding between the coach and incubatees of how to engage in the activities.

5. Toward a model of docility in interventions

This section presents propositions based on the connections we found between aspects of the coaches' docility, their interventions, and the outcomes of those interventions in the context of business incubation, presented in Table 2. Fig. 2 presents a process model of behavioral interventions in business incubation.

The first part of the model addresses the relationship between the determinants of the business coaches' docility and its expression. Our findings indicate that the coaches had varying perceptions about the stakeholders in terms of whom value was to be created for and what their needs were. Accurate perceptions and interpretations are important for identifying opportunities; such behavior is a "shrewd and wise assessment of the realities" (Kirzner, 1980, p. 7). However, the literature on business incubation has focused on a developmental approach, taking the view that business opportunities develop over time as a result of active searching behavior (Mian et al., 2016; Ucbasaran et al., 2006; Vohora et al., 2004). Perceptions arise in part from the underlying heterogeneity of individuals in terms of their behavior, preferences, and past experiences (Sarasvathy and Venkataraman, 2011). Perceptions of value creation needs are shaped by their social embeddedness and the influence of environmental contingencies (Granovetter, 1985; Jack and Anderson, 2002). For example, the "need for environmental

Table 2
Exemplary quotes used in the propositions

'I think it would be disgraceful not using taxpayers' money to produce benefits for society and I keep that in mind while coaching the startups…There was no such focus initially, and then we started conducting workshops to identify the challenges in society and make the start-ups see how they could help … That also makes it easier to find customers because the challenge is defined from the beginning.' (**Coach-1** on how they address social problems through incubation)

'For me, the definition of a potentially successful company is the possibility for international growth…. I had a hunch that the Spanish market would be worth exploring, but the thought of going to a foreign market caused them anxieties. But then after much search, I found someone with experience in those markets to talk to them, and they became motivated as they overcame their initial fears.' (**Coach-2** on his perceptions and interpretations of the marketplace and how it made him responsive)

'We are usually very strict about having physical meetings, and not telephone meetings as the engagement is more solid …He (an incubatee) was really self-going and doing a lot of good things all the times. So, I never insisted on him coming for the meetings. Anything we had we discussed over the telephone or email.' (**Coach-3** describes his willingness to let the incubatee skip the periodic review meetings)

'So, we asked them to verify all the hypotheses they had in the business model and to call a series of meetings with potential customers to verify their idea. But the idea was not that good, so they stopped working on it after ten weeks, and we decided to try something else based on the feedback they received. They came up with something entirely different, with an application in an entirely different field. We were not sure about how the new idea would work as the underlying technology was so new and needed more clarity on how they could proceed. However, I was impressed that they were persistent and constantly working to develop their idea…. Though it was not really in our competence, I started learning about the technology and its feasibility from my contacts and bring more clarity…' (**Coach-4** on his experience of the startup team's willingness to adapt and iterate their ideas and be persistent in following through).

'The teams' collective interest is vital. They think they should adjust to his behavior as he is their senior (Scientist). He has to take a backseat if they are to succeed and I have suggested it to them though I don't want it to be forced' (**Coach-5** gives subtle suggestions that the younger team members need autonomy)

'Even though they were enthusiastic, I realized that they don't know enough about the market they are targeting. So, I asked around and found an investor who can ask some really tough questions. I called him up and said, 'well, I have a project that really needs to come down there and talk to you.' I was sure he is going to make them realize their problems.' (**Coach-6** on how he made the incubatees realize their lack of knowledge about the market without telling them directly)

'Now that we are out of the incubator, we can move the company anywhere, but that is up to us, and there is no compulsion from our investors to move to a cheaper location. The coaches wanted the companies to grow here in the region. I could see that from the way they were talking, 'we like (the city), we want (the region) to grow…Now that I look at it they were always trying to connect us to investors that invest here in the (region) and want the companies to stay and grow here. There was a mingle event with regional investors, and that is how we found ours' (**Incubatee-1** on how the incubation activities included making them stay and grow in the region)

'She understood that we are not 'instruction people.' We are not good at being instructed; instead, we like to discuss. She then tried to make us feel like now we have a choice.' (**Incubatee-2** on how the coach addressed their concern regarding being told what to do)

Creation of a shared understanding

'We are always trying to create companies with an emphasis on the forestry industry…In a broad sense, we were able to argue how the idea can help the industry, but I wanted them (the startup) to find it out on their own. So, I asked them to go to a forest industry event so that they might form an understanding of their own about the potential for their idea and its development in the industry…Coming back they said they now have a potential customer' (**Coach-7** on subtly suggesting the incubatees to explore the opportunities in the forestry industry)

'We recently had two start-ups, one that I was coaching and one by another coach, develop ideas that we thought would be better if they worked more closely as they had so many complementarities. We have this co-working space where some early stage teams were sitting. So, we moved these two teams there so that they get to interact and work together. But instead, one of the teams started working with another one (a third team) that was in a different field and they merged into one company with two different ideas. Interesting things happen when they talk and launch with the other teams…' (**Coach-8** notes how putting teams together in a co-working space created an unexpected outcome)

'Being a researcher, I wanted to do more experiments. But the business coach said, 'well it's not really necessary for the business,' and then, of course, we argued for a while. But then I understood why we don't need more experiments at this stage…We usually sorted out things in the room so that we always understand each other's (the coach and incubatees) viewpoint and come to an agreement about why we did this or that activity.' (**Incubatee-3** on how they reached an understanding with the coach on the activities to do)

Failure to reach a shared understanding

'In the end, we had to supply the customer expectations that our coach asked for. But it was not that easy. We had to explain our concept to the customers who didn't have the vision. It was like trying to sell an iPhone in the 1980s. The products we are working on are so innovative that the customer companies do not have the knowledge to assess them. … If they (the incubator and the funding agency) ask you to do something you better do it. But then, I would say not all the energy was spent on productive activities.' (**Incubatee-4** on feeling ineffectiveness in doing a mandatory customer expectation report)

'They put me in a room with this other guy and suggested that we collaborate as we were working on similar ideas and had complementary skills. But I found it impossible to work with him as we couldn't agree on anything. I think we were not fully made aware of how this is going to work, and it seems like they were experimenting. I feel like I wasted a lot of time in that' (**Incubatee-5** on feeling ineffectiveness about being asked to collaborate)

sustainability" may be a perception about social value that a business coach holds. Socially constructed values and beliefs evolve and are reinforced and accepted in uncertain situations such as new venture creation (De Clercq and Voronov, 2009; Suchman, 1995). Previous studies have concentrated on the role of university, policy, and financial stakeholders in providing the knowledge and value expectations that contribute to capabilities within incubators (Aaboen, 2009), thus neglecting the role of the individual.

Our data suggest that such influences are not only institutional but also depend on the perceptions of those involved in enabling new venture creation. From an individual behavioral perspective, the perceptions of coaches, just like institutional perceptions, lead them to form expectations and place these expectations on incubatees. Coach-1, for example, drew on his perceptions about the need for social value creation in arranging workshops to identify the challenges in society; through the workshops, he placed those same expectations on the incubatees. Thus, the coaches' perceptions of the value creation needs of the stakeholders made them place the onus of value creation on the incubatees. Furthermore, it led them to display more responsive behavior themselves. For instance, when Coach-2 perceived the need for a startup to go international, he became responsive, making considerable efforts to find an expert on the Spanish markets who would enable the startup to explore those markets. These considerations lead to our first proposition:

Proposition 1. (*a*) A heightened perception of stakeholder value creation needs increases the expression of a coach's docility in the form of idiosyncratic expectations and responsiveness.

Previous studies have regarded business incubation as providing incubatees with resources and capabilities in the form of tangible as well as tacit knowledge (Aaboen, 2009; Somsuk and Laosirihongthong, 2013). This might mean that startups obtain access to resources based on their requirements. However, our data reveal that access to resources is also based on participant behavior, given that coaches are themselves influenced by their experiences of the incubatees' proactive behavior. Proactive behavior is a cornerstone of entrepreneurship, and is associated with taking the initiative in pursuing new opportunities (de Jong et al., 2015; Moser et al., 2017). Social capital theory can help to explain such influences in the transmission of behavior; social capital may be generated when one party in a relationship transmits behavior related to excitement about activities, intensity of commitment to a goal, and eagerness to educate — and this influences the behavior of the other party (Coleman, 1990).

When coaches experience incubatees' willingness to adapt and the persistence of their effort and engagement with objectives, the coaches themselves become responsive. This behavior was observed in Coach-3, who responded to the self-starting attitude and engagement of the incubatee by dispensing with the periodic review. Similarly, when Coach-4 sensed the persistence of the incubatees and their proactive behavior, he became willing to step out of his comfort zone to engage in a search to learn more about new technology. This interplay of behavior between coach and incubatee is formulated in our next proposition.

Proposition 1. (*b*) A heightened experience of incubatees' proactive behavior increases the coach's expression of docility in the form of

responsiveness.

The second part of the model addresses the relationship between the expression of docile behavior by the coaches and their interventions in business incubation. The idiosyncratic expectations and responsiveness of the coaches affected how they intervened through coaching. We see these effects as prominent when it comes to interventions that promote exploration and embracing spontaneity. As our data show, interventions that involve the provision of instructions are often standardized. However, relying on standardized procedures alone would prevent the initiation of any search process outside the standard frame of reference (Brown and Duguid, 2000). To overcome such architectural rigidities (Miller, 1993), the coaches seemed to favor interventions that took advantage of exploratory and spontaneous interactions (Fayard and Weeks, 2007) with the potential for unexpected but desirable outcomes. Behavior shaping and conformity can be achieved through social influence without applying overt pressure, and this can take place in subtle ways (Cialdini and Goldstein, 2004; Freedman and Fraser, 1966). For example, Coach-5's expectations about the collective interest of the team led him to make subtle suggestions that the senior scientist should take a back seat. One coach's expectations about regional development led to a subtle suggestion to Incubatee-1 about staying and contributing to the region, and the startup managed to do this by finding a regional investor at a mingle event. Although finding the investor was unplanned, it was made possible by the coach's expectations about regional growth and subsequent attempts to connect startups with regional investors. Similarly, Coach-6's responsiveness enabled him to intervene by promoting exploration: by setting up a situation in which the startup was confronted with tough questions from an investor, he allowed the startup to learn on its own about market needs. These observations lead to our next proposition:

Proposition 2. (*a*) Expression of docility in the form of idiosyncratic expectations and responsiveness increases a coach's ability to intervene by promoting exploration and embracing spontaneity.

Responsiveness is a kind of flexibility: the ability to respond to situations and engage in active search. Flexibility must be maintained for entrepreneurial activity (Sarasvathy, 2001), and responsiveness is vital in circumstances where established policies, procedures, and routines hinder exploration of opportunities (March and Simon, 1958). Entrepreneurial behavior is shown not only by entrepreneurs but also by those who intervene to enable it. This is not surprising given that most business coaches are current or former entrepreneurs. Even in the role as business coaches, their responsive behavior is influenced by their experience of incubatees' proactive behavior. In one example, a business coach who found that the incubatees were unwilling to accept instructions tweaked her coaching methods accordingly. Her responsiveness made Incubatee-2 feel like she now had a choice in the process. Unlike a reliance on initial impressions (Ciuchta et al., 2017), the behavioral expression of docility in the form of responsiveness enables coaches to tweak procedures so that they are better suited to the needs of individual entrepreneurs. Hence, we make the following proposition:

Proposition 2. (*b*) Expression of docility in the form of responsiveness increases the ability of a coach to intervene by tweaking incubation procedures.

The third part of the model addresses the relationship between the interventions of the coaches and their behavioral outcomes. The entrepreneurship literature has argued for "the role of collective interaction, negotiation and shared experiences in shaping and reshaping opportunities" (Venkataraman et al., 2012, p. 22). Our data show how the docile behavior of the coaches helped to create this shared understanding between them and the incubatees. Coach-7 suggested subtly that incubatees should explore opportunities in the forestry industry. When they did this, they ended up sharing his views about the potential for their idea in that context; they also found a customer, thus creating value for themselves and for the forestry industry. By facilitating an environment in which spontaneous interactions could take place, Coach-8 helped two startups at his incubator to merge into a single company. His views about complementarity and the need to work together were shared by his incubatees, and their interpretation of this created an unexpected outcome made possible by the underlying spontaneity.

However, the data also show a number of failures to reach a shared understanding. Establishing direction and meaning within a process requires intentional alteration of how people attribute meaning by communicating it in an understandable and evocative manner (Gioia and Chittipeddi, 1991; Hill and Levenhagen, 1995; Smerek, 2011). Incubatee-4 felt frustrated and believed that compiling a customer expectation report would be unproductive: he complied with the coach's instructions, but reluctantly. Owing to the heterogeneous perceptions, behavior, and knowledge that they bring to the table, incubatees have their own ideas about incubation activities. As Incubatee-2 noted, she and her team were not "instruction people." However, in that case, the coach was able to address the incubatee's sense of ineffectiveness by making her feel like she had a choice. Incubatee-3 was able to reach a shared understanding with the coach about why more experiments were not required at a particular stage in the process; this intervention by the coach was crucial because the incubatee was struggling with her dual roles as researcher and entrepreneur. However, in the case of Incubatee-5, an opportunity to create a shared understanding was missed when their sense of ineffectiveness regarding collaboration with another incubatee was not addressed.

The attempts of a coach tries to address the shortcomings that arise in their interventions are consistent with the kind of docility in which an individual undertakes a "stage of exploration and inquiry followed by a stage of adaptation" (Simon, 1945, p. 85) in order to reach a goal. This moderating role of a coach's behavior in creating a shared understanding with incubatees regarding interventions is captured in the following proposition:

Proposition 3. The more willing a coach is to tweak incubation procedures according to the needs of the incubatees, the more likely it is that their interventions will result in a shared understanding of the incubation process with the incubatee.

6. Discussion

In this study, we have explored the role of docility in coaching behavior in a business incubation context. As a fundamental element of human behavior and despite its centrality in entrepreneurship (Dew et al., 2008; York et al., 2013), the concept of docility has not received the attention it merits in research on the new venture creation process (Augier and Sarasvathy, 2004; McMillan, 2016b). Our findings suggest that coaches express docility in their expectations and responsiveness, and that this behavior is determined by their idiosyncratic perceptions of stakeholder value creation needs and their experiences of proactive behavior on the part of incubatees. This expression of docility leads to interventions that are instructional, exploratory, spontaneous, and open to tweaking in nature, and these interventions result in a shared understanding of the incubation process with the incubatees. Our findings and propositions thus enable us to make significant contributions to theory and practice.

6.1. Theoretical implications

Our study makes significant theoretical contributions to the behavioral understanding of business incubation. First, we contribute to an understanding of business incubation not just as a process based on the competitive aggressiveness of new venture creation (Lumpkin and Dess, 1996), but also as one that generates social value from the diverse goal-seeking behavior of those engaged in interventions. Our findings bring forth the coach's perception of value creation as a critical

behavioral construct that determines how he or she intervenes in business incubation. Perceived value, which is relative and personal by virtue of its comparative, preferential, and situational nature (Sánchez-Fernández and Iniesta-Bonillo, 2007), brings a behavioral dimension to the value created in the incubation process. The heterogeneous perceptions of coaches and the idiosyncratic expectations they place on incubatees explain how the value that results from new venturing can be appropriated by other actors (Lepak et al., 2007); this may be crucial in explaining how and why incubation attracts and incentivizes the participation of diverse stakeholders. Moreover, coaching behavior based on perceptions, expectations, and responsiveness shows that it is much more varied than its current understanding as assertive, consensual, or conflictual.

Second, we theorize how the specific behavioral interventions of coaches help overcome architectural rigidities (Miller, 1993) within business incubation. Behavioral interventions are more suitable to facilitating the ambiguous and uncertain process of new venturing. Our findings highlight that explorative interventions through subtle and indirect suggestions help incubatees to make choices and resolve debates. Interventions that facilitate spontaneity can lead to unexpected yet desirable outcomes. Interventions by tweaking procedures can impress upon incubatees the meaning associated with various incubation activities and make the otherwise structured process more flexible. Accordingly, we highlight that the shared understandings that emerge from the incubation process are intersubjective in that they are socially constructed as a result of behavioral and rule-based interactions (Jack and Anderson, 2002; Venkataraman et al., 2012).

6.2. Implications for the practice of business incubation

We believe that our findings have the potential to positively influence the effectiveness of a business incubator. Incubator managers should realize that theirs is not an organization that provides a homogenous model of business incubation; instead, it relies on the behavior of the coaches. Coaches should have the behavioral capabilities to effectively engage in the different kinds of interventions that we have identified; not everyone has the right behaviors necessary for embracing structured and unstructured intervention processes. Coaches have heterogeneous perceptions of value creation and are influenced by the behavior of incubatees toward them. This, in turn, affects how opportunities are interpreted and pursued, leading to imbalances in how resources are made available to incubatees. Therefore, a startup in the incubation process should not be dependent on one coach with one set of behaviors, but multiple coaches with different docile behavioral dispositions. Moreover, our findings draw attention to the need for coaches to have a degree of autonomy in tweaking procedures based on individual startup requirements in order to ensure that the incubation process is effective. These behavioral dimensions should also be included in coach training programs, helping coaches to reflect on how they intervene in the incubation process.

Policymaking tends to rely on best practice frameworks as a means to influence new venture creation initiatives. However, our findings show that the behavior of those engaged in interventions can modify these models such that they work differently in practice. Policymakers and incubator managers should be mindful of these behavioral influences when applying models and best practice frameworks for new venture creation.

6.3. Limitations and suggestions for future research

With its empirical focus on the Swedish publicly funded incubation setting, our study may be subject to generalizability concerns. Based on our data, we suggest that our contributions are contextual and provide valuable ground for further studies to increase our understanding of business incubation. Given that each region's entrepreneurial ecosystem is unique (Spigel, 2017), our findings should be considered relevant for understanding how heterogeneity develops within incubation settings that are top-down policy-driven and with programs that do not take a financial stake in their start-ups. The limitations of this study, therefore, suggest ways in which future work could proceed.

The determinants and expression of docility identified here are not an exhaustive set, and different samples may identify different docility elements. Our sample consists of incubators funded primarily by regional governments and is therefore heavily influenced by the national innovation agency's goals. This sampling restricts our findings' generalizability to contexts where there is an inherent and fundamentally social motive behind incubators. The business coaches in this sample were not significantly influenced by the need to increase their own or the incubator's financial value. This motive contrasts with the goals of a business coach at a private business incubator from our stage 1 data collection, who told us this:

> *This is a privately held company, and we have a financial interest in making sure that this company is a success. That makes me stay here until midnight and maybe come here at 7 o'clock in the morning. Because if I can make this work, then maybe I can build myself a fortune.*

Therefore, future research should examine docility in privately run business incubation contexts such as corporate incubators or those where the incubators take a stake in the incubated start-ups. We expect that the determinants and expression of docility will be somewhat different in those circumstances. Moreover, all incubation models might not allow business coaches to tweak procedures. We theorize from our data that tweaking helps create a shared understanding of the uncertainty inherent to incubation. However, further studies should seek to examine how tweaking works in other settings and in incubators with different financing models.

Previous studies have discussed the incubation process in terms of phases from entry to exit, and business incubators have different ways of characterizing their processes based on start-up needs. In some cases, coaches are involved in coaching and other aspects of incubation such as selection decisions. Our grounded theorizing did not distinguish between incubation phases. The process that we depict of reaching a shared understanding was not an endpoint of the incubation process but an outcome of interventions within that process. We expect that docile behavior, which is dynamic, will vary according to the incubation phase and will influence interventions differently as the coach–incubatee relationship develops. Time, context, and the environment are also likely to play a role, given that the manifestation of docility may depend on the availability of resources in the incubator or on how much of a financial stake the coach has in the start-up project. Moreover, the expression of docility might also vary depending on the individual backgrounds of coaches. Further research could explore these dynamic aspects of docility in business incubation to enhance understanding of how docility emerges and changes over time and its long-term effects on incubation and new venture creation (Karri and Goel, 2008). While we believe that docility is a crucial behavior that influences interventions in new venture creation, the theory generated here could be adapted and tested for other vital behaviors such as trust, altruism, opportunism, and reflectiveness.

Finally, the importance of the behavior of those intervening in the process of new venture creation has implications for understanding interventions through other support systems such as start-up campuses, coworking spaces, hatcheries, accelerators, pitch competitions, and new venture financing within entrepreneurial ecosystems. There is considerable mutual interaction between entrepreneurs and those who enable the new venture creation process in these settings, that needs to be explored. We believe that there are many opportunities to build and expand upon the model and constructs proposed in this study. We hope that it lays the groundwork for further behavioral studies of business incubation and new venture creation in general.

CRediT authorship contribution statement

Sujith Nair: Conceptualization, Methodology, Validation, Formal analysis, Investigation, Resources, Data curtion, Writing – original draft, Writing – review & editing, Visualization, Supervision, Project administration, Funding acquisition. **Tomas Blomquist:** Methodology, Validation, Investigation, Resources, Data curation, Writing – review & editing, Visualization, Supervision, Project administration, Funding acquisition.

Declaration of Competing Interest

The authors declare that they have no known competing financial interests or personal relationships that could have appeared to influence the work reported in this paper.

Acknowledgements

This research was carried out with funding from the Swedish Riksbankens Jubileumsfond (P19-0597:1). We are also thankful for the support from the Handelsbanken's Tore Browaldhs research foundation and the Per & Eivor Wikströms' Foundation while developing this article.

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