

# Crab Syndrome in Business Life and Collectivist/Individualist Culture

## *İş Yaşamında Yengeç Sendromu ve Kolektif/Bireyci Kültür*

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### ABSTRACT

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*In the business world, employee competition can cause individual and organizational issues, potentially fueled by the "crab syndrome," where individuals view others as obstacles to success. In a workplace, it is thought that the manifestation of crab syndrome in employees may be caused by the culture they have. This study aims to determine the impact of collectivist/individualist culture on the crab syndrome. In this study, the one of quantitative techniques, the survey technique was used. Data was collected through surveys from different public institution employees. The analysis revealed that the collectivist culture had a positive, but statistically insignificant effect on the cognitive, emotional, and behavioral components of the crab syndrome. Based on this result, it can be said that having a collectivist or individualist culture does not significantly influence individuals experiencing the crab syndrome. Considering that businesses can be affected by the cultural environment they operate in, it can be stated that this phenomenon is independent of the culture (collective or individualist) prevalent in the society.*

### ÖZET

**Anahtar Kelimeler:**

Yengeç Sendromu,  
Kolektif Kültür,  
Bireyci Kültür

**Jel Kodları:**

M12, M14

*İş yaşamında, çalışanlar arasındaki rekabet bir düzeyden sonra hem bireysel hem de örgütsel açıdan sorunlara yol açabilmektedir. Bu durumun olası sebeplerinden biri yengeç sendromuyla ilişkili davranışlardır. Bir işyerinde çalışanlarda yengeç sendromunun ortaya çıkmasının sahip oldukları kültürden kaynaklanabileceği düşünülmektedir. Bu çalışma, kolektivist/bireyci kültürün yengeç sendromu üzerindeki etkisini belirlemeyi amaçlamaktadır. Bu çalışmada nicel yöntemlerden biri olan anket yöntemi kullanılmıştır. Araştırma kapsamında farklı kamu kurumu çalışanlarından anket yoluyla veriler toplanmıştır. Yapılan analizler, kolektivist kültürün yengeç sendromunun bilişsel, duygusal ve davranışsal bileşenleri üzerinde pozitif yönde, ancak istatistiksel olarak anlamlı olmayan bir etkiye sahip olduğunu ortaya çıkarmıştır. Elde edilen bulgulara dayanarak kolektivist veya bireyci bir kültüre sahip olmanın bireylerin, yengeç sendromunu tecrübe etmeleri üzerinde önemli ölçüde bir etkiye sahip olmadığı söylenebilir. İşletmelerin faaliyet gösterdikleri kültürel ortamdan etkilenebileceği dikkate alındığında bu olgunun toplumda yaygın olan kültürden (kolektif veya bireyci) bağımsız olduğu ifade edilebilir.*

## 1. INTRODUCTION

In his Psychoanalytic Theory, Sigmund Freud argued that there are mental processes called id, ego and superego that affect human behavior. The ego, which includes consciousness, is a structure in the mind that controls the reflection of the individual's actions to the outside world and continues to censor the individual's sleep even in dreams. The super ego represents an energetic reaction to the choices made by the individual. The id, on the other hand, works according to the pleasure principle of the individual and includes passions (Freud, 1923). According to this theory, it can be said that the individual with a dominant id tends to act only for his/her own personal interests and can use the people around him/her as a tool to achieve his/her goal. It is possible for these individuals to exhibit some behaviors in working life.

In the business world, there can be individuals who want to rapidly climb the career ladder. These individuals aim to promote by taking the necessary steps to improve themselves. However, especially in public institutions, where there are few positions and numerous candidates for those positions, this situation can increase competition among employees. This competition can lead to unethical behaviors over time. In such cases, instead of making efforts to improve themselves, employees make an effort to fail the person they see as a competitor. Especially individuals whose id part is dominant in the mind try to progress not by improving themselves, but by using others as stepping stones. This behavior is referred to as the “crab syndrome.”

Not many studies have been conducted on the underlying causes of the crab syndrome observed in work environments. However, some theoretical studies suggest that the crab mentality may be culturally influenced. In an individualistic culture, where individuals tend to think only of themselves, some people may be willing to sacrifice others to advance in the workplace. On the other hand, in a collectivist culture, where the drive for collective success is dominant, others may pull back an individual who is trying to advance alone. Therefore, the main question of this research is whether culture has a significant effect on the crab syndrome. Answering the research question is anticipated to determine whether individuals' behaviors of harming each other in the workplace stem from culture or not.

The crab mentality, as a metaphor used in relation to people, originates from the behavior exhibited by crabs when placed in an open bucket. When crabs are placed in an open bucket, they start to make an individual effort to get out of the bucket. However, this effort turns into a competition not only to escape the bucket but also to hinder each other's progress. One of the crabs tries to reach the edge of the bucket by stepping on other crabs, but when it gets close, another crab grabs it with its pincers and pulls it back. Then, another crab tries to reach the edge by stepping on the previous one. This cycle continues for a while, and ultimately, none of the crabs manages to get out of the bucket. It's as if the crabs have an instinctive decision to prefer collective failure over individual success (Aaron & Smith, 1992). In the business world, it can sometimes observe a similar tendency among employees, where they pull each other back while trying to climb the ladder or get promoted. Therefore, the term “crab syndrome” can be used to describe such thinking and behaviors.

Crab syndrome refers to the mentality and behaviors of members who violate the norms of social assistance and support within an organization (Miller, 2019). According to another definition, the crab syndrome is the orientation of the individual's behavior by the primitive self (Özdemir & Üzümlü, 2019).

It is claimed that the Crab Syndrome develops as a defense mechanism in individuals (Özdemir & Üzümlü, 2019). It has been stated that crab syndrome should be handled in cognitive, emotional and behavioral terms (Fettahlioğlu & Dedeoğlu, 2021). Personal factors are at the forefront in the cognitive stage. The individual may develop negative thoughts about the events around him/her and behaviors of people related to these events, but may not express these negative thoughts to others or even comprehend the meaning behind these thoughts. In the emotional stage, the individual begins to reflect negative feelings towards others around them. Finally, in the behavioral stage, the individual tends to exhibit competitive behaviors and may also display negative behaviors aimed at pulling others down.

The crab syndrome has been discussed in relation to Social Comparison Theory and Social Identity Theory (Miller, 2014; Özdemir & Üzümlü, 2019). Social Comparison Theory claims that when a person compares themselves with others around them, it can positively contribute to recognizing their own deficiencies and improving themselves. However, it is suggested that if a person cannot improve their own performance, they may try to hinder others from performing better than them due to the effects of the crab syndrome (Özdemir & Üzümlü, 2019). In the Crab Mentality, it is stated that when one person is perceived to rise and achieve more than others, he/she will be pulled down by the others (Connor & Miller, 2014).

Social identity theory is a theory that reveals in-group dynamics and tries to explain how individuals' group membership drives in-group and intergroup interactions (Jansen & Delahajj, 2020). In social identity theory, it is argued that people get some of their identity from the groups they belong to. It has been stated that the social identity of the individual determines their feelings and behaviors (Scheepers & Ellemers, 2019). Behaviors associated with the crab mentality can include jealousy, selfishness, and actions aimed at hindering others (Özdemir & Üzüm, 2019).

In the initial stage of the crab syndrome, individuals may make efforts to outperform each other. Therefore, at first, it may be perceived as a situation that creates a competitive environment among employees and provides motivation for employees to struggle. However, since the crab syndrome creates the belief that employees cannot overtake one another, the behavior of pulling back the advancing individual may begin to observe. If this situation continues, employees may consume their energy by pulling each other back, and over time, they may not only stop struggling with each other, but also stop making efforts to move forward. As a result, this situation can lead to a decline in productivity among employees.

Culture has been defined as a network of discrete and specific knowledge structures shared by individuals living in a particular community (Torelli et al., 2020). Culture can influence the way people think, feel and act, as well as organizations and institutions (Hofstede & Hofstede, 2005, as cited in McSweeney, 2006). Societies can exhibit individualistic and/or collective cultural characteristics. Collective self refers to the evaluation of the self by a particular reference group (Triandis, 1989). In collectivist cultures, more in-group social relations are communal, whereas in individualist cultures there may be more exchange relations (Triandis, 1989). In individualistic cultures, individuals see themselves as self-righteous and independent entities. In collective cultures, individuals see themselves as interconnected members of a larger social group (Shin et al., 2020). In individualistic societies, people are autonomous and independent from their groups; they prioritize their personal goals over the goals of their groups, act based on their attitudes rather than their group norms, and through exchange theory, it is possible to predict the social behaviors of these individuals (Triandis, 2001).

The main antecedents of individualism seem to be cultural complexity and wealth. The more complex the culture, the greater the number of in-groups one can have, so that one has the option to join in-groups and even create new in-groups. Wealth implies the ability of an individual to be independent from in-groups. If an in-group makes excessive demands, an individual can leave the group. Mobility is also important in this context. As individuals move (migration, social class changes), they can join new in-groups and find opportunities to join in-groups whose goals compatible with their own. Population density can also influence culture. High-density ecologies are characterized by collectivism not only because those who behave inappropriately can be excluded, but also because it is necessary to regulate behavior more strictly in order to overcome crowd problems. When in-groups provide many rewards (e.g. emotional security, status, income, information, services, desire to spend time with the person), it tends to increase one's commitment to the in-group and the collectivism of the culture (Triandis, 1989).

As societies become more affluent (individualistic), they also reduce the size of families, which increases opportunities to raise children with individualistic values. Autonomy in child-rearing can also lead to individualism. Exposure to other cultures (e.g., through travel or social diversity) can also enhance individualism as individuals become aware of different norms and have to choose their own behavioral standards (Triandis, 1989).

It should not be assumed that in individualistic cultures everyone has all the characteristics of an individualistic culture and in collectivistic cultures everyone has all the characteristics of a collectivistic culture. On the contrary, people can take examples from both individualistic and collectivistic cognitive structures depending on the situation (Triandis, 2001).

## 2. LITERATURE REVIEW

Different studies have been found regarding the antecedents of crab syndrome. Jealousy, egocentrism, ambition and inequality (Aydın & Oğuzhan, 2019; Çavuş, 2021; Ayar, 2023); Type A personality (Üzüm et al., 2022); tenure (Çavuş, 2021) are among the antecedents of crab syndrome. However, not many empirical studies have found that culture can be an antecedent of crab syndrome.

According to Miller (2019), the crab mentality typically represents the mindset and behaviors of individuals belonging to a marginalized community or culture, or those who identify with them (Miller, 2019). In another study (Miller, 2015), Miller stated that the crab mentality is a metaphor used to describe the mindset and

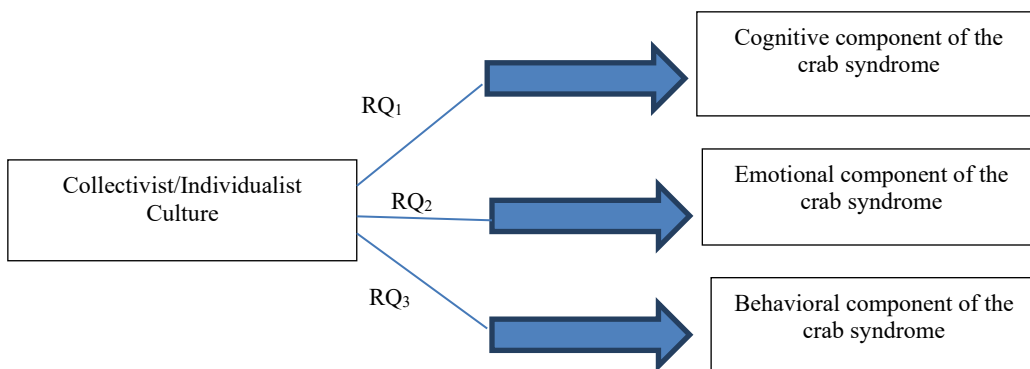
behaviors of individuals belonging to or identifying with a particular community or culture who 'hold each other back' from various opportunities for progress and success despite incentives and expectations for collaboration. As evident from these definitions, the crab mentality is closely related to culture. However, no direct empirical study on the impact of culture on the crab mentality has been found, but some theoretical or indirect studies have addressed the subject. One of these studies is by Sampath. According to Sampath (1997), in societies under colonial rule or recently liberated from colonialism, there exists a “poverty and obedience bucket,” and individuals in these societies live in this bucket. It is stated that these individuals are in a struggle with each other to gain the respect that they think exists outside their society.

As a result of a study conducted in a state university in Turkey, it was determined that the participants exhibited behaviors according to their social identities and the cultural values of the society they belong to, and that crab syndrome behaviors were seen as a negative organizational behavior among these behaviors (Turan, 2023). According to Altan & Filizöz (2023), pressures for progress and success in a society may be effective in the emergence of crab syndrome. In other words, in cultures where value is based on success, the likelihood of the crab mentality emerging can be high. On the other hand, it has been suggested that the crab mentality may be less common in collectivist cultures where harmony is important (Üzum & Ozkan, 2024).

In a study conducted with healthcare workers in the Philippines, participants emphasized the importance of solidarity, stating that people expect loyalty and faithfulness from each other as a result. The term “group loyalty” mentioned here generally implies the need to maintain group harmony, and some participants explained that the pressure of group loyalty could lead to stress for those seeking career advancement. Among Filipinos, this pressure against individualism has been described as the crab syndrome (Connor & Miller, 2014). In another study, it was stated that union commitment is negatively affected by the crab mentality. Considering that unions have a collective structure, some members might think that individual efforts to advance could harm the group (Edralin, 2009). In societies with a collective culture, some individuals may struggle alone to break away from the crowd. However, those who try to rise on their own might be pulled back by other members of the community. In another sense, in an environment where collective culture is common, individuals who try to leave the community by making individual efforts are not welcome and can be withdrawn, since there is an 'all together or none' perspective. On the other hand, in individualistic societies, individuals may tend to act on their own and struggle independently to succeed compared to individuals in collective societies. These individuals may strive to stand out in the work environment as they have a lower sense of group consciousness. Individuals influenced by individualistic culture are expected to struggle on their own and try to rise, even at the expense of others in the environment. Based on this information, it can be shown that the crab mentality can be influenced by both collective and individualistic cultures. In this context, the following research questions have been formulated:

- *Research Question 1: Does the collectivist/individualist culture have a statistically significant effect on the cognitive component of the crab syndrome?*
- *Research Question 2: Does the collectivist/individualist culture have a statistically significant effect on the emotional component of the crab syndrome?*
- *Research Question 3: Does the collectivist/individualist culture have a statistically significant effect on the behavioral component of the crab syndrome?*

In this study, the following research model was created to determine the effect of collectivist/individualist culture on crab syndrome:



**Figure 1. Research Model**

As seen in Figure 1, it will be investigated whether the collective/individualistic culture has a significant effect on the components of the crab syndrome.

### 3. METHODOLOGY

In the workplace, competition among employees can sometimes be observed. When this competition turns into unfair rivalry, employees may harm their perceived rivals, lower their performance, and cause them to fail. Culture is thought to be one of the environmental factors that leads to the emergence of this behavior called crab syndrome. The aim of this research is to determine the impact of the cultural environment on employees displaying the crab mentality and, in turn, provide recommendations to managers on how to take preventive measures. Since there are no specific empirical studies found in the literature on this topic, it is believed that this research will contribute to the literature.

In this study, one of the quantitative methods, the survey method was used. In the research model, culture was used as the independent variable and crab syndrome components were used as the dependent variable. To measure the culture, statements assessing the collectivism-individualism dimension were used from Hofstede's developed cultural values scale, adapted into Turkish by Saylık (2019). Participants were presented with response alternatives for each statement, ranging from 'strongly disagree', 'disagree', 'somewhat agree', 'agree' to 'strongly agree.' These responses were given values from 1 to 5, where a higher value indicates a higher level of collectivism, and a lower value indicates a higher level of individualism.

In order to measure the crab syndrome, a 27-statement and three-dimensional scale developed by Fettahlioğlu & Dedeoğlu (2021) was used. Respondents were presented with answer alternatives of 'strongly disagree', 'disagree', 'somewhat agree', 'agree' and 'strongly agree' for each statement. These answers were given a value from 1 to 5, and a high value indicates the presence of crab syndrome. Accordingly, the positive effect of the collective/individualistic culture variable on the crab syndrome variable indicates that the crab syndrome behavior increases as collectivism increases.

An application has been made to a Şırnak University Ethics Committee for the evaluation of the ethical suitability of the prepared survey form. After obtaining ethical approval (Date: November 25, 2022; Number: 53179), the implementation phase of the survey began.

The limited number of positions that can be promoted in public institutions, certain promotion conditions and the similarity of qualifications among many individuals can intensify competition among employees. For this reason, employees working in public institutions were selected as the sample. The prepared questionnaire was sent online to those working in public institutions and 160 people responded. The obtained data were analyzed via SPSS.

### 4. RESULTS

It has been determined that the average age of the employees participating in the survey is 36, and 33% of the participants are women and 67% are men. 62% of the participants stated that they were married and 38% stated that they were not married. Considering their education level, 9% of them are high school graduates; 60% of them are undergraduate graduates; It was determined that 18% of them were graduates and 13% of them were doctoral graduates.

Factor analysis has been conducted on the Crab Syndrome Scale, and it was found that the scale's KMO value is 90%. The factor loadings of the items range from 0.37 to 0.86, and the variance explained is 57%. In the factor analysis of the Collectivism/Individualism scale, the KMO value is 83%, and the factor loadings of the items range from 0.65 to 0.86, with a variance explained of 63%. Factor loadings between 0.50 and 0.60 are considered 'good' (Gürbüz & Şahin, 2018). A KMO value of 60% or above is considered sufficient for factor analysis of the sample (Tabachnick & Fidell, 2013). Lastly, it has been stated that the variance explained should be at least 50% (Streiner, 1994). Therefore, based on these criteria, it can be concluded that the results of factor analysis for both scales are within acceptable limits.

The table below presents the descriptive statistics of the variables measured by the scales:

**Table 1.** Descriptive Statistics

Variables	M	SD	Cronbach's Alpha
Cognitive Component of the CS	2.91	.54	.60
Emotional Component of the CS	3.13	.89	.90
Behavioral Component of the CS	3.13	.95	.94
Collectivist/Individualist Culture	3.49	.85	.87

M= Mean; SD= Standart Deviation; CS= Crab Syndrome

Based on the values in Table 1, only the reliability coefficient of the cognitive component of the crab syndrome has turned out to be low (0.60). Considering that the reliability coefficient should be at least 60% (Gürbüz & Şahin, 2018), it was decided to include the cognitive component in the analysis.

According to the participants, the cognitive component of the crab syndrome is experienced at a lower level in their workplace, while the emotional and behavioral components are experienced more. It is evident from the means that the participants' culture is closer to a collective culture (see Table 1).

Regression analyses were conducted to determine the effect of collectivist/individualist culture on the components of the crab syndrome. Analysis results are shown in the table below:

**Table 2.** The Results of the Regression Analysis

Dependent Variables	Independent Variable				
	Collectivist/Individualist Culture				
	B	SE	$\beta$	t	R <sup>2</sup>
Cognitive Component of the CS	.029	.050	.046	.583	.002
Emotional Component of the CS	.018	.084	.017	.213	.000
Behavioral Component of the CS	.094	.088	.084	1.058	.007

\*p<0,05; \*\*p<0,01

As a result of the conducted regression analyses, it has been determined that the collective/individualistic culture has a positive but statistically insignificant effect on the components of the crab syndrome (see Table 2). According to this result, as collectivism increases in individuals, the likelihood of exhibiting behaviors related to the crab syndrome may increase, but this increase is not statistically significant. In other words, it cannot be said that having a collective culture affects the situations related to the crab syndrome. Therefore, the following answers can be provided to the research questions:

- *Answer to the Research Question 1: Collective/Individualistic Culture has no statistically significant effect on the cognitive component of the crab syndrome.*
- *Answer to the Research Question 2: The Collective/Individualistic Culture has no statistically significant effect on the emotional component of the crab syndrome.*
- *Answer to the Research Question 3: The Collective/Individualistic Culture has no statistically significant effect on the behavioral component of the crab syndrome.*

## 5. CONCLUSION

Competition between businesses in the business world is important in terms of encouraging businesses to develop themselves. The same applies to the internal environment of the business. Competition among employees in the business environment can make important contributions to businesses. Employees not only perform their duties in order not to fall behind their colleagues, but they may also tend to make efforts for their own development in order to carry out their work in a better way by making extra effort. This can lead to more efficient and high-quality work within the company. However, competition among employees can sometimes get out of control over time, and they may begin to exhibit crab syndrome behaviors. In this case, instead of focusing on their own development, employees may start to spend time on make failures of their colleagues

whom they perceive as competitors. As a result, employees may not only fail to improve themselves, but they may also fail in their duties, eventually leading to burnout and decreased performance. Therefore, it can be said that crab syndrome has negative consequences not only for individuals but also for organizations.

It has been suggested that the cultural environment may be effective in the emergence of crab syndrome (Sampath, 1997; Connor & Miller, 2014; Edralin, 2009; Turan, 2023). In this study, it was tested whether collective/individualistic culture has an effect on crab syndrome. Data were collected through surveys from employees working in different public institutions. It was determined that the participants were closer to collective culture. The analysis revealed that collectivist culture had a positive but statistically insignificant effect on the cognitive, emotional, and behavioral dimensions of the crab mentality. According to this result, in an environment where collectivist culture is prevalent, employees may want to distinguish themselves from the crowd and strive to rise by leaving others behind. However, the fact that the result obtained is not statistically significant shows that collective culture does not explain the crab syndrome of individuals. Therefore, in an environment where individualistic culture is prevalent, employees can be expected to exhibit crab syndrome behaviors.

The emergence of the crab syndrome among employees causes them to spend their time and energy on the failure of their coworkers rather than on their tasks and their own development. This harmful behavior among employees depletes their energy and eventually could make it difficult for them to even perform their own duties. This situation decreases their productivity and may harm the organization in this respect. Therefore, managers should pay attention to this issue. Managers should be aware that employees from different cultures may exhibit behaviors related to crab syndrome. Managers should be cautious about excessive competition among employees and take measures to prevent situations such as gossip and defamation. Sanctions should be applied to individuals involved in such situations, and no compromises should be made. By doing so, it is expected that employees' dealing with each other, in other words, crab syndrome can be prevented.

One limitation of this research is that it was conducted in a rural region where individuals have limited work alternatives. Future research could be carried out in larger cities where individuals have more work alternatives. This would allow the determination of whether job alternatives have an impact on competition in the workplace. Another limitation of the research is that it was conducted with public sector employees. Conducting research with private sector employees could reveal the relationship between different working conditions and the crab mentality in individuals.

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#### **AUTHORS' DECLARATION:**

This paper complies with Research and Publication Ethics, has no conflict of interest to declare, and has received no financial support. For the scale used in the article, it is declared by the authors that permission was obtained from the original owner of the scale. The author(s) sent a signed "*Copyright Transfer Form*" to the journal. Regarding the conduct of this research, an "*Ethics Permission Certificate*" dated 25/11/2022 and numbered 53179 was obtained from the Ethics Committee of the University of Şırnak.

#### **AUTHORS' CONTRIBUTIONS:**

The entire research is written by the author.

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