DiSC® CLASSIC THEORY

THE DiSC GRAPHS

Though many who work with our programs have migrated to the current Everything DiSC® solutions, DiSC® Classic continues to be a practical and prominent tool for personal and professional development. Few concepts in the use of DiSC Classic cause as much confusion and controversy as the three graphs that measure a respondent's scores. Ever since we introduced our first DiSC profile more than 30 years ago, practitioners have debated the merits and applications of the graphs. Today, claims of different interpretations of the graphs are almost as plentiful as imitations of our original *Personal Profile* that started it all.

How did such strongly held beliefs develop? And who is right?

Table of Contents

THE DiSC® CLASSIC GRAPHS

THE ISSUE

Illustrating the depths of the issue, many interpretations of the graphs exist. One school of thought holds that Graph I is the public self, Graph II is the private self, and Graph III is the real self. A competing interpretation agrees that Graph III displays the real self, but says that Graph I shows the ideal self while Graph II shows less-desirable characteristics.

Another theory states that Graph I measures other's expectations of the person, Graph II displays behavior under pressure, and Graph III measures self-perception. Yet a different interpretation states that Graph I is adapted style, Graph II is motivated style, and Graph III is behavior in a selected environment.

In addition, there are those who believe that Graphs I and II are simply a means to an end (i.e., the creation of Graph III) and should just be ignored. And there are still other interpretations, which continue to surface.

This dizzying conflux of interpretations and theories demands clarification. To do so, it is necessary to discuss the history of the graphs and their relationship to the DiSC® model.

The Roots of the Issue

The roots of the issue are sometimes traced to Walter Clarke, an industrial psychologist from the middle of the last century, who was among the first to design a personality assessment influenced by Marston's work. His instrument, the *Activity Vector Analysis*, required respondents to answer a questionnaire twice. The first time, Clarke had respondents identify "words I have heard others use to describe me." The second time, he had them identify "words I honestly believe describe me." It is important to note that Clarke actually gave two separate instructions to respondents, so it was natural to presume that different concepts were being measured. Finally, we note that we have never been able to determine that Clarke did any further validation for this instrument.

In the 1950s, when researcher John Cleaver developed the first forced-choice instrument based on Marston's model, the concept of public and private selves may have remained a strong influence. Cleaver's version of the instrument, however, did not include the same instructions that Clarke had used. Furthermore, with this instrument, people only responded to questions once, which was a fundamental difference.

Then, in the 1970s, John Geier, a researcher at the University of Minnesota, authored the first *Personal Profile System*® (the earliest version of *DiSC Classic*) building on the work of Marston, Clarke, and Cleaver. The PPS called for interpreting Graphs I and II as measurements of the public and private selves, respectively. Consequently, when Wiley (formerly Performax Systems International; formerly Carlson Learning Companies; formerly Inscape Publishing, Inc.) published this first PPS and trained the first trainers and consultants in the use of DiSC, we encouraged them to interpret Graph I as their public self and Graph II as their natural self (and the way they

acted under pressure, a belief held by John Cleaver). This continued throughout the 1970s into the early 1990s.

Because of the enormous success of Wiley's learning system model, others began imitating Inscape's tools and methods, including its use of Graph I and II. They carried with them the corresponding interpretations. In some cases, the claims regarding the graphs grew to include an even wider range of uses.

Then in the 1990s, we began making significant strides toward increasing the accuracy of the Personal Profile System with the introduction of the PPS Series 2800, which included new research by Pamela Cole. As part of the increased emphasis on research at the time, the company reevaluated its position on Graphs I and II. Our researchers documented that while both Graph I and II are reliable and valid measures of DiSC®, there wasn't a strong theoretical or empirical connection to support their use as measures of any of the alternative interpretations. But by that time, the company had spawned such a great number of practitioners in its original use of Graph I and II that a debate was inevitable.

Where We Stand

In the discussion over the interpretation of Graphs I and II, little if any attention has been given to the role Marston's original theories have in this debate. So in pursuit of this deeper connection to the issue, Wiley initiated a review of Marston's works relative to this question.

Indeed, it seems that the difference between the public and private self is among the richest of Marston's concepts. In fact, much of the power of Marston's theories may lie in this construct, and a better understanding of it may allow us to gain insight into behavior, adaptability, and other vital aspects of communication so central to DiSC. But Marston never designed an instrument to measure private and public self-perceptions; nor did he design an instrument to measure the "D," "i," "S," and "C" emotions.

Still, his emphasis on the distinction between the public and private self may have influenced the researchers who attempted to harness this concept over the next 40 years. It may also explain why some practitioners have found the discussion of public vs. private selves such a compelling way to present deeper insights to users of DiSC.

Meanwhile, the fact remains that efforts to validate measurement of these separate parts of one's self in an instrument have not been successful from a research perspective. In essence, there has never been well-documented support that any of the graphs are indicators of the private, public, natural, or pressured self or that they are anything other than measurements of general self-concept.

But as one of Marston's key concepts, the understanding of the public and private selves represents a worthy goal. To this end, Wiley initiated two studies to explore this topic. (See

THE DiSC® CLASSIC GRAPHS

Research on the Graphs for more information on these studies.) Study 1 examined the possibility that Graph I measures the public self, and Study 2 examined the possibility that Graph II measures behavior under pressure. Based on the 376 people in Study 1 and the 534 people in Study 2, these preliminary research findings do not support either of these alternative interpretations for Graphs I or II. They suggest that in all probability, Graphs I and II simply reflect a set of emotions and behaviors that are congruent with the respondent's general self-concept. This is the full extent of the information that Graphs I and II provide.

Summary

The most accurate measurement of an individual's DiSC style remains Graph III. Because our research confirms that Graph III consistently demonstrates superior reliability and validity compared with either of the other two graphs, we will continue to promote it as the best indicator of the respondent's DiSC style. Its importance has been demonstrated both through the rigors of science and in the real world.

DiSC Classic

EXPLAINING DISCREPANCIES BETWEEN GRAPH I AND GRAPH II

But what do you say when someone says, "My Graph I and Graph II are different!"?

First, take a deep breath. Our research shows that more than 50% of the time differences between Graph I and Graph II are related to statistical aspects of the instrument rather than differences within the individual. Imagine that you asked two close friends to describe you. Most of the time they would agree, but they might give different accounts on some occasions because they are looking at you in different ways. Which friend's account is a more accurate picture of your real self? They are both reliable sources of information…right? You would probably want to combine both of these accounts because this captures you in a more complete way. This is what Graph III does. There are conditions, however, when differences between Graph I and Graph II can reflect something meaningful about the person's response style. A person responding to DiSC® Classic items in either an **exceptionally consistent** manner or an **exceptionally inconsistent** manner will create discrepancies that you can discuss with the learner. Let's look at these conditions in greater detail.

Exceptionally consistent responding

A person doesn't select any of the words belonging to a particular style (e.g., Dominance) as either "most" or "least" like him or her. In this case, he or she will have a low score on Graph I and a high score on Graph II. In other words, not touching any words on a given DiSC scale will cause discrepancies on Graphs I and II. It would make sense that a person who has neither "most" of a trait nor "least" of that same trait would be roughly average on that trait. In this case, that is what Graph III shows. So if a person does notice such a discrepancy on one of their scales (i.e., a low scale score on Graph I and a high scale score on Graph II), you might check to see if this describes his or her pattern of response. You will most likely find that this pattern suggests to the respondent that he or she is neither high nor low in this area, which again, is what Graph III suggests.

Exceptionally inconsistent responding

A person has a great deal of variation in his or her responses to the questions on a given DiSC scale. For example, a person may select some "D" words as "most" and other "D" words as "least". In this case, he or she will have a relatively high "D" score on Graph I and a relatively low "D" score on Graph II. You might expect that someone who has some characteristics that are high in "D" and some that are low in "D" is, on average, moderate in this style (which is what Graph III indicates). The discrepancy between the two graphs, in this case, tells us that he or she is probably more variable in this style than someone who did not have such a discrepancy. You can use this to begin a dialogue with the participant. You can check if this response pattern describes his or her responses, and if so, discuss what it says about him or her. Again, you might find that the respondent feels that he or she is variable on this particular style. There may be

some contexts in which he or she has a lot of this trait and other contexts in which he or she has very little.

CURRENT RESEARCH ON THE GRAPHS

Wiley performed two preliminary studies to explore the validity of the alternative interpretations given to Graphs I and II. In Study 1, 376 people who had completed *DiSC® Classic 2.0* also responded to 20 DiSC adjectives. They were instructed to rate themselves on these adjectives as others see them. These adjective ratings were used to create "D," "i," "S," and "C" scale scores that reflected the individual's "social" self-concept. These rating scale scores were then correlated with the *DiSC Classic 2.0* forced-choice scale scores from Graph I, Graph II, and Graph III. It was hypothesized that if Graph I does, in fact, measure the public self, then the rating scales scores should correlate more highly with Graph I scale scores than with Graph II or Graph III scale scores. The opposite, however, was found. All four rating scale scores (i.e., our "social" self measure) correlated most highly with Graph III. Further, the median correlation with the Graph II scales was meaningfully higher than the median correlation with the Graph I scales.

In Study 2, 534 people completed *DiSC Classic 2.0* and responded to the 20 DiSC adjectives mentioned above. In this study, however, after participants completed *DiSC Classic 2.0*, they were asked to recall a recent period of time in which they were under a great deal of pressure at work. They were then instructed to rate how well each of the 20 adjectives described them during that period of pressure. These adjective ratings were used to create "D," "i," "S," and "C" scale scores that reflected the individual's DiSC style under pressure. These rating scale scores were then correlated with the *DiSC Classic 2.0* forced-choice scale scores from Graph I, Graph II, and Graph III. It was hypothesized that if Graph II does, in fact, measure the behavior under pressure, then the rating scales scores should correlate more highly with Graph II scale scores than with Graph I or Graph III scale scores. Again, this hypothesis was not supported. All four rating scale scores (i.e., our "pressured behavior" measure) correlated most highly with Graph III. In addition, the median correlation with the Graph II scales was only fractionally higher than the median correlation with the Graph I scales.