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Charting ethical shadows: institutional dynamics for sycophancy as a strategy in public universities

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ABSTRACT

This research explores the structural mechanisms that foster sycophantic behaviors among academics in Business Schools at Turkish public universities. It investigates how institutional factors influence academic working conditions and promote the use of sycophantic strategies. Grounded in an institutional theoretical perspective, this study employs semi-structured in-depth qualitative interviews with research assistants, research fellows, and assistant professors. Thematic analysis of the data reveals two key themes: career advancement systems, and access to power and authority. By examining the institutional dimensions of sycophancy, this research enhances our understanding of how context-dependent factors legitimize unethical behaviors within organizations. In terms of theoretical contribution, it challenges traditional notions of legitimacy, and highlights the role of regulatory, normative, and cultural-cognitive dimensions in shaping sycophantic behaviors. Furthermore, this study emphasizes the institutionalization of sycophancy in higher education, illustrating how it has become a survival strategy within the workplace despite its unethical nature.

Introduction

Sycophancy is a strategic approach that employees use to manipulate senior management within organizations in order to advance their own interests. This approach involves outwardly endorsing every decision made by management, even if they completely depart from one's genuine beliefs (Ozbilgin et al., 2019). Many studies (e.g. DuBrin, 2012; Miller, 2003) have shown that sycophantic behavior entails excessive praise, displays of care, and an exaggerated willingness to assume responsibility, an approach to career advancement that ultimately undermines the

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principles of professional success. Nevertheless, academics in public universities encounter sycophancy due to the subjective criteria adopted to award promotions and achievements within the academic hierarchy, such as those established by the vice chancellor and rector.

While sycophantic behaviors have been widely considered in organizational settings, there is a lack of research on how they are shaped and reinforced by institutional structures in public universities; in particular, the research on the normalization and legitimization of sycophancy in academia remains scarce. In the Turkish context, public universities are structurally different from private (foundation) universities. They are governed by a centralized, state-controlled bureaucratic system where top-level administrators, such as rectors and deans, are appointed by the Higher Education Council. This structure leads to hierarchical and politically influenced decision-making processes regarding promotions and appointments. In contrast, foundation universities have relatively autonomous governance and performance-based evaluation since they are governed by boards of trustees that provide strategic and managerial decisions which include the appointment of senior leadership (Ateş & Dönmez, 2020). As a result, public universities create a unique institutional environment in which sycophantic behaviors are more likely to emerge and gain legitimacy due to hierarchical and politicized power structures. By considering these points, in this research we aim to explore how the structure of higher education institutions shapes working conditions for academics and forces them to adopt sycophantic behaviors.

Various studies (e.g. Ammeter et al., 2002; Ouimet, 2010) have indicated that sycophancy is an attitude employed to deceive leaders. As a consequence, it is deemed an unethical and undesirable approach within an organizational context. However, public universities, in particular, exhibit a predisposition to tolerate its manifestation, an inclination that can be attributed to the promotional and achievement mechanisms in place within such institutions. Despite the establishment of particular criteria by university management for all promotion procedures, the evaluation systems in universities remain subjective. Consequently, sycophantic behavior continues to prevail in higher education institutions.

In this research, we adopt an institutional theoretical perspective, drawing on the work of Scott (2013) to understand the prevalence of sycophantic behaviors within higher education institutions. Institutional theory provides a lens through which we can examine how organizational norms, values, and structures create the conditions that legitimize – and indeed even reward – sycophantic behavior. By applying this theoretical perspective, we aim to explore how institutional factors influence the adoption of sycophantic behaviors among academics and contribute to the institutionalization of such practices within the

organizational context of public universities. This perspective allows us to examine the regulative, normative, and cultural-cognitive dimensions that shape the behaviors and practices observed within these institutions.

To investigate the use of sycophancy as a strategy within higher education institutions, we employed a qualitative research approach. Semi-structured in-depth qualitative interviews were conducted with a diverse group of academics from various public universities in order to capture their experiences, perspectives, and insights regarding sycophantic behaviors in the workplace; additionally, participant observation and analysis of organizational data were utilized to gain a comprehensive understanding of the phenomenon. Thematic analysis was employed to identify key themes and patterns emerging from the data, allowing for a rich exploration of the complex dynamics and contextual factors involved.

The analysis of the data revealed compelling insights into the adoption of sycophantic behaviors within the context of Turkish public universities. The findings highlighted the influence of career advancement systems and access to power and authority as significant factors contributing to the prevalence of sycophantic behaviors among academics. The lack of explicit job descriptions, subjective decision-making processes in promotions and appointments, and the influence of personal and political connections were identified as key challenges faced by academics, leading them to engage in sycophantic behaviors to navigate the associated systems. The findings also shed light on the institutionalization of sycophancy within the higher education system and its impact on academic freedom, fairness, and integrity.

This article is structured as follows. In the subsequent section, we comprehensively review the literature on sycophancy, exploring its conceptualization, antecedents, and consequences within organizational contexts. Following the literature review, we present the theoretical framework informed by institutional theory, which guides our analysis of the institutional factors influencing the adoption of sycophantic behaviors in public universities. We then describe the methodology employed in this study, including data collection procedures, sample characteristics, and data analysis techniques. Next, we present the key findings that emerged from the analysis, discussing the themes and sub-themes identified through thematic analysis. Finally, we discuss the implications of our findings, highlighting the ethical considerations, and conclude with suggestions for future research and practical implications for higher education institutions.

Theoretical perspective on sycophancy at work

Sycophancy represents a prevalent form of unethical conduct within organizational settings whereby individuals strategically manipulate leaders to further their own interests, such as securing promotions and

exerting power (Ozbilgin et al., 2019; Ralston, 1985). Liden and Mitchell (1988) theoretical framework introduces ingratiation as a macro-level perspective to shed light on employee behaviors toward leaders. This conceptual model posits that ingratiation serves as a calculated strategy by which individuals attempt to enhance their appeal in the eyes of leaders or higher-ranking management figures, effectively operating as an upward influence tactic. Consequently, sycophancy can be viewed as a specific manifestation within the broader context of ingratiation.

Notwithstanding the prevalent literature's predominantly condemnatory stance towards sycophancy as a form of unethical behavior, certain studies challenge this perspective. For instance, Ralston's (1985) research argues that individuals may engage in sycophantic practices without conscious awareness or intent, blurring the boundaries between genuine conduct and calculated flattery. Consequently, this research emphasizes the significance of conscious intent as a criterion for assessing the ethical dimensions of sycophancy. For this reason, intention serves as a key indicator for diagnosing sycophantic behaviors in organizations. In addition to employees' intentions, organizational power dynamics and contextual factors can also compel employees to display sycophantic behaviors (Pech & Slade, 2007). It is thus crucial to take both individual and organizational dimensions into account, rather than solely focusing on the attitudes of individuals within organizations. There is an intertwined relationship between individual behaviors and the overall organizational context, and gaining an understanding of this complex interplay could provide a more comprehensive insight into the root causes of, and potential solutions to, sycophantic behaviors in the workplace (Granovetter, 2017).

The visibility of sycophantic behaviors within an organization is contingent upon the prevailing organizational climate. For instance, Wang et al. (2023) and Shankar et al. (1994) both highlight that leaders operating within a participative climate prioritize collaborative decision making, supportive relationships, and organizational objectives. In such an organizational climate, sycophancy may be less apparent, as leaders maintain consistent performance standards for employees. However, leaders operating within an authoritarian climate emphasize power dynamics and status hierarchies (Schyns et al., 2020). Consequently, sycophancy becomes a behavior that can bolster an individual's self-aggrandizement. In such a climate, blind obedience and personal loyalty become critical for leaders to attain their objectives within the organization.

Furthermore, a conceptual study conducted by Chahal and Poonam (2015) reveals that employee sycophantic behavior can have a positive impact on career success. The authors argue that sycophantic behavior can be beneficial for employees within an organization. However, it is

crucial to note that adopting sycophantic behaviors entails personal benefits while potentially leading to organizational losses. Table 1 provides an overview of the individual-centered advantages and organizational-centered disadvantages associated with the adoption of sycophantic behavior within an organization.

As indicated in Table 1, the outcomes of sycophantic behavior within an organization can be apparent across both the micro-individual and meso-organizational levels. At the micro-individual level, individuals reap certain benefits from adopting sycophantic behaviors, including heightened motivation and increased access to opportunities for promotion. Conversely, at the meso-organizational level, there are associated costs for the organization. In such climates, non-sycophantic employees face challenges such as diminished trust and a discouraging work environment in terms of power dynamics and access to opportunities for promotion.

In the following section, we demonstrate the process by which sycophancy can be institutionalized within organizations, exploring how social and cultural structures shape and perpetuate the associated behaviors. By understanding the institutional dynamics at play, it becomes possible to gain deeper insights into the underlying mechanisms that contribute to the prevalence and persistence of sycophantic behaviors in the workplace.

Institutionalization of sycophancy in Türkiye

Institutional theory provides a framework for understanding how certain behaviors, such as the ethical, become legitimized, routinized, and institutionalized within organizations (Dacin et al., 1999). Having adopted the institutional theoretical framework, this section first outlines the three fundamental pillars of institutional theory, the regulative, normative, and cultural-cognitive, and discusses how these mechanisms can lead to legitimization of unethical behaviors such as sycophancy. We then apply this framework to the specific context of Turkish universities, where sycophantic behavior appears to have become embedded in academic life through both formal structures and informal norms.

Table 1. Benefits and losses for adopting sycophantic behavior in an organization.

Adopting sycophancy behavior	
Personal-based benefit	Organizational-based loss
Easily getting promoted	Lack of trust
Inclusion of decision-making process	Lack of employee motivation
Easy access to power	Silence at work
High level of motivation	Fear of mobbing
Achieving prolonged career success	Discouraging workplace
Self-satisfaction	Adverse organizational climate

Institutional theory serves as an analytical approach for examining the behaviors of individuals and organizations within their institutional environment (Dacin et al., 1999). This theoretical lens emphasizes three key types of institutions. Firstly, formal institutions encompass the constitutions, regulations, and formal agreements that shape and govern behavior (Doh & Guay, 2006; North, 1991). These institutions provide the framework within which individuals and organizations operate, influencing their actions and decisions. Secondly, informal institutions draw power from societal norms and beliefs, including religious and political concepts, which influence behavior through shared values and expectations. Lastly, organizations themselves can be viewed as institutions that shape collective interests by adhering to and integrating informal practices and formal rules (Doh & Guay, 2006; North, 1991).

Based on the institutional approach, Scott (2013) conceptualizes institutions through three interrelated pillars – the regulative, normative, and cultural-cognitive – that shape how behaviors are institutionalized within organizations. The regulative pillar addresses formal rules, laws, and enforcement mechanisms that constrain or enable behavior though sanctions and incentives (Braga et al., 2021, p. 60); the normative pillar encompasses shared values, norms and expectations that create moral obligations; and the cultural-cognitive pillar refers to the taken-for-granted beliefs and shared understanding that reflects individuals' behaviors within a given context. These pillars do not operate in isolation; rather, they reinforce one another to sustain practices even though those practices may themselves be ethically questionable, such as sycophancy.

While Scott's (2013) institutional framework focuses on understanding the adoption and reinforcement of efficient or legitimate organizational practices, it also provides a theoretical lens through which to examine the legitimization of ethically questionable behaviors. Within this framework, the regulative pillar may inadvertently support such behaviors through ambiguous regulations or the enforcement of formal policies. The normative pillar can strengthen cultures in which loyalty and obedience are considered of greater value than merit and critical thinking. This can lead individuals to follow and adapt to dominant power structures. The cultural-cognitive pillar supports unethical behaviors when individuals consider them a necessary means by which to keep their jobs or gain promotion. In such situations, institutions do not interfere in terms of stopping such behavior; instead, they may make them apparently acceptable and, indeed, allow them to continue. This demonstrates that organizational problems can gain a certain longevity because of the very systems that are intended to create order and fairness.

In order to provide a more structured theoretical lens, Table 2 demonstrates how the three institutional pillars contribute to the institutionalization of sycophantic behavior. It identifies how each pillar offers a

distinct yet interrelated pathway through which sycophantic behavior can be legitimized and maintained within organizational contexts. The table highlights key dimensions across the three pillars, including the basis of compliance, basis of unethical actions, dominant mechanisms, and sources of legitimacy that collectively support the continuity of such behavior. By mapping these dynamics, Table 2 offers a structured lens through which to understand how institutional arrangements – typically designed to promote order, consistency, and professional standards – can paradoxically enable the legitimization of ethically questionable practices.

As presented in Table 2, the regulative pillar works through mechanisms of coercion that encourage obedience to formal rules, legal requirements, and organizational processes (Scott, 2003, p. 880). Yet when poorly defined, irregularly applied, or discriminatorily enforced, such mechanisms are likely to inadvertently encourage sycophantic behavior, most obviously in instances where personal judgment prevails over procedural clarity in hierarchical environments. The normative pillar works through culturally embedded norms and social expectations. In organizational settings where organizational loyalty and conformity are rewarded over merit and independent judgment, individuals will utilize sycophantic behavior as a perceived means of managing organizational expectations. If so, then the cultural-cognitive pillar ensures that this becomes self-perpetuating by embedding such behavior in shared meanings and sense-making processes. When such behavior is internalized as routine or necessary, it becomes taken-for-granted and self-sustaining within prevailing organizational logic. Taken together, the pillars do not just allow for unethical practice; they actively facilitate and entrench it in the long term.

In alignment with the institutional perspective, individuals' behavior within organizations is profoundly influenced by the institutional environment in which they operate (Jamali & Neville, 2011, p. 602). To

Table 2. Three conceptions of institutions that produce sycophantic behavior (derived from Braga et al., 2021, p. 60).

	Regulative	Normative	Cultural-cognitive
Basis of compliance	Expedience	Social/organizational obligations	Shared understandings; taken-forgrantedness
Basis of unethical actions	Regulative rules, laws, standards, internally created rules	Binding expectations	Agreed and shared schema for sense-making
Mechanism	Coercive	Normative	Mimetic
Logic	Follow the rules, laws and internally created rules	Do what is appropriate	Do what is accepted
Indicators	Rules, laws, standards, sanctions	Certification, expertise	Common beliefs
Basis of legitimacy	Legally sanctioned	Norms	Culturally supported and recognizable

comprehend the underlying factors contributing to unethical behaviors, specifically sycophancy, it is vital that one scrutinizes the associated institutional environment. In this study, we employed the information in Table 1 delineating the institutional pillars as a framework to facilitate a comprehensive analysis of the institutionalization of sycophantic behavior within university settings. By critically examining the interplay of these pillars, our aim is to shed light on the intricate dynamics that perpetuate and sustain sycophantic practices in academia.

Keashly (2021) highlights academia in particular as a place where a culture of cruelty can emerge, pointing to the difficult realities often found in higher education. Canaan and Shumar (2008) and Twale and De Luca (2008) have shown that the values, norms, and structures of academia can create conditions that lead to bullying and similar problems. Gabbert (2014) reminds us that universities are meant to be spaces for free thought and for serving the public good through knowledge. Yet, in practice, they often turn into difficult workplaces where poor leadership results in harmful experiences for staff.

The role of scholars within universities is inherently tied to the administrative and organizational structures outlined in university regulations. Moreover, the informal dimension of universities, shaped by social, economic, and cultural factors, further influences their overall structure (Bozkurt & Balcı, 2020). Drawing from an institutional perspective, regulatory processes encompass a series of practices that establish constraints and regularize behaviors, encompassing activities such as rule-setting, sanctioning, and monitoring (Scott, 2013). Consequently, universities have specific rules in place that are managed by organizational management levels. However, there are instances where regulations afford discretion to the university rector, allowing personal beliefs and notions to potentially impact management processes, particularly those involving academics. Therefore, while regulations play a critical role in effectively managing universities, informal institutions arising from cultural and political ideas can exert both positive and adverse influences on academic managerial processes.

When we turn to our research context (Türkiye), Tuncer (2022) offers valuable insights into the selection process for rectors in Turkish universities, where the discretionary power bestowed upon the President enables the appointment of professors who have not even expressed interest in any particular position. Consequently, this idiosyncratic selection mechanism creates a hierarchical power structure, endowing rectors with quite formidable authority. Regrettably, this concentration of power creates an environment conducive to the misuse of authority, as rectors may engage in adverse practices such as mobbing and workplace bullying, subjecting academics to an atmosphere of fear and exploitation. Kayacı's (2014)

research on the treatment of academics in Türkiye exposes a disconcerting reality, where intentional work overload, obstruction of career advancement, and even threats are inflicted upon them. These distressing instances lay bare the darker side of academia as a workplace. Building upon Scott's (2013) institutional theory, this study attempts to unravel the institutionalization of sycophancy as a coping mechanism in response to such adverse working conditions, critically analyzing its regulatory, normative, and cultural-cognitive underpinnings.

Employing the framework of institutional isomorphism within the institutional theory, with a focus on its coercive dimension, Turkish higher education institutions have a certain uniformity in governance structures (Kilic & Berk, 2022). Institutional isomorphism posits that organizations within a similar sector tend to evolve towards uniformity, as driven by various external pressures (DiMaggio & Powell, 1983). In Türkiye's higher education context, the predominant force of coercive isomorphism, shaped by governmental policies and legal regulations, is particularly evident (Ozturk, 2020). This alignment with external pressures, especially in Türkiye's state-centric system, is instrumental to universities' ability to maintain operational stability and secure necessary resources. The Turkish government's substantial influence over universities exemplifies this dynamic. Coercive isomorphism encompasses both overt and subtle pressures, compelling organizations to conform to the prevailing cultural norms and regulatory frameworks (Ozturk, 2020). This often necessitates adherence to pre-established protocols and standards, irrespective of their inherent equity or suitability, due to the state's authoritative role in establishing these processes (Colbeck, 2002; DiMaggio & Powell, 1983; Gounko & Smale, 2007).

Existing research predominantly focuses on the ethical aspects of institutionalization in organizations. However, our study presents a distinctive perspective, highlighting how these pillars contribute to the institutionalization of sycophantic behavior as an unethical phenomenon within organizations. To illustrate this phenomenon, we turn to the unique case of Türkiye, where unethical behaviors have become deeply entrenched, manifesting as shared understandings and accepted approaches within the organizational context.

Research method

Various researchers (e.g. Hammersley, 1992; Saunders et al., 2009) have highlighted that research method selection should be based on the purpose and the nature of research undertaken rather than committing to prior methodological and philosophical preferences. In light of the dearth of empirical research on sycophancy as unethical behavior in academic

institutions, as well as the exploratory nature of the present study, we decided to adopt an interpretivist and inductive approach. Furthermore, in order to obtain detailed and reliable data for the analysis, we selected the samples for both pilot and main data collection (Saunders et al., 2009). In the present approach, we employed a snowball sampling technique to recruit research participants, as the exploration of matters concerning sycophantic and unethical behavior necessitates a foundation of trust between the researchers and participants. Snowball sampling, a recognized method in qualitative research, leverages networking and referrals to identify and recruit participants. This approach starts with a small group of participants, chosen for their relevance to the research criteria and willingness to participate (Truong et al., 2013), who then refer others who meet the study's requirements, expanding the participant network in a natural, organic manner. Researchers typically utilize their social connections to initiate this process, and the sample grows until data saturation is reached, at which point no additional significant information can be gleaned. We create a well-established range of questions based on the sycophancy and institutional theory literature, and the second author of the present research conducted interviews with academics who have the title of either Research Assistant, Research Fellow, or Assistant Professor Dr at Business Schools at state universities. The main reason for selecting these academic levels stems from their employment type. In a Turkish academia, all academic staff other than Associate Professor Dr. and Professor Dr. will have worked on a temporary contractual basis. University managements renew the Assistant Professors' contracts every three years, and other academic levels annually.

We conducted semi-structured, in-depth qualitative interviews with 48 participants in Türkiye, following the approach of Francis et al. (2010). This method involves establishing initial and stopping criteria for interviews based on data saturation. Our initial criterion was to conduct 10 interviews. The stopping criterion, as exemplified in Francis et al. (ibid), was set at the point where data saturation was achieved, indicated by three consecutive interviews showing data congruence after the initial 10. Data saturation was considered to have been achieved using this methodology when the participant composition included 20 Assistant Professors (8 men, 12 women), 16 Research Assistants (8 men, 8 women), and 12 Research Fellows (8 men, 4 women), all affiliated with Business Schools at Turkish state universities. All interviews were conducted on the Microsoft TEAMS software between January 2023 and December 2023. Interviews lasted between 30 and 40 mins. We assigned participant numbers based on a combination of criteria. Each participant is identified by a code that includes their academic position (AC for Academic), a sequential number, and their gender (M for a male, F for a female).

Additionally, for academic positions, we used letters: A for Assistant Professor, B for Research Fellow, and C for Research Assistant. For example, the first participant, who is a male Assistant Professor, is labeled AC1A-M, while the second participant, who is a female Research Fellow, is labeled AC2B-F. An overview of participant characteristics is provided in Table 3.

The present study involved interviews in Turkish, which were transcribed verbatim. To ensure accurate translation into English, a two-step process was followed. The second author and a professional translation agency collaborated to double-translate the transcripts. When translation differences arose, the second author and the agency engaged in discussions to resolve them. Within the present research context, we adopt template analysis to analyze the transcribed interview data, aligning with the method developed by King (2004). This analysis is characterized by its flexibility, emphasizing hierarchical coding while allowing for adaptation to suit the specific requirements of a given study. Given the interpretivist and inductive nature of our research, our primary focus was to capture the richness of participants' narratives. We believed that the flexibility of template analysis would enable us to identify overarching themes while also being attentive to interesting and unique details (King & Brooks, 2016). To ensure the accuracy of our analysis, we took the additional step of sharing the interview transcripts and examples of our coding with each participant *via* email, recognizing the complexities associated with sycophancy and sycophantic behaviors (King, 2004).

Regarding the coding process, we considered a constructivist perspective for the existing data (Madill et al., 2000). Our procedure involved multiple steps. Initially, each author thoroughly read three randomly selected transcripts on multiple occasions to each become familiar with a certain subset of the data. Through intercoder discussions and dialogues (Miles et al., 2013), we created a coding template tailored to our sample for this particular dataset. Importantly, we aimed to avoid the imposition of predetermined codes derived from the extant literature, thus minimizing any potential bias in our analysis. To support our coding process, we utilized the NVivo11 software. Due to the wide-ranging nature of the interviews, a diverse range of themes emerged during the

Table 3. Participant characteristics.

Characteristic	Category	Number of participants
Total participants		48
Academic position	Assistant Professor	20
	Research Assistant	16
	Research Fellow	12
Gender	Female	24
	Male	24
Institutional type	Public Universities	48
Field	Business Schools	48

coding process. However, after coding the first three transcripts, we identified participants' experiences related to sycophantic patterns.

To ensure trustworthiness in our coding process, the second author individually coded each transcript. As new themes emerged or modifications were made to the coding templates, we revisited previously analyzed interview transcripts to incorporate these changes. Aligned with the principles of communicative validity (Sandberg, 2005), we utilized inter-subjective judgment to confirm the credibility of our coding and interpretations. To ensure a comprehensive understanding of the data, we cross-checked our coding and interpretations with the interviewees, as necessary, to enhance the accuracy of our findings. By engaging in this iterative process, our aim was to avoid overlooking any taken-for-granted phenomena (Lather, 1993; Sandberg, 2005). As part of this cross-checking procedure, we actively involved the interviewees by verifying our interpretations and sharing alternative viewpoints. We sought their input and advice to gain further insights into the data, allowing us to refine our understanding and analysis. Table 4 reports the amalgamation of themes and variations in coding that resulted from our analysis, underscoring the thoroughness of our examination (King, 2004).

Findings

Through thorough data analysis, we identified two overarching themes that encapsulate employees' perspectives on how sycophantic behavior influences the workplace, the survival strategies employed by sycophants, and the reasons behind their adoption of such behaviors. These themes are (1) Career Advancement Systems, and (2) Access to Power and Authority. Importantly, the evidence for each theme reveals both positive and negative aspects, as sycophants and non-sycophants experience the workplace differently. Moreover, these themes shed light on the institutionalization of sycophancy within public universities in Türkiye.

Career advancement systems

Career advancement in Turkish academia is shaped by formal regulations and informal managerial discretion. This theme explores how the structural uncertainties and power dynamics embedded in institutional processes shape individual behaviors by causing the adoption of sycophantic behaviors. Drawing on Scott's (2013) institutional theory, we argue that the observed practices reflect shortcomings across all three institutional pillars – the regulative, normative, and cultural-cognitive – that collectively legitimize these unethical forms of ingratiation and obedience. This theme refers to employees' career progression, including the process from

Table 4. Overview of data structure and exemplar quotes.

Aggregate themes	Second-order themes	First-order themes	Exemplified quotations
Career advancement systems	Lack of job descriptions	• Uncertainty in Job Search Process • University-Specific Job Description Practices • Low Recruitment Probability • Rector's Directives on Job Description • Lack of Response to Requests for Role Clarification	The rector's directive to the Human Resources Department (HRD) to craft exceedingly specific job descriptions, including alignment with someone's thesis, results in a recruitment probability of less than 1% (AC13C-F). When you start working as a research assistant at a university, the job descriptions are often vague. Even though I have asked numerous times for a clear outline of my duties, the response I get is that I need to carry out any task given by management. This situation feels almost like a joke (AC12C-M).
	Managerial initiative	• Rector's Authority in University Regulation Creation • Ineffective Communication in Regulation Preparation • Rector's Lack of Staff Engagement • Power Dynamics with the Rector Political Alignment as a Barrier to Transfer • Acceptance of and Adaptation to Arbitrary Behaviors	Our rector consistently demands that we work extended hours, even going so far as to send late-night texts inquiring about assigned tasks. This places significant pressure on us, but due to his position of power, I find myself unable to oppose him (AC12C-M). I'm tired of the arbitrary behavior of the rector, dean, or anyone in a managerial position. I'd like to transfer to another university and am willing to move, but here's the catch: I'm not aligned with the ruling party. If I had even one connection, I might be able to transfer, but it's not feasible. So, I feel it's better to accept such arbitrary behaviors and keep a smiling face. Honestly, that's what I'm doing (AC1A-M)
	Open-end regulations	• Efforts to Satisfy Department Head • Balancing Excessive Tasks with Research Interests • Consequences of Not Pleasing Management • Mismatch Between Title and Designation • Incomprehension of Promotion Regulations • Strategy for Gaining Visibility • Volunteering for Tasks to Attract Rector's Attention	Despite being awarded the title of associate professor, I am still designated as an assistant professor. The reasons behind the regulations that hinder academic progress elude my understanding. Consequently, I have resorted to seeking visibility by actively taking on numerous tasks in the hopes of catching the attention of our rector (AC16A-M). I received an acceptance letter for a short-term teaching program in Poland. I applied for permission to participate in this program, but the rector did not approve my application. Do you know why? Surprisingly, there was no specific reason; he simply chose not to approve it (AC4A-M)

(*Continued*)

Table 4. Continued.

Aggregate themes	Second-order themes	First-order themes	Exemplified quotations
Access to power and having authority	Obeying the authority	• Arbitrary Assignment of Tasks by Management • Career Risks for Non-Compliance with Management • Lack of Structured Task Allocation • Lack of Alternative Employment Opportunities • Adopting a Poker Face as a Coping Strategy	There is a lack of a structured work allocation model, with the management freely assigning tasks to research assistants and fellows as they see fit. The underlying motivation behind this approach is to ensure compliance from the assistants and fellows, as they may encounter career challenges if they fail to obey the management's directives (AC11B-F) Despite my strong dislike for my dean, I maintain a smiling facade. This is primarily because I am unable to secure alternative employment and have come to realize that similar challenges exist everywhere. Adopting a poker face has become a useful strategy in navigating such situations (AC4C-F)
	Reference-based approach	• Influence of Politicians in Job Acquisition • Necessity of Political References for Academic Positions • Disadvantage for Individuals Lacking Connections • Reluctance and Subsequent Acceptance of the System • Disadvantages for Academics without Personal References	Well, I acknowledge that I may not possess extensive qualifications, but I firmly believe that I deserve to be in my current position. Interestingly, a parliamentarian played a crucial role in assisting me to obtain this position. It's rather unfortunate that many rectors require potential applicants to obtain references from politicians. It puts individuals without such connections at a disadvantage (AC8C-F). Despite having an impressive academic record, I faced rejection from 11 universities. Some people suggested that I should obtain a reference from a mayor or someone who could connect me to the rectors, but I initially declined. However, realizing that this might be the norm in the system, I ultimately agreed. Consequently, my father managed to secure a reference for me, and everything fell into place (AC1C-M).

starting to work in an entry-level job to reaching a management position (Brites da Silva et al., 2021). There are three sub-themes: lack of job description, managerial initiatives, and open-ended regulations.

Lack of job description

One of the most frequently mentioned institutional shortcomings was the lack of standardized job descriptions for academic positions. Although the Turkish Higher Education Law provides broad definitions of

academic titles, these descriptions are too general and in practice are open to interpretation. For this reason, universities have certain discretionary power in the recruitment processes. Many of the participants shared their observations in which job postings had clearly been written with a preferred candidate already in mind. In some cases, they noted that the job advertisements included highly specific thesis topics or narrowly defined research areas to limit the pool of eligible applicants. Many scholars consider this practice to undermine merit-based recruitment and reinforces informal selection mechanisms within the academic system. One participant highlights this issue with the following statement:

> Securing an assistant professor position in Türkiye can be challenging due to the practice followed by universities. They preselect individuals for recruitment and explicitly mention their thesis or research titles in the job advertisements and descriptions. Consequently, even if you possess exceptional academic qualifications, you are unable to apply for such positions (AC12A-F).

These practices are symptomatic of the systemic circumvention of the regulative pillar (Scott, 2013), wherein formal rules are routinely bypassed by actors with organizational authority. Although courts have occasionally intervened to annul such advertisements, participants emphasized that these are exceptions, and that institutional tolerance for manipulation remains high. AC14A-F provides an example of such a case, stating the following:

> In the business administration department of a university, a job advertisement was posted for an assistant professor position. However, the advertisement explicitly specified a particular research topic. To illustrate, the post stated that applicants should focus on "writing a dissertation regarding the effect of A on B." Upon conducting a Google search, it became apparent that only one person matched the specified research topic. Consequently, individuals who were also seeking the position brought the matter before the court, and they emerged victorious. As a result, the position was ultimately canceled (AC14A-F)

The consequences of this ambiguity extend beyond access to roles; they shape behavioral expectations within the workplace. Participants described how anticipation of discretionary decisions by senior administrators led to cautious self-positioning. In such settings, sycophantic behavior – characterized by over-compliance, deference, and alignment with managerial preferences – emerged not as a personality trait but as a tactic for professional survival. Despite this awareness, applicants still maintain hope, as expressed by one participant:

> Since obtaining my PhD in 2019, I have actively pursued assistant professor positions within my area of expertise. While I have encountered numerous job advertisements that align with my qualifications, I am well aware that the recruitment process is subject to the discretion of the rector, who holds the final decision-making

power. Despite this understanding, I remain hopeful and determined in my job search, consistently exploring and applying for suitable positions that arise (AC11B-F)

Critically, the absence of clarity surrounding roles continues after being hired. Junior academics, especially research assistants, spend much of their time on administrative work far from their academic brief. These blurred boundaries, enabled by regulatory vagueness, allow supervisors to redefine academic roles on an ad hoc basis. The following participant highlights this with the following statement:

> As a Research Assistant, I have encountered a lack of clarity regarding the job description for this position. Consequently, we rely on instructions from higher authorities such as the head of the department, dean, or rector. For example, despite it being the responsibility of administrative staff, we are assigned tasks like creating exam programs for midterms and finals. It appears that research assistants are often perceived as administrative staff rather than academics (AC8C-F).

Such institutional malleability rewards instances of strategic conformity. Actors described conforming with authority, not because of collegiality, but in order to escape being allocated punitive tasks or even future exclusion. Thus, sycophancy becomes institutionally induced, not simply the product of individual disposition but an act of rational adaptation to systemic uncertainty. Regulatory uncertainty here not only allows for managerial overstepping but legitimizes ingratiatory behavior under the conditions of institutional life.

Managerial initiative

Beyond the uncertainty of official job definitions, interviewees uniformly described the key influence of senior administrators – most notably rectors – on the outcomes of career promotion. Though Turkish higher education policy has prescribed procedures for academic promotion, the initiation and approval of new positions rests on the whim of the leaders of the institution. Practically assessed, this discretionary control means that rectors and deans may act as gatekeepers of academic advancement, with or without clear criteria. One of the research fellows expresses this perspective as follows:

> After obtaining my PhD in 2018, I [was] eligible to hold the position of an assistant professor without any impediments. However, despite our head of department recommending me for an assistant professor position, the rector has yet to approve it. I attempted to arrange a meeting with the rector to discuss this matter but, regrettably, I have not received a response or an appointment (AC1B-M).

Such accounts reflect a misalignment between institutional policy and implementation. Although formally guided by Higher Education Law, the normative pillar (Scott, 2013) – that is, the taken-for-granted expectations

about how processes ought to unfold – is overshadowed by personalized interpretations of authority. Participants often described promotion as dependent not on merit, but on favor, visibility, and perceived loyalty to institutional leaders.

The delegation of decision making to a small circle of actors also introduces vulnerabilities to discretionary obstruction, particularly when disagreements or interpersonal tensions arise. One participant explained that they were denied promotion to an associate professorship even though they held the national certification, which they believed was due to an earlier disagreement with the rector about quality assurance. An assistant professor describes this situation as follows:

> I have obtained the Associate Professorship certificate through a national exam. However, in order for me to hold the position of Associate Professor at our university, the rector needs to create a corresponding position. Unfortunately, the rector has chosen not to open this position for me, possibly due to a disagreement we had regarding quality systems and my expression of negative opinions about completed tasks. Since that incident, the rector has neither granted me an appointment nor initiated a position opening. It appears that the rector is misusing their power in this situation, which I find to be unfair (AC15A-F).

In this context, sycophantic behavior becomes structurally incentivized. Participants described efforts to demonstrate alignment with leadership expectations – through public support, social visibility, or avoidance of dissent – as a means of increasing the likelihood of being recommended for promotion. This aligns with the cultural-cognitive pillar of institutional theory, wherein repeated interaction with opaque systems gives rise to internalized assumptions about how success might be attained. One participant provides a definition of such mechanisms as follows:

> In academia, career advancement and promotion are highly sought-after goals. However, achieving them is not a simple task. It requires navigating through numerous challenges, including both regulatory and managerial processes. To succeed, one must actively demonstrate their abilities within the organization, making themselves visible. Failing to do so means being overlooked, and the prospect of promotion becomes unlikely to attain (AC14C-M).

These findings suggest that academic careers are shaped not merely by performance or compliance with formal rules, but by an underlying logic of survival, one in which ingratiation, appeasement, and self-censorship act as unofficial criteria for advancement. These behaviors are not isolated personal strategies, but embedded responses to institutional systems that lack transparency, accountability, and equitable governance. Over time, this dynamic creates an organizational climate in which sycophancy is not only tolerated but expected, an unspoken yet widely understood feature of navigating managerial initiative in Turkish academia.

Open-end regulations

Participants highlighted a further institutional mechanism that reinforces discretionary power and sycophantic behaviors: the open-ended language embedded in university regulations. Specifically, Article 33 of the Turkish Higher Education Law delegates broad authority to university management by stating that research assistants and fellows are responsible for 'other tasks as assigned'. While intended to provide operational flexibility, this clause effectively sanctions a wide range of subjective managerial interpretations, enabling the redefinition of academic roles based on personal preferences or power dynamics. One participant highlights this as follows:

> When it comes to the roles of research assistants and fellows within universities, the Higher Education Law specifies that they are "responsible for other tasks as assigned by the management." This implies that deans, department heads, and other relevant individuals have the authority to issue instructions to academics, encompassing a wide range of tasks (AC15C-M).

Such legal ambiguity exemplifies a weakness in both the regulative and cultural-cognitive pillars of institutional structure (Scott, 2013). Formally, the absence of defined limits permits expansive interpretation. Informally, it fosters learned behaviors and coping strategies among early-career academics – particularly research assistants – who often face demands that are otherwise unrelated to their academic remit. Participants described being assigned administrative work, event organization, or even personal tasks for senior managers, often unrelated to their research trajectories or career goals.

To navigate this environment, participants developed forms of defensive sycophancy, including maintaining proximity to powerful figures, volunteering for managerial initiatives, or co-authoring papers primarily to gain favor rather than intellectual development. For instance, the following participant describes this as follows:

> I strive to maintain a positive relationship with my head of department to avoid experiencing stress or other negative feelings. Regardless of his personality, my main objective is to minimize the burden of tedious tasks. As a tactic to achieve this, I collaborated with him on publishing a paper. Although he may not contribute much to the articles, this collaboration allows me to divert drudgery tasks to other assistants. My focus remains on successfully publishing the paper while ensuring that I am relieved of mundane responsibilities (AC3B-M).

These behaviors are not just about taking advantage of opportunities. They demonstrate how people adjust to a workplace culture wherein following orders and showing respect to authority are seen as necessary for security and career progress. Over time, research assistants get used to these rules, and sycophantic practices become part of daily life. They use them not only to avoid punishment but also to

gain certain advantages like access, visibility, and informal support for future jobs.

Moreover, the unintended consequence of these coping strategies is a crowding out of individual development. Participants noted that giving too much attention to the preferences and projects of senior academics took time and focus away from their own research, limiting their long-term career development. Over time, this leads to a degree of conflict between short-term survival and long-term autonomy, leading to a professional culture wherein success depends essentially on compliance with informal authority. Open-ended regulations do not work as neutral tools of governance but instead give managers wide-ranging powers to shape behavior. Combined with broader structural ambiguities, these conditions encourage sycophancy as a logical and normalized way of coping with institutional uncertainty.

Access to power and having authority

This second aggregate theme shows how concentrated authority and the way access to power is organized shape academic behavior in Turkish universities. Participants explained that rectors, deans, and department heads have a disproportionate impact on their career development, daily task assignments, and participation in decision making. They did not see this power as neutral or purely administrative but as discretionary and personal, which created both pressure and incentives for sycophantic behavior. Two sub-themes demonstrate how this structure works in practice: obeying authority, and a reference-based approach.

Obeying authority

Participants frequently highlighted how university hierarchies, which are characterized by concentrated and discretionary power, lead to environments in which obedience is not simply encouraged but demanded. While formal hierarchies are a feature of most organizations, in the Turkish context, unchecked managerial authority, which is particularly apparent among rectors and deans, was described as shaping not only resource allocation and promotions but also everyday behavior. Participants did not consider this authority as being exercised within transparent or merit-based systems; rather, their accounts pointed to opaque decision-making processes that made compliance with managerial preferences essential for career survival.

This institutional structure results in a mode of behavioral conformity that the participants engaged in strategically, though somewhat reluctantly. In the absence of formal mechanisms to challenge unfair treatment, participants described adapting their behavior to avoid conflict or

exclusion. One participant provides insight into this through the following statement:

> Our dean lacks the necessary qualifications, and it remains unclear how she attained her position. While she appears to be amiable, she consistently reminds us of her authority. For example, she threatens to withhold conference attendance approvals unless certain tasks are completed. Additionally, she asserts that she will not advocate for new positions if we fail to meet her expectations. [This] leaves me detached from academia, as I find myself compelled to follow orders rather than engage in independent scholarly pursuits (AC16C-F).

What comes through in this quote is the very real strain that accompanies demands for obedience in academic life. The dean was remembered in two ways: as someone who could appear friendly and supportive, yet at the same time as a figure whose support always came with certain strings attached. This statement captures how authority can apply pressure without ever needing to be heavy-handed. People learn that it is safer to go along with expectations, even when that means setting aside their own academic independence. In practice, sycophantic behavior does not develop because of open threats or explicit orders; it takes shape in a system where dependence is built into everyday relationships and where the fear of being left out is always present, even if rarely spoke openly.

Similar dynamics were observed in cases involving mobility and international collaboration. One participant described how receiving a prestigious international scholarship was overshadowed by concerns as to whether senior administrators would allow them to pursue it, as follows:

> I received a scholarship from Italy for my research and proceeded to apply for permission from the dean and rector. However, I harbored concerns about potential rejection. While I am aware that the academic staff [are] competent and capable of managing lectures effectively, I was unsure about the rector's attitude. It seemed that the rector did not prioritize academics' motivation, happiness, or success, wielding a disproportionate amount of power akin to a king. If the rector chose not to grant permission, there was no obligation to provide a reason [for doing so]. This lack of transparency and fairness is disheartening. It prompts the reflection that rectors should not possess such overwhelming authority (AC12B-F).

Participant 16's explanation highlights that if rectors support certain staff members, such staff will rarely, if ever, encounter obstacles, leading some academics to avoid facing such problems. As a result, academic staff may feel compelled to comply with the wishes of rectors and deans to secure their favor and avoid negative consequences. Additionally, there may be a certain reluctance among academic staff to express dissenting opinions, and will support management decisions without making appropriate ethical considerations. This could potentially lead to an unethical approach, including engagement in organizational wrongdoing, which refers to 'illegal, immoral, and/or unethical activities for which the

organization is accountable and which are under its control' (Uys & Smit, 2016: 62). One participant provides an example of such as follows:

> The recruitment team released a job advertisement for the Associate Professor position, which I applied for and became the sole candidate. I successfully passed all the required exams. However, the rector delayed signing my appointment for over a year, possibly due to my failure to comply with their directives. Furthermore, during this period, I received a scholarship to study abroad and took the opportunity. Surprisingly, other individuals who applied months after me were appointed to their positions promptly, solely because they complied with the rector's wishes. It is disheartening to witness how the rector, as the university president, treats those individuals who lack their own distinct qualities as mere subordinates (AC9A-M)

This quote is an example of how non-compliance can be interpreted as disloyalty and can lead to exclusion from institutional benefits. Conversely, those who align themselves according to the preferences of those in positions of power, even in the absence of exceptional merit, are rewarded expeditiously. The evolving organizational culture rewards visible loyalty rather than professional competence and reinforces sycophantic behavior as a structural form of adaptation rather than as an individual choice.

This sub-theme demonstrates that obedience in Turkish academia should not be attributed solely to cultural norms of hierarchy or interpersonal relations. Rather, it stems from institutional conditions that combine concentrated authority, opaque decision-making processes, and the absence of procedural safeguards. In this kind of environment, sycophantic behavior can be seen as a natural response to institutional uncertainty. Accordingly, it enables individuals to navigate power asymmetries, secure access to resources, and maintain professional continuity in the face of arbitrary managerial control.

Reference-based approach

Participants explained that in Türkiye's higher education system, career advancement is often shaped less by scholarly performance and more by an individual's ability to secure strong personal endorsements. However, the key issue is that mere references do not function as a supplement to merit-based evaluation within the system. Instead, they operate as an informal control mechanism, bringing political, familial, and ideological ties to the forefront of hiring and promotion. As a result, this reliance on personal connections – effectively cronyism – creates a workplace environment in which survival is dependent on the ability to build and maintain relationships with powerful individuals. Ultimately, this leads to relationship structures that resemble patronage networks, where those who share political, religious, or personal affinities with decision makers are selectively rewarded.

One participant provides an example to illustrate this as follows:

> In a rather peculiar but prevailing reality, having connections with parliamentarians from the ruling party can greatly influence the favorability of a rector towards an individual. Additionally, it is worth noting that the alignment of an academic's political support with the ruling party can also significantly impact their standing. Similarly, religious affiliations play a significant role. Being associated with the same religious groups as the dean or rector, regardless of the specific group, can garner substantial support from the management team (AC6A-F).

This quote reflects the institutionalization of informal loyalty mechanisms, in which access to resources, opportunities, and professional validation is contingent on symbolic alignment with dominant networks. In this environment, sycophantic behavior such as exaggerated displays of loyalty, selective silence, or ideological mirroring emerges as a calculated strategy to secure managerial support and avoid marginalization.

Beyond ideological affinity, participants also reported more overt forms of nepotism, where family connections override meritocratic procedures. Such accounts expose how the erosion of formal criteria creates the space for decisions that serve personal, rather than institutional, interests, often leading to the demoralization of unconnected yet qualified individuals. One participant provides an example to illustrate this as follows:

> It is an open secret that some rectors hire their own relatives, which has been reported in various news sources. An example of this was highlighted in the newspaper "Cumhuriyet," which revealed a case where a rector appointed five of their relatives to positions within the university, including three of their own daughters. Such incidents are perplexing, but this real-life case emphasizes the existence of nepotistic practices within certain academic institutions. (AC10B-M)

Although nepotism and cronyism are not new to organizational life, what clearly emerges from the study's findings is their normalization through reference-based practices. These practices are not perceived as anomalies but rather as expected pathways to gaining privileged treatment. This perception leads many early-career academics to seek patronage relationships, often by attempting to interact more with powerful figures within their organization or by reproducing dominant ideological discourses that sustain authority. In doing so, they adopt a stance of loyalty even before it is explicitly demanded, a behavior that may be described as 'anticipatory sycophancy'.

In the study, participants particularly expressed their frustrations, ethical discomfort, and disillusionment with existing structures and processes within the system. At the same time, they emphasized the limited alternatives available in an environment that provides no consistent or transparent criteria for promotion or recruitment. In the absence of institutional safeguards, academics learn to operate within a logic where network-based loyalty becomes the de facto currency of advancement.

In this way, the reference-based approach functions not only as a method of recruitment but also as a broader mechanism of social control, reinforcing hierarchical dependence and behavioral conformity. Favoritism, nepotism, and cronyism are thus not experienced as isolated instances of misconduct but as embedded features of institutional life that shape the incentive structures governing everyday behavior. The resulting culture privileges allegiance over autonomy, reinforcing sycophantic behavior not as an individual moral weakness but as an adaptive response to structurally induced uncertainty and power asymmetry.

Discussion and conclusion

The findings of this research shed light on the use of sycophantic behaviors as a strategy for cultivating a positive workplace environment for sycophants within the context of Turkish higher education institutions. Through the utilization of qualitative interviews, participant observation, and organizational data, the study has provided critical insights into how and why individuals adopt sycophantic approaches within organizations.

One of the overarching themes identified in the research is the influence of sycophantic behavior on career advancement systems. The lack of explicit job descriptions for specific positions poses challenges during the recruitment process. Participants highlighted the practice of including specific research topics or theses in job advertisements, which may effectively preselect particular individuals for recruitment. This practice goes against the Higher Education Law, but it is widely accepted and understood by both recruitment teams and potential applicants. The findings reveal that decision-making power often lies with university management, leading to potential unfair treatment and a lack of transparency in the recruitment process. This creates a sense of uncertainty and frustration among applicants who may feel that their qualifications are being disregarded in favor of the personal connections or preferences of those in power. The absence of clear job descriptions and the broad discretionary authority of rectors exemplify the regulative pillar, which, instead of standardizing behavior, produces ambiguity that incentivizes sycophancy. These challenges in career advancement systems hinder individuals' progress and development within the organization.

The second overarching theme identified in the research is the access to power and authority that influences the adoption of sycophantic behaviors. The study highlighted the pressure exerted on academic staff to comply with the wishes of authority figures, such as rectors and deans. The hierarchical structure within higher education institutions places significant decision-making power in the hands of rectors, who hold the highest authority. Participants expressed concerns about rectors

prioritizing their own interests and displaying arbitrary behavior, which can create a culture of fear and obedience. These patterns reflect the normative pillar, where managerial initiatives, favoritism, and reference-based practices have become accepted norms. This reliance on personal and political connections, as well as favoritism and nepotism, further reinforces the need for individuals to adopt sycophantic behaviors to secure their positions and avoid negative consequences. The findings also indicate a reluctance among academic staff to express dissent, contributing to a culture of silence and limited opportunities for constructive discussions and improvements within the organization. Also, by adopting the three pillars of institutional theory, the present research demonstrates the dimensions that provide for the institutionalization of sycophantic behaviors in Turkish higher education institutions. Table 5 illustrates an institutional process framework for encouraging sycophantic behaviors.

In relation to the regulative aspect of Table 5, Scott (2013) argues that regulatory processes within institutions encompass a wide range of practices aimed at constraining and standardizing behaviors. These practices include imposing sanctions, establishing rules, and engaging in monitoring activities. Consequently, Scott (ibid) illustrates that regulative processes involve the formulation of rules and procedures to shape sanctions, either through rewards or punishments, with the aim of influencing

Table 5. Institutional process framework for encouraging sycophantic behaviors.

Institutional pillar	Institutional drivers	Mechanisms	Behavioral outcomes	Feedback loops
Regulative	Ambiguous job descriptions and open-ended regulations (e.g. Higher Education Law Article 33; broad discretionary power of rectors	Reward and sanction structures (promotion, visibility, conference approvals)	Sycophantic strategies: obedience, exaggerated loyalty, visible alignment with management	Silence sustains vague and unchecked regulations → regulatory ambiguity persists
Normative	Loyalty, favoritism, and nepotism adopted as legitimate norms; managerial initiative and reference-based practices	Silence and self-censorship (avoiding conflict, not challenging authority); informal networks (patronage, political/religious affiliations, family ties)	Anticipatory sycophancy: signaling loyalty even before it is requested; short-term benefits: promotions, relief from administrative burdens, access to opportunities	Informal networks gain further legitimacy and loyalty norms are reinforced
Cultural-Cognitive	Obedience internalized as a survival strategy; 'this is how academia works' assumption	Open-ended role assignments directing research assistants to administrative work	Long-term costs: loss of autonomy, weakened research agenda, erosion of fairness and meritocracy	'This is how things are done' becomes institutionalized → cultural-cognitive reinforcement

future behaviors. Although there are regulations and laws in Türkiye that govern higher education institutions, the primary issue lies in the open-ended nature of these regulations and their failure to address well-defined job descriptions, as addressed in Table 5. As a result, the regulations frame the organization as a workplace where academics face precarious working conditions, which arise due to the absence of objective processes for promoting academics and allocating their tasks based on specific work allocation models. Consequently, the regulations establish a workplace environment that empowers management levels, with the findings demonstrating that they (e.g. rectors, deans, heads of departments) predominantly adopt unethical approaches when implementing academic practices. For this reason, the first phase's impact on the organizational level becomes evident when it creates an environment in which university management can legally adopt unethical attitudes towards academics they do not support or favor.

In the second phase, the normative aspect addresses the existence of normative rules within an organization. According to Scott (2013: 64), rules can be understood as having a prescriptive, evaluative, and obligatory dimension in social interactions. Understanding these rules brings forth a discussion of the normative pillar, encompassing both norms and values (Peng, 2003). Values represent a set of standards that shape structures and behaviors by means of comparison and assessment in social contexts. Conversely, norms signify legitimate approaches to conducting activities within social settings (Blake & Davis, 1964). The research findings indicate that managerial initiatives and the reference-based approach as an accepted norm are commonly perceived as organizational values, as many academics accept a pressure-based management style and rely on references to seek or secure positions within higher education institutions. This effectively encourages individuals to exhibit sycophantic behavior in order to navigate the promotional process smoothly and to maintain a harmonious work environment. This phase also highlights the current academic working conditions at universities. Following this phase, the third phase encompasses the impact of these working conditions on individual behaviors at the micro-level as part of the cultural-cognitive pillar.

The cultural-cognitive pillar posits the influence of external cultural frameworks on internal interpretive processes (Scott, 2013: 67). These frameworks, as described by Douglas (1982), serve as cognitive containers through which cultural categories can be approached, defined, classified, debated, negotiated, and contested (p.12). Within society, cultural frameworks encompass cultural systems that fulfill various functions at different levels. They range from shaping shared understandings within local institutions to molding an organization's values through collective structures and perspectives. Furthermore, cultural frameworks extend to

standardized rationales that define organizational fields and the common beliefs and ideals that shape preferences for political systems across various levels (Scott, 2013).

Examining the cultural-cognitive pillar, Jepperson and Swidler (1994) delve into the embedded cultural forms found within society. In line with their perspective, the institutional understanding of the cultural-cognitive pillar revolves around these cultural forms, which manifest as norms and values in this study (Mizruchi & Fein, 1999). In the context of this research, the micro individual-cultural cognitive level illustrates how the concept of 'access to power and having authority' primarily reflects from the macro-national regulative and meso-organizational normative levels to the micro-individual cognitive level. Based on these reflections, individuals tend to focus on strategies of obeying authority and adopting reference-based approaches, which are key reasons for demonstrating sycophantic behaviors. Obedience becomes internalized as a survival strategy, reinforcing the cultural-cognitive logic of 'this is how academia works'.

Within the context of our research, academics employ various strategies to navigate authority. Notably, the findings reveal that many academics wear a metaphorical 'poker face', even if, in reality, they harbor no support nor affinity for their managers. They conform to orders, believing that compliance and the appearance of supportiveness make their lives easier. Although such behavior may be viewed as ethically questionable, it is effectively shaped by the regulatory systems at the institutional level and the norms and values prevailing within Turkish Higher Education Institutions, thereby influencing academics' cultural-cognitive perspectives.

A combination of regulative, normative, and cognitive-cultural factors shape the institutionalization of sycophantic behaviors within the Turkish higher education system. Through the mechanisms identified (reward structures, silence, informal networks, open-ended role assignments), these drivers translate into behavioral outcomes (sycophancy, anticipatory loyalty, short-term gains, long-term costs). Critically, feedback loops then reinforce the original drivers, normalizing unethical practices and maintaining the cycle.

The implications of these findings are significant for both individuals and the broader organizational context. Individuals who adopt sycophantic behaviors may experience short-term benefits such as career advancement and the avoidance of undesirable tasks. However, long-term negative consequences include neglect of personal research and development, limited skill development, and a compromised sense of purpose in their work. Furthermore, the prevalence of sycophantic behaviors undermines the principles of meritocracy, fairness, and integrity within higher education institutions.

Unethical behaviors have become deeply entrenched in Türkiye's organizational context, ultimately manifesting as shared understandings and accepted approaches. The research study conducted in Turkish public universities revealed that sycophantic behavior, favoritism, nepotism, and cronyism were prevalent in recruitment, promotion, and decision-making processes. Job descriptions were often unclear, allowing for subjective decision making by authorities. Authority figures, such as rectors and deans, exerted their power through threats and demands for obedience. Personal and political connections played a significant role in hiring and promotion decisions, overshadowing merit-based principles. These unethical behaviors have become normalized and are accepted as part of the organizational culture in Turkish public universities.

Theoretical contributions

From an institutional theoretical perspective, the present research makes significant contributions to the field of management studies. Firstly, it introduces sycophancy as a context-dependent factor that legitimizes the conditions for the adoption of unethical behavior, that is, in order to survive in a precarious context. By highlighting the role of sycophancy, the study sheds light on how individuals may engage in unethical practices to gain favor and maintain their positions within an organization, particularly when faced with challenging circumstances.

Secondly, this research extends the concept of legitimacy within institutional theory. Legitimacy is typically understood to be a generic concept within the theory, pertaining to the socially accepted and valued practices that organizations adhere to. However, this study demonstrates that unethical behaviors can also gain legitimacy and become an expected norm within organizations. By challenging the conventional understanding of legitimacy, the research broadens the scope of institutional theory and provides a nuanced perspective on how organizations operate in complex environments.

Thirdly, we present an institutional process framework. This framework illustrates how individuals within an organization develop sycophantic behavior and how institutional processes encourage such behavior within the organizational context. Through this framework, we integrate the level of analysis with institutional theory, demonstrating their interconnection. Additionally, existing scholarly literature on sycophancy primarily focuses on the individual level, discussing the benefits and challenges these behaviors pose for individuals in organizations, as outlined in the theoretical discussion section. By proposing a multilevel approach in our institutional process framework, we expand the existing literature beyond a singular level of analysis, offering a more comprehensive perspective.

Lastly, the study emphasizes the importance of the regulative pillar in institutional theory as a context creator. Despite this pillar being designed to establish and enforce rules and norms, this research shows that it can inadvertently create a workplace environment wherein the dominant social values and culture are at odds with ethical practices. This finding highlights the need to critically examine the unintended consequences of regulatory frameworks within institutional theory, and highlights the complex interplay between formal rules and informal practices in shaping organizational behavior.

Practical contributions

The current research offers two significant practical contributions. First, it sheds light on the governance structure of universities in Türkiye, pinpointing a process that fosters sycophantic behavior. This insight enables the need for Turkish policymakers and practitioners to better comprehend the dynamics of higher education workplaces in Türkiye and to take the necessary actions to reform university governance systems. The study underscores critical issues leading to poor workplace conditions and the propensity for sycophantic behaviors in academic settings. Moreover, it brings to light a widespread dissatisfaction among academics, a concern that merits attention on both national and international platforms. Second, the research serves as an important voice for Turkish academics, bringing their challenges to the attention of global audiences, including scholars, NGOs, and ranking and accreditation bodies. Consequently, this research supports for the need to address such issues on an international stage.

Transferability of the present research

While this study is empirically grounded in Turkish public universities, its contribution does not rest on claims of statistical generalizability but on analytical transferability (Corbin & Strauss, 2014). In qualitative research, transferability is established through reasoned comparison of institutional arrangements and processes rather than through direct empirical extrapolation. Accordingly, the present study focuses on how regulative, normative, and cultural-cognitive dynamics shape the institutionalization of sycophantic behavior within a specific organizational context.

Drawing explicitly on Scott's (2013) three institutional pillars, the findings illustrated that open-ended regulations and discretionary authority (regulative pillar), the normalization of loyalty- and reference-based evaluation (normative pillar), and the internalization of obedience and silence

as everyday academic practice (cultural-cognitive pillar) all jointly structure career behavior in Turkish public universities. Importantly, these institutional dynamics are not analytically unique to the Turkish case but reflect broader patterns identified in organizational settings characterized by hierarchical authority, limited transparency, and weak accountability mechanisms.

For example, existing research on higher education systems in parts of Asia and the MENA region documents similar combinations of state influence, politically mediated leadership appointments, and constrained institutional autonomy, which have been shown to foster favoritism, patronage, and loyalty-based advancement practices (Hayward, 2009; Islam & Mohna, 2025; Shaw, 2018; Solingen, 2008). In such contexts, compliance with authority and symbolic alignment with senior management frequently operate as informal mechanisms shaping academic careers.

Comparable institutional arrangements have also been identified in military academies and highly hierarchical public-sector organizations, where formal chains of command, discretionary performance evaluation, and obedience norms play a central role in career progression (Baturo et al., 2025; Yuan et al., 2022). Under these conditions, behaviors resembling sycophancy can emerge as adaptive responses to institutional uncertainty rather than as individual moral deviations.

Similarly, studies of family-owned firms and patronage-based organizational systems highlight how personal loyalty, kinship ties, and informal networks often override formal performance criteria, producing organizational environments in which allegiance to authority is prioritized over professional autonomy (Gorji et al., 2020; Jiang, 2018). These settings share structural affinities with the Turkish public university context examined above, particularly with respect to discretionary governance and personalized authority relations.

Table 6 synthesizes this analytical logic by mapping how the regulative, normative, and cultural-cognitive pillars identified in the Turkish public university context correspond to structurally comparable institutional configurations in other organizational settings. By distinguishing core institutional mechanisms from context-specific manifestations, the table illustrates the conditions under which similar patterns of sycophantic behavior may reasonably be expected to emerge beyond the empirical case examined in this study.

Table 6, therefore, does not suggest direct empirical equivalence across contexts. Rather, it maps analytically comparable institutional configurations by distinguishing core mechanisms associated with the three institutional pillars from context-specific manifestations. In doing so, the study offers a theoretically grounded and methodologically cautious basis for transferability, while explicitly inviting future comparative research to

Table 6. Institutional mechanisms and the transferability of findings across organizational contexts.

Institutional pillar	Core institutional mechanism	Manifestation in Turkish Public Universities	Structurally comparable organizational contexts	Indicative supporting literature
Regulative	Open-ended regulation and discretionary authority	Vague job descriptions; discretionary recruitment and promotion decisions by rectors and deans; delayed or blocked appointments without formal justification	State-influenced universities in Asia and MENA; hierarchical public-sector organizations; military academies	Islam and Mohna (2025); Shaw (2018); Solingen (2008); Hayward (2009); Yuan et al. (2022)
Normative	Loyalty- and reference-based evaluation norms	Career advancement shaped by personal loyalty, informal references, political or ideological alignment rather than formal merit criteria	Patronage-based public organizations; family-owned firms; authoritarian governance contexts	Baturo et al. (2025); Gorji et al. (2020); Jiang (2018)
Cultural-cognitive	Internalization of obedience and silence as taken-for-granted practice	Compliance, self-censorship, and ingratiation normalized as routine academic behavior and survival strategy	Military academies; highly hierarchical public institutions; authoritarian organizational settings	Baturo et al. (2025); Yuan et al. (2022)

Note: This table does not imply empirical equivalence across organizational contexts. Rather, it identifies institutional mechanisms associated with the regulative, normative, and cultural-cognitive pillars that recur across different settings characterized by hierarchical authority, discretionary governance, and patronage-based relations.

empirically examine how similar institutional dynamics may shape sycophantic practices across different organizational and national settings.

Limitations and suggestions for future research

This research has several limitations. First, the sample constitutes 48 academics who work in Turkish public business schools that are situated within a highly centralized and politically mediated higher education system. For this reason, these contextual particularities necessarily limit the extent to which the findings can be generalized. Furthermore, as qualitative research, even though we implemented the process of transcript checks and iterative coding for the interviews, there is still the risk of selective bias and the self-presentation effect. Such contextual particularities necessarily delimit the extent to which the findings can be generalized. Further, as with the majority of qualitative research, the reliance on interview narratives, even when supplemented by transcript checks and iterative coding, carries the risk of selective recall and self-presentation effects.

Nevertheless, the theoretical contribution made by this research goes beyond its individual context. By developing an institutional process model connecting regulative, normative, and cultural-cognitive mechanisms with the normalization of sycophancy practices, we create an account of how morally suspect practice becomes embedded in organizational life. While empirical data is site-specific, the mechanisms identified – regulatory ambiguity, managerial discretion, and patronage logics – are recognizable in other hierarchical employment arrangements. Hence, the framework holds promise for application in analyzing how organizations in different national and sectoral settings institutionalize behavior that is otherwise contrary to professed values of fairness and merit. Future comparative and multilevel research would be valuable in assessing the portability of these insights and in testing the durability of the framework across different institutional settings.

Disclosure statement

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Data availability statement

The participants of this study did not give written consent for their data to be shared publicly, so due to the sensitive nature of the research supporting data is not available.

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