



# An Investigation of the Perceptions of Nursing Students in Clinical Practice on Crab Barrel Syndrome: A Descriptive Study

## *Klinik Uygulama Yapan Hemşirelik Öğrencilerinin Yengeç Sepeti Sendromu Algılarının İncelenmesi: Tanımlayıcı Bir Çalışma*

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### Abstract

**Introduction:** Nursing education aims to equip students with professional skills by transforming theoretical knowledge into practice. However, clinical placements can lead to stress and emotional challenges among nursing students. The aim of this study is to identify the perceptions of nursing students regarding the Crab Barrel Syndrome during their clinical practice.

**Methods:** This cross-sectional and descriptive study was conducted with 319 nursing students enrolled in a faculty located in the Mediterranean region. Data were collected using a "Demographic Information Form" and the "Crabs in a Barrel Syndrome Scale." The data were analyzed using t-tests and analysis of variance.

**Results:** The average total score of students on the Crabs in a Barrel Syndrome Scale was  $3.04 \pm 0.53$ , indicating a moderate level of experience. Male students scored significantly higher than female students in the cognitive dimension ( $p < 0.05$ ). When comparing class levels, fourth-year students had higher scores in the cognitive dimension compared to students in other years. Additionally, students dissatisfied with their internships scored significantly higher in the emotional and behavioral dimensions.

**Discussion and Conclusion:** The findings of this study suggest that nursing students undergoing clinical placements experience a moderate level of Crab Barrel Syndrome. Gender roles and class levels appear to influence students' cognitive awareness of the phenomenon. Dissatisfaction with internships is associated with heightened emotional and behavioral dimensions of the syndrome. To enhance professional development and emotional solidarity among students, it is recommended to develop policies that provide better support during clinical placements. Moreover, future research should include diverse professional groups and organizational factors to provide a broader understanding of Crab Barrel Syndrome.

**Keywords:** Clinical internship; Crab Barrel Syndrome; Nursing student

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Nursing is a professional discipline that provides health services to individuals, families, and communities while continuously evolving through various social, cultural, and technological changes. It also actively engages in health improvement initiatives.<sup>[1-4]</sup> Nursing education is characterized by a combination of theoretical instruction and practical training that enables students to translate theoretical knowledge into practice. The core principle of clinical education is to prepare nursing students for their professional careers by exposing them to real-life applications. Additionally, clinical training aims to guide their learning and research within both national and international contexts and facilitate their socialization into professional roles to provide effective and appropriate patient care.<sup>[5]</sup> However, clinical placements, which play a significant role in the development of professional identity, are reported to be emotionally challenging and a source of stress for students.<sup>[6-9]</sup> A study identified the most significant factors contributing to stress among nursing students during clinical placements as caregiving tasks, workload, lack of professional knowledge and skills, the practice environment, peer interactions, and daily life stressors.<sup>[10]</sup> Stressful situations can lower students' self-esteem.<sup>[11]</sup> In this context, the Crab Barrel Syndrome, which can emerge in stressful circumstances, may negatively affect students' clinical experiences. Crab Barrel Syndrome is defined as a social tendency in which individuals who fear failure attempt to prevent others from succeeding. Furthermore, such negative actions are often normalized and accepted by those around them.<sup>[12]</sup> Individuals subjected to Crab Barrel Syndrome are known to experience emotions such as stress, anger, frustration, and a reduction in self-esteem.<sup>[13]</sup> Given these potential impacts, examining students' perceptions of Crab Barrel Syndrome is critical. A review of the literature reveals a lack of studies focusing specifically on nursing students' perceptions of Crab Barrel Syndrome. This study aims to explore and analyze the perceptions of Crab Barrel Syndrome among nursing students participating in clinical practice.

The study aimed to determine the perceptions of nursing students regarding Crab Barrel Syndrome during their clinical placements.

## Materials and Methods

### Study Place and Type

This study was conducted at the Faculty of Health Sciences between September 21, 2023, and June 19, 2024, using quantitative, descriptive, and cross-sectional research design.

Data collection commenced after obtaining all necessary approvals. The researchers provided nursing students with detailed information about the study, including its objectives and methods. Prior to completing the survey, participants were required to provide informed consent, both verbally and in writing. Students were assured that their participation was entirely anonymous and voluntary, and that they could withdraw from the study at any time without facing any negative consequences. Additionally, they were informed that all data would remain confidential and would be used solely for research purposes.

### Population and Sample

The population of this research consisted of 325 nursing students in the 1<sup>st</sup>, 2<sup>nd</sup>, 3<sup>rd</sup>, and 4<sup>th</sup> years at a faculty located in the Mediterranean region. No sampling was conducted in this study. It was aimed to reach all nursing students in the population. The study was conducted with 319 nursing students who met the inclusion criteria, reaching 98% of the population. The inclusion criteria for the study were: (a) being willing to participate in the study, (b) having completed at least six weeks of clinical placement, (c) being a nursing student. The exclusion criterion was (d) wanting to withdraw from the study during the research.

### Data Collection Tools

The data of the study were collected using the "Demographic Information Form" and the "Crabs in a Barrel Syndrome Scale."

### Demographic Information Form

The form, prepared by the researchers in line with the literature, consists of questions regarding nursing students' socio-demographic characteristics (age, gender, and the high school they graduated from) and clinical experience (e.g., satisfaction with their internship).<sup>[14,15]</sup>

### Crabs in a Barrel Syndrome Scale

This scale, developed by Fettahlioğlu and Alkış Dedeoğlu<sup>[12]</sup> in 2021, consists of 27 items and three subdimensions (cognitive=items 1-8, emotional=items 9-18, and behavioral=items 19-27). The scale is a 5-point Likert type, ranging from 1 "strongly disagree" to 5 "strongly agree." The scoring of the scale is done by averaging each subdimension. The total Cronbach's alpha value of the scale is 0.801. In this study, the Cronbach's alpha value was determined to be 0.826.

**Table 1.** Distribution of nursing students according to sociodemographic characteristics (n=319)

Characteristic	n	%
Gender		
Female	202	63
Male	117	37
Class		
First year	94	29.4
Second year	81	25.3
Third year	69	21.6
Fourth year	75	23.7
Learning status		
Health of vocational high school	81	25.3
Anatolian high school	195	61.1
High school science	43	13.6
Internship satisfaction		
Yes	191	59.8
No	64	20.1
I'm undecided	64	20.1
Mean age=19.4	Std. <b>1.741</b>	

Std: Standart.

## Data Collection

The data were collected face-to-face from nursing students engaged in clinical placements at the faculty where the study was conducted, using a survey method. This took place between December 21, 2023, and June 19, 2024, after obtaining ethical approval and institutional permissions. The data collection process lasted approximately 10–15 minutes per participant.

## Ethical Considerations

This study adhered to the ethical guidelines of the Helsinki Declaration (2013). Ethical approval for the research was obtained from a university's Clinical Research Ethics Committee (Number: 70904504/502, Date: 21.07.2023). Institutional permission was granted by the General Directorate of Health Services of the Ministry of Health (Number: 68295535-100-754407, Date: 11.10.2023), and permission to use the Crabs in a Barrel Syndrome Scale was obtained (Date: 14.05.2023).

## Data Analysis

The statistical analyses were conducted using the SPSS software version 21.0 (IBM, Armonk, NY, USA) was analyzed by an independent statistician. The normality of the data

**Table 2.** Crabs in a Barrel Syndrome Scale and sub-dimension score averages

Crabs in Barrel Syndrome Scale and bottom dimensions	Mean±SD
Cognitive component	2.96±0.54
Emotional component	3.09±0.75
Behavioral component	<b>3.05±0.79</b>
Scale total	3.04±0.53

SD: Standard deviation.

distribution was assessed using the Kolmogorov-Smirnov test. For the analysis of socio-demographic data, descriptive statistics such as frequencies, percentages, arithmetic means, and standard deviations were used. Differences in the mean scores of the Crabs in a Barrel Syndrome Scale based on socio-demographic variables were evaluated using t-tests and one-way analysis of variance (ANOVA).

## Results

### Socio-Demographic Characteristics of Nursing Students

When the socio-demographic characteristics of the participants were examined, 63% were female, 29% were first-year students, and 60% were graduates of Anatolian high schools. Additionally, 59.7% of the participants reported being satisfied with their internship experience (Table 1).

### Mean Scores of the Crabs in a Barrel Syndrome Scale and its Subdimensions

The analysis of the participants' scores on the Crabs in a Barrel Syndrome Scale and its subdimensions revealed that the highest mean score was observed in the emotional subdimension (3.09±.75). The total mean score of the scale was determined to be 3.04±.53 (Table 2).

### Comparison of Socio-Demographic Characteristics with Mean Scores of the Crabs in a Barrel Syndrome Scale and its Subdimensions

Table 3 presents the comparison of nursing students' socio-demographic characteristics with the mean scores of the Crabs in a Barrel Syndrome Scale and its subdimensions. Male students (Mean=3.14) scored significantly higher than female students (Mean=2.86) in the cognitive subdimension ( $t=-4.603$ ,  $p=0.00$ ). However, no significant differences were found in the emotional, behavioral, or total scores ( $p>0.05$ ). No significant differences were observed among students from different types of high

**Table 3.** Comparison of socio-demographic characteristics of nursing students and Crabs in a Barrel Syndrome Scale total and sub-dimension mean scores

Variables	Cognitive Mean±SD	Emotional Mean±SD	Behavioral Mean±SD	Crabs in Basket Syndrome Scale total Mean±SD
Gender				
Female	2.86±0.50	3.09±0.73	3.01±0.75	2.99±0.50
Male	3.14±0.656	3.08±0.78	3.11±0.85	3.10±0.55
Test t/p	<b>-4.603/0.01*</b>	0.107/0.914	-1.096/0.274	-1.909/0.057
Level of education				
Vocational health high school	3.01±0.52	3.02±0.69	3.06±0.80	3.02±0.48
Anatolian high school	2.94±0.54	3.11±0.77	3.06±0.79	3.04±0.54
Science high school	2.98±0.58	3.10±0.79	2.96±0.76	3.03±0.55
Test F/p	0.361/0.297	0.526/0.698	0.286/0.751	0.280/0.972
Class				
1	3.02±0.51	3.2±0.80	2.99±0.74	3.04±0.50
2	2.74±0.54	3.02±0.76	3.01±0.85	2.93±0.61
3	2.92±0.53	3.08±0.74	3.09±0.72	3.04±0.45
4	3.17±0.57	3.13±0.70	3.11±0.84	3.13±0.50
Test F/p	<b>9.305/0.01*</b>	0.334/0.801	0.443/0.703	1.885/0.132
Satisfaction with the internship				
Yes <sup>a</sup>	2.97±0.54	2.96±0.72	2.88±0.80	2.93±0.54
I'm undecided <sup>b</sup>	3.80±0.56	3.29±0.69	3.48±0.62	3.26±0.43
No <sup>c</sup>	2.91±0.51	3.25±0.84	3.11±0.71	3.09±0.46
Test F/p	0.495/0.610	<b>6.657/0.001**</b>	<b>15.685/0.001**</b>	<b>10.247/0.001**</b>
Post-hoc (Bonferroni)	a=b=c	a>b=c	a>b>c	a>c>b

SD: Standard deviation; \*: P<0.05; \*\*: P<0.001; a: Yes; b: I'm undecided; c: No.

schools (Vocational, Anatolian Science High School) in any of the subdimensions or total scores ( $p>0.05$ ). Fourth-year students had the highest mean scores in the cognitive subdimension (Mean=3.17), while second-year students had the lowest (Mean=2.74). This difference was statistically significant ( $F=9.305$ ,  $p<0.001$ ). However, no significant differences were observed in the emotional, behavioral, or total scores ( $p>0.05$ ). Analysis based on satisfaction with the internship revealed no significant differences in the cognitive subdimension scores among groups ( $p>0.05$ ). However, students who were unsure about their satisfaction reported significantly higher scores in the emotional ( $F=6.657$ ,  $p<0.001$ ), behavioral ( $F=15.685$ ,  $p<0.001$ ), and total scores ( $F=10.247$ ,  $p<0.001$ ) compared to other groups (Table 3). Bonferroni post hoc analysis was performed to determine which group caused the difference. In the emotional dimension, it was determined that the mean score of those who said 'Yes' was higher than those who said 'No' and 'I am undecided', therefore it was concluded

that the difference between the groups was due to those who said 'Yes'. In terms of the behavioral sub-dimension and total score, it was determined that the mean score of those who said 'Yes' was higher than the other groups, and it was stated that the difference between the groups arose for this reason. In the total scale and the cognitive sub-dimension, no significant difference was found between those who said 'Yes', 'No' and 'I am undecided'.

## Discussion

In this study, the perceptions of nursing students participating in clinical placements regarding Crab Barrel Syndrome were examined. Identifying the levels of Crab Barrel Syndrome among student nurses is considered significant, as it may facilitate solution-focused interventions and contribute to the establishment of a healthier learning and professional development environment. A review of the literature indicates that the perception of Crab Barrel Syndrome has not been explored among nursing students

engaged in clinical placements or other nursing students. For this reason, the study has been discussed considering findings from research conducted on various concepts believed to be associated with Crab Barrel Syndrome.

Crab Barrel Syndrome can be perceived as an individual-centered problem. However, it is not appropriate to consider organizations independently of individuals. The attitudes and behaviors of individuals play a crucial role in shaping organizational behavior and can significantly impact organizations in various ways. Individuals experiencing Crab Barrel Syndrome may violate organizational norms such as respect, mutual support, or cooperation. Within teams, behaviors related to discouragement are associated with actions such as belittling and criticizing others through harsh words, while uncivil and overly competitive behaviors encompass actions like blaming, gossiping, fabricating conspiracy theories, and resisting collaboration.<sup>[12,13,16,17]</sup> In this study, it was observed that nursing students participating in clinical placements experienced a moderate level of Crab Barrel Syndrome, with the highest scores recorded in the emotional component subdimension. In a study consistent with this finding, students reported experiencing significant anxiety during their adaptation process to the new environment, stemming from their fear of making mistakes and being blamed by peers and nurses.<sup>[18]</sup> Similarly, a study conducted by Uzun and Kulakaç (2021)<sup>[15]</sup> found that nursing students in clinical placements were subjected to mobbing, with causes including verbal threats, belittlement, disdain, coercion, exclusion, and defamation. This suggests that the group dynamics and psychological pressures encountered by nursing students during clinical placements reflect such behaviors. Furthermore, these actions appear to be rooted in emotions such as a lack of empathy, jealousy, and frustration, which play a significant role in shaping such interactions.

The analysis of the study data revealed that nursing students' perceptions of Crab Barrel Syndrome differed significantly based on the gender variable. Male participants were found to exhibit a greater tendency toward Crab Barrel Syndrome compared to female participants. In contrast, a study by Çavuş (2021)<sup>[19]</sup> found that participants' perceptions of Crab Barrel Syndrome did not significantly differ by age or gender. However, in a study by Durmuş and Özyılmaz (2024)<sup>[20]</sup> investigating the effect of Type A personality traits on Crab Barrel Syndrome among employees, it was observed that women experienced Crab Barrel Syndrome more intensely than men. This result contradicts the

findings of the current study. In this study, male students scored higher than female students in the cognitive dimension of Crab Barrel Syndrome. Nursing is still predominantly perceived as a female profession today.<sup>[21]</sup> Therefore, it is likely that male nursing students experience greater pressure related to professional acceptance and competition. This may lead male students to experience thoughts such as jealousy, a sense of superiority, or fear of failure at the cognitive level, contributing to higher levels of Crab Barrel Syndrome. Additionally, the more pronounced perception of the cognitive dimensions of the syndrome among male students may stem from social expectations or environmental factors.

As there are no studies in the literature specifically focusing on Crab Barrel Syndrome among nursing students, the conceptual significance of the dimensions has been reflected upon and discussed. The high cognitive scores observed among fourth-year students may reflect their belief that they must perceive themselves as competent and superior, given that they are on the brink of entering the profession.

Additionally, feelings of acceptance and the desire to succeed during the process of starting work at institutions may push them to think more motivated and goal-oriented. Considering fourth-year nursing students as soon-to-be graduates, studies indicate that while issues such as lack of confidence and knowledge gaps may exist among new graduates, their self-assessment competencies are generally positive.<sup>[22,23]</sup>

According to the results of this study, the high cognitive levels among final-year students suggest that their self-assessment competencies are positive. This study found that students who were undecided about their satisfaction with their internships experienced Crab Barrel Syndrome more intensely compared to others, with significant differences observed in the behavioral dimension. Crab Barrel Syndrome refers to behaviors aimed at hindering or belittling the successes of others. This syndrome is a relatively new topic in the organizational behavior literature, with only a limited number of studies, particularly in Türkiye. No specific studies have been identified in the existing literature that directly examine the relationship between internship satisfaction or indecisiveness and crab barrel syndrome. Indecisiveness is a process that forms the foundation of various negative emotional states and is one of the primary triggers of stress. Furthermore, there is a positive relationship between intolerance of uncertainty and perceived stress. This can lead individuals to doubt

their decision-making processes, succumb to obsessive thoughts, and experience heightened stress. Considering this information, it can be suggested that individuals experiencing indecisiveness may exhibit behaviors associated with Crab Barrel Syndrome more frequently or experience its effects more intensely.

### Strengths and Limitations of the Study

The strength of this study lies in being the first to identify Crab Barrel Syndrome among nursing students participating in clinical placements. However, the study has several limitations. First, the findings are limited in their generalizability as the study was restricted to a single group of nursing students. Second, the cross-sectional design of the study did not allow for an evaluation of changes over time. A longitudinal and more comprehensive study could provide such an opportunity. Third, considering that Crab Barrel Syndrome is related to organizational culture, factors such as the organization's cultural structure, employee motivation, positive organizational climate, and job satisfaction could play a role in the occurrence and prevention of this syndrome. The lack of exploration of organizational factors is a significant limitation of the study. Comparative studies in different organizations are thus essential. Lastly, the exclusion of socio-cultural factors (e.g., family structure, economic status) limited the broader interpretation of the findings.

### Conclusion

This study revealed that nursing students participating in clinical placements experienced a moderate level of Crab Barrel Syndrome. Male students were found to experience Crab Barrel Syndrome at a higher level than female students. The findings highlight the need to develop more effective awareness of individual and group dynamics within the nursing education process. Improving internship processes, in particular, can support students' professional development and foster emotional and behavioral solidarity by creating positive learning environments. In this context, it is recommended that both universities and clinical practice settings adopt policies that support students' social and professional development. Future studies are encouraged to include broader and more diverse samples, incorporating different professional groups to deepen the understanding of this issue. Additionally, investigating the influence of socio-cultural and environmental factors within the scope of such studies could provide a more comprehensive interpretation of the findings.

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