

Theoretical Analyses

The Limits of DISC: A Critical Examination of Psychopathy and Manipulation in Popular Personality Profiles

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Abstract

From a psychological perspective, society functions as an intricate web of diverse personalities. Yet certain traits, such as emotional regulation, empathy, and moral awareness, are widely recognized as indicators of psychological health, transcending individual differences. This suggests that, despite people's varied backgrounds and experiences, they share fundamental characteristics that define rational behavior. Similarly, there are complex personalities whose intentions transcend the scope of the DISC color model. The model's neutral category may correspond to psychopathic traits, which are central to the clinical study of psychopathy. This article critically examines the personality profiles popularized by Thomas Erikson, a figure widely known in popular psychology, and explores specific techniques employed to counter manipulative behaviors. The review aims to promote self-awareness and interpersonal understanding by examining how manipulation tied to psychopathic behavior leads to emotional distress and self-destructive tendencies. The paper also sheds light on the forensic and ethical implications of applying pseudoscientific models in psychological and criminal assessment settings. To comprehensively evaluate psychopathy from Erikson's perspective, the researcher selected both the English version and the Arabic translation to ensure that all essential components of psychopathy were reviewed.

Keywords: Psychopathy; DISC model; pseudoscience; forensic psychology; ethical implications.

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Framing Psychopathy through the DISC Model

Throughout history, individuals have always been driven by a desire for power, greed, and domination often placing little value on justice, empathy and virtue. These individuals with such conditions have been identified as psychopaths and have captured fascination and intrigue throughout the ages. Psychopathy presents a paradox: a superficial appearance of normalcy conceals pathological traits that undermine psychological safety and well-being. Therefore, studies have identified psychopathy as a disorder characterized by superficial emotional responses, impulsive traits, lack of empathy, and antisocial behavior (Kirrane et al., 2024). Unravelling the complexities inherent in psychopathic behavior is an overwhelming task; it demands a thorough analysis of their actions. While their paradoxical nature complicates understanding them, a deep awareness of these personalities is essential for comprehension. In interactions, people may encounter individuals whose superficial charm hides the strange reality of psychopathy. These individuals often demonstrate a disturbing capacity for manipulation which causes emotional harm while maintaining a superficial appearance of normalcy. This concealed dimension of human behavior can be understood by identifying the distinct signs that differentiate psychopaths from other individuals. The strategies employed by these individuals provide valuable insights into their ways of manipulation (Warren et al., 2003; Walsh et al., 2009; Vyas, 2015). Erikson's work aims to guide readers not toward confusion or distress, but along a path of understanding, healing and wisdom. In exploring the enigmatic realm of psychopathy, individuals prepare to confront difficult truths and dispel long-held misconceptions. To this end, tools and frameworks, such as Thomas Erikson's personality categorization, can assist in identifying these traits and fostering inner peace.

The behavior categories I use, in that first book as well as in this one, are based on William Moulton Marston's theories and consist of four main types of

people, each of which is associated with a color: Red for dominance, Yellow for influence, Green for stability, and Blue for compliance (Erikson, 2020, p. 02)

The ability to understand one's weaknesses and strengths enhances self-awareness, which is crucial for building fulfilling relationships. When exploring the pages ahead, and as the concept of being "surrounded by psychopaths" comes to light, our purpose is to highlight the complex dimension of human nature and empower individuals to re-consider their unconscious involvement in toxic relationships. This article aims to critically examine the DISC personality model, as popularized by Thomas Erikson, with special emphasis on its limitations in identifying psychopathy and manipulative behavior. The objective is to evaluate the risks of applying the pseudoscience models in forensic psychology, organizational decision-making and interpersonal relations. This study employs a conceptual and critical review methodology; it synthesizes clinical and forensic literature on psychopathy with an analysis of Erikson's DISC model¹. Sources include both research and Erikson's narrative in English and Arabic, to capture the translation and cultural framing of psychology in popular psychology.

Analysing the Paradox of Psychopaths

Psychopaths cannot be easily identified through physical symptoms commonly associated with other mental illnesses or disorders. Unlike those with schizophrenia, for example, psychopaths do not experience hallucinations or hear voices directing their actions (Meloy, 1988; Patrick, 2006; Vien & Beech, 2006). Though they lack obvious clinical symptoms, psychopaths exhibit distinct personality characteristics that set them apart from those with other personality disorders. These traits make psychopathy a uniquely complex and intriguing area of study within the field of psychology.

You have most probably run into this person: an exciting human being who is incredibly charismatic, nice, charming and helpful. Who always has a compliment up his/her sleeve. And who will be guaranteed to make you feel good. You will believe what you're told, even when it sounds fake – since it feels good. But what might seem too good to be true will most definitely be so (Erikson, 2020).

¹ The DISC model was first introduced by the psychologist William Moulton Marston in *Emotions of Normal People* (1928); he described four primary emotional and behavioral patterns (Dominance, Inducement/Influence, Submission/Steadiness, and Compliance/Conscientiousness). Erikson did not introduce 'DISC' but he popularized a color-coded version of it in his bestselling books, mainly *Surrounded by Idiots* (2014), *Surrounded by Psychopaths* (2017), and *Surrounded by Narcissists* (2022).

When exploring Erikson's work, the author uncovers the essential components for healthy personalities and relationships. Building such relationships is difficult, especially in a world where psychopaths exhibit antisocial behavior and lack the ability to empathize or experience guilt, which places them within the cluster of severe personality pathologies studied in clinical psychology (Rogers & Cruise, 2013; Abdalla-Filho & Birgit, 2020). It is an unstable personality that is integrated in society with all its unexpected attitudes and aggressive behavior; while their place is supposed to be in psychiatric care. However, the work does not target individuals with obvious mental illnesses or easily recognized abusive behavior. Instead, it reveals personalities that are narcissistic and manipulative, aiming to control healthy personalities. This personality type may stem from childhood experiences or genetic inheritance (Marshall & Cooke, 1999). The temperament and character traits we inherit influence our behavior, a process that begins at the genetic stage. In this context, the researcher raised these questions: What is the purpose? Why manipulate others? Who are the targets? Psychopaths with manipulation skills can succeed in life and ascend to higher positions.

They may exploit emotionally stable individuals, drawing on their psychological resources for personal advantage without reciprocation, ultimately benefiting themselves while harming their victims. In this non-fiction book, DISC characters are categorized primarily by colors; red, blue, yellow, and green. However, the DISC model lacks the empirical support required in formal personality assessment and remains largely unrecognized within peer-reviewed psychological studies. They reveal how manipulative or susceptible to manipulation we might be, help us understand the kinds of people encountered and build relationships with, whether at home, school, in public or at work. However, the psychopaths discussed here transcend the DISC-color traits; they are best described as colorless and malevolent, unlike typical individuals who are a blend of the aforementioned colors. Although widely used in non-clinical settings, the DISC model lacks the empirical foundation required for validated personality assessments. As maintained by Erikson:

They are people who don't have a personality of their own; instead, they mimic whatever they see for their own gain. They are a type of chameleon with a hidden agenda that only they know of. And we can be certain that this agenda only ever benefits them (Erikson, 2020).

Table 1.

DISC Color Personality Model: Traits, Strengths, and Workplace Fit (adapted from Erikson, 2020)

Color	Traits	Strengths	Weaknesses	Ideal Work Environment
Red (Dominant)	Bold, Decisive, Competitive, Direct	Leadership, Goal-oriented, Takes initiative	Impatient, Insensitive, Overly controlling	Fast-paced, high-pressure, leadership roles
Yellow (Influential)	Charismatic, Outgoing, Optimistic, Enthusiastic	Great communicator, Inspiring, Creative	Distracted easily, Over-promises, Disorganized	Social, flexible, creative industries
Green (Steady)	Loyal, Patient, Reliable, Supportive	Team Player, Good listener, Empathetic	Avoids conflict, Resistant to change, Indecisive	Stable, collaborative, people-focused roles
Blue (Conscientious)	Analytical, Detail-oriented, Logical, Reserved	Precise, Perfectionist, Critical thinker	Overly cautious, Perfectionist, lacks spontaneity	Structured, rule-based, data-driven fields

The nature of a colorless individual explains why some people become users and abusers, devoid of empathy and compassion. These individuals are not in prison or psychiatric care because they are fully aware of their remorseless actions. To truly understand psychopaths, it is essential to examine the author's experiences. Similar events with different characters still cause psychological damage. His awareness of this issue stems from cumulative events of his life; when the damage is psychological, it often leaves a lasting impact. The author outlines strategies to prevent manipulation by psychopaths, such as setting psychological boundaries, managing empathy, building self-esteem, and fostering a sense of self-worth and entitlement (BooksxBits, 2023).

It is crucial to take measures to avoid exploitation, but equally important is assessing what a relationship offers. If a relationship fosters power, strength, personal growth, or love, then it can be deemed healthy. Conversely, if individuals experience psychological distress, anxiety and emotional instability, it is a clear indication of toxic relationships marked by manipulation and psychological harm *"if you don't think that anybody can love you, terrible as you are, then you'll be willing to invite in anybody who shows you the slightest appreciation"* (Erikson, 2020, 2021)

The figure below describes the characteristics of each personality profile that the four colors separately evoke. It is worth mentioning that normal individuals could embrace different personality characteristics from each color per se, and this would entail the existence of a DISC profile in a single individual.

HIGH D/RED	HIGH I/YELLOW	HIGH S/GREEN	HIGH C/BLUE
Dominant	Inspiring	Stable	Analytical
Proactive	Extroverted	Patient	Investigative
Ambitious	Persuasive	Reliable	Cautious
Strong-willed	Verbal	Attentive	Systematic
Problem solver	Open	Restrained	Precise
Energetic	Empathetic	Lovable	Logical
Competitive	Optimistic	Good listener	Conventional
Forceful	Creative	Friendly	Distant
Inquisitive	Spontaneous	Cautious	Objective
Direct	Sensitive	Supportive	Perfectionist

Figure 1. Multi-color personality representations (adapted from Erikson, 2020)

Recently, many therapists, psychologists, and researchers initiated discussions via social media about the issue of people's eligibility and the law of attraction, claiming that people reflect on what they fear most and if they do not work on this merit, they do not attract what they truly aspire to. Individuals worldwide become interested in their online sessions seeking solutions to their problems. Unlike psychopaths, who are unaware of the abnormality of their actions, a typical individual is aware that s/he is being manipulated and hurt. In this context, feeling lost could be a sign of acumen or helplessness. Dealing with a colorless profile can be challenging, especially for individuals who are not acquainted with psychopathic behavior. Erikson described typical attitudes through the metaphor of sheep and wolves; even though the number of sheep exceeds that of wolves, one wolf's cunning could defeat many sheep, suggesting that weak personalities are easily targeted by psychopaths and narcissists. For many people, fear is a dominant trait; their fear of abandonment urges them to maintain a toxic relationship and disregard all the red flags they encounter, and eventually, their needs are suppressed. From my perspective, Erikson attempted to immediately raise readers' awareness of toxic relationships. He directly addresses this issue and attracts attention to preserve one's mental sanity because no one deserves to be betrayed and manipulated.

Building on the preceding discussion, the following section outlines the main manipulation strategies described in Erikson's work:

- i. **Arbitrary positive enforcement** is an intentional form of favoritism whereby individuals are given strong praise which is then abruptly withheld. The withholding of positive reinforcement often leads to frustration and confusion.

- ii. **Love bombing:** a manipulative strategy used in toxic relationships in which individuals are bombarded with affection, leading to intense feelings of love, admiration, and caring. This tactic is highly distressing when realizing that affection is insincere and has devious motives.
- iii. **Smokescreens:** a confusing technique in which psychopaths shift the focus from the actual issue by claiming that you are the source of the problem. This technique is intended to obscure the truth, creating confusion and leading to misleading thoughts.
- iv. **Silent treatment** is a manipulative technique in which people emotionally withdraw from communicating with others. This includes ghosting, ignoring messages, or avoiding eye contact. Prolonged silence may cause emotional discomfort, as individuals feel rejected, and unsure of what they might have done wrong.
- v. **Gaslighting** is a manipulative tactic designed to make individuals question their own sanity. In these situations, the manipulator employs various techniques, including denying or distorting the importance of the victim's emotions, truth-bending, placing blame on the victim, and withholding affection.

These tactics represent classic forms of emotional manipulation, commonly used by individuals with psychopathic traits to assert covert control over their victims. The following figure illustrates the prototypical characteristics of psychopathy. [Cleckley's \(1941\)](#) early description of psychopathy (as cited in [Vien and Beech, 2006](#)), along with additional items from PCL-R; it is presented in the form of a checklist to depict the personality profile of psychopaths.

<i>Cleckley's Core Traits</i>	<i>Hare's PCL-R Items</i>
1. Superficial charm and good intelligence	1. Glibness/superficial charm ^a
2. An absence of delusions & other signs of irrational thinking	2. Grandiose sense of self-worth ^a
3. An absence of "nervousness" or psychopathic manifestations	3. Need for stimulation and/or proneness to boredom
4. Unreliability	4. Pathological lying ^a
5. Untruthfulness and insincerity	5. Conning and/or manipulative
6. A lack of remorse or shame for their behavior	6. Lack of remorse or guilt ^a
7. Inadequately motivated antisocial behavior	7. Shallow affect
8. Poor judgment and failure to learn from previous experiences	8. Callous and/or lack of empathy ^a
9. Pathologic egocentricity and incapacity for love	9. Parasitic lifestyle
10. General poverty in any major affective reactions or emotions	10. Poor behavioral controls ^a
11. A specific loss of insight	11. Promiscuous sexual behavior
12. A general unresponsiveness to interpersonal relationships	12. Early behavioral problems
13. Fantastic and uninviting behavior with or without alcohol	13. Lack of realistic and long-term goals ^a
14. Suicide is rarely carried out because of love of the self	14. Impulsivity ^a
15. Sex life will be impersonal, trivial, and poorly integrated	15. Irresponsibility ^a
16. A failure to follow any kind of life plan	16. Failure to accept responsibility for own actions ^a
17. Many short-term marital relationships	
18. Juvenile delinquency ^a	
19. Revocation of conditional release	
20. Criminal versatility	

a. These items are those included in the Psychopathy Checklist–Screening Version plus an additional item of adult antisocial behavior

Figure 2. Cleckley's basic traits of Psychopathy besides the PCL-R items (Vien & Beech, 2006)

Given the main topic of evaluating toxic relationships, an important topic to consider is the significance of establishing healthy boundaries in all types of relationships. Just like toxic behavior can harm our mental state, not setting boundaries can also lead to negative consequences in our relationships. It is important to recognize our own needs and communicate them effectively to others to maintain healthy and fulfilling relationships. Erikson's work final section leaves readers, who have been manipulated, with an open-ended question about the value of their relationships. This type of question can be a powerful tool for introspection and self-reflection. It encourages individuals to evaluate the interpersonal dynamics and nature of their relationships, assess the level of manipulation, and consider their mental health and well-being.

Attempting to repair relationships damaged by manipulation can be a challenging process that requires patience, especially from the affected partner who is often an empath. Upon realizing that their relationships are toxic, people may make varied decisions. These decisions are based on their individual experiences, personalities, and emotional resilience. Some may choose to confront the issues head-on, striving to salvage and heal the relationship. Others may find the strength to end the toxic relationship, prioritizing their serenity and personal growth. Additionally, some characters might remain uncertain and struggle to make a decision, grappling with conflicting emotions and the fear of change.

Deciding whether a relationship is worthy or not is not a mere choice; several factors intervene in this regard, including the individual's willingness to be committed, the rate of manipulation, and the history of emotional involvement in one's childhood. These choices reveal the complexity of negotiating toxic relationships. Nevertheless, each individual's situation is unique, as there is no universal solution to manage relationship challenges. Support from family, friends or a professional counselor can help those facing this situation make informed decisions about their relationship network.

Boundaries and Psychopathy

Understanding the different types of psychopathy is important to identify and treat the disorder. Primary and secondary psychopathy are two subordinate types that are often differentiated from each other. By uncovering the characteristics of each subtype, empaths can develop effective therapies and interventions to aid those struggling with the condition. Although the two subtypes share similar characteristics, their underlying causes are different. Primary psychopathy is thought to stem from a lack of conscience and empathy, while secondary psychopathy is believed to be a result of one's environment and early experiences. Yet there remains some diversity in opinion concerning the origins and development of psychopathy (Veit et al., 2002; Mark et al., 2011). There is a widely accepted agreement that psychopathy has both a social and neural origin. In the past two decades,

there has been a growing interest in the neural basis of psychopathy. Experts believe that genetic factors play a functional role in the development of psychopathy, but adverse developmental experiences such as abuse and negative social-environmental factors can also contribute to its emergence (Vitale, 2001; Vitacco et al., 2005; Viding et al., 2015, Love & Holder, 2016).

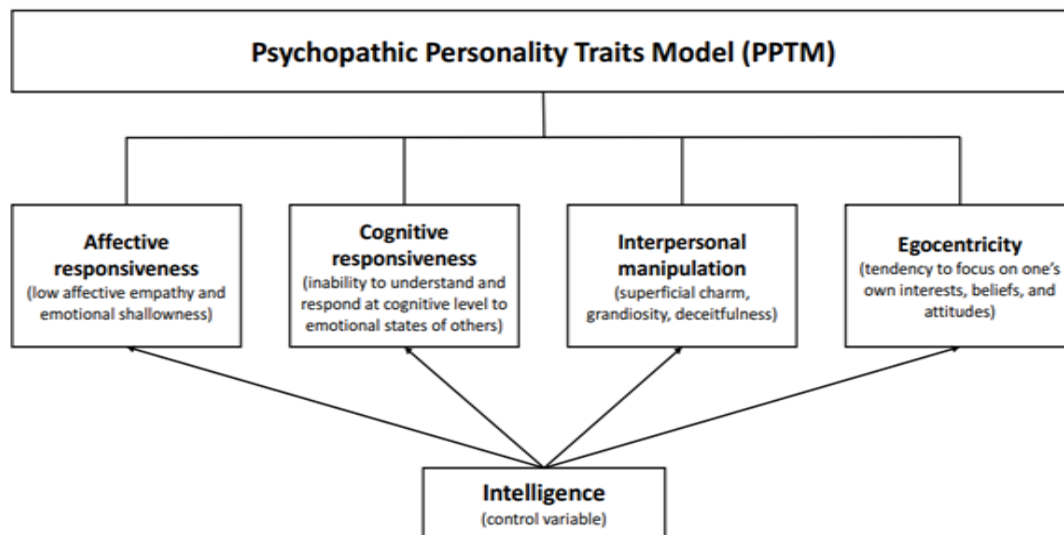


Figure 3. The Psychopathic Personality Traits Model (PPTM) (Boduszek et al., 2017, p.19)

Understanding individuals who possess psychopathic traits is facilitated by surrounding oneself with narratives about psychopaths; the revelation provided in this publication is truly invaluable where it is equipped with the necessary knowledge to confront challenging situations with self-assurance and dignity. Having a deep understanding of one's individuality is essential to resist and block manipulative tactics. By being aware of one's strengths and weaknesses, individuals can begin to protect themselves against manipulators.

However, maintaining control over one's thoughts and actions in the face of manipulation is an on-going challenge that may require continuous effort and adaptability. Therefore, knowledge is power, but it is important to recognize that self-awareness alone may not work equally well for everyone. Tailoring strategies to individuals' needs and circumstances is essential. An interesting saying is used by Erikson in his book, which says a lot about healthy characters: "fool me once, shame on you, fool me twice, shame on me" (Erikson, 2020).

To better understand the aspects of unhealthy relationships, it is crucial to distinguish between healthy and toxic relationships. The table below highlights the key differences across relational elements, including communication, empathy, and emotional effect. This comparison identifies the warning signs of manipulation and exploitative traits, thereby enhancing awareness and emotional resilience. Being familiar with these traits at an early stage helps individuals to make informed decisions about the relationships they maintain.

Hence, such awareness is basic to establish psychological safety, promote psychological well-being, and encourage the development of respectful interpersonal connections.

Table 2.

Comparison of Healthy and Manipulative Relationships

Aspect	Healthy Relationship	Manipulative Relationship
Empathy	Present	Lacking
Boundaries	Respected	Violated
Communication	Open	Withholding / Gaslighting
Intentions	Transparent and honest	Hidden, self-serving
Emotional Impact	Supportive and uplifting	Confusing and emotionally draining
Conflict Handling	Constructive dialogue	Blame-shifting / silent treatment

Erikson's publication is a comprehensive guide to establish and maintain healthy boundaries in relationships. It provides valuable insights into how to identify and manage individuals who may attempt to violate and exploit these boundaries for their benefit. With its practical tips and enlightening perspective, this non-fiction work is essential for anyone looking to improve their relationships and protect their emotional well-being.

As avid readers, the source text is captivating; it presents engaging insights supported by practical strategies, although the author did notice some subtle elements of conviction. The absence of attachment and trust among individuals is concerning. When a sense of belonging is achieved, people naturally cooperate to confront external challenges and threats. Conversely, when a sense of belonging is lacking, individuals are compelled to invest time and energy in self-protection. This, in turn, can inadvertently make us more vulnerable to external threats and challenges (Sinek, 2014). In summary, Erikson's work is successful in evoking our interest and curiosity about understanding colorless and detached profiles, as it offers valuable guidance on maintaining personal boundaries and preserving our mental health.

Clinical, Forensic and Ethical Implications

From a clinical psychology perspective, psychopathy is conceptualized within the spectrum of personality disorders and assessed using validated tools like the Hare Psychopathy Checklist (PCL-R), unlike the DISC model, which lacks empirical validation and interpretive precision in clinical settings. Although psychopathy is characterized by its resistance to treatment, cognitive therapy has received interest through a myriad of therapeutic attempts. Pseudoscientific models such as DISC transcend diagnosis and treatment, it lacks clinical

precision and does not follow the parameters of clinical diagnosis, yet it influences how individuals see themselves. It is powerful in changing behaviors, which scientific diagnosis may not fully address.

From a forensic and ethical perspective, relying on pseudoscientific typologies like DISC is problematic. As Erikson maintains in *Surrounded by Psychopaths*, some individuals exploit personality frameworks to manipulate others, emphasizing the ethical consequences of neglecting the intricacy of human behavior (Erikson, 2020) and this proves why the use of frameworks like DISC in clinical or forensic contexts could have serious implications. It is worth mentioning that, in clinical settings, assessment should be grounded in validated science in order to avoid serious outcomes of misdiagnosis or miscarriage (Boskovic, 2025; Cairns, 2023). Forensic psychology covers the complex nature of psychopathy and the negative consequences of implementing models that disregard its multidimensional nature (Malatesti et al., 2021; Gredecki & Turner, 2021). Psychopathy cannot be reduced to typical personality codes without encountering socio-ethical consequences. Its association with violence and emotional dysregulation are well researched in the forensic literature (Velotti et al., 2024; Thomson et al., 2025), while arguments reveal its expression in communities, where social strata and occupational roles could ease manipulation (Pinto et al., 2025; Babiak, 2019).

Furthermore, ethical concerns are amplified through research showing that individuals with psychopathic traits may derive pleasure from fear-evoking stimuli, and that the manifestation of these traits varies depending on how it is measured (Schneider et al., 2025; Batky et al., 2024; Eisenbarth et al., 2025). Therefore, the responsibility of professionals and experts in the field is twofold: make sure that forensic assessment practices are rigorous and evidence-based and to preserve public understanding from the misrepresentations of pseudoscience. Sustaining these norms is important to avoid harm and uphold the credibility of psychology as a science and a profession (Boskovic, 2025; Cairns, 2023)

Limitation

- This paper has reliance on conceptual review and no empirical data were collected.
- Problem of translation issues when using Arabic and English versions.
- Psychologists criticize Erikson's work as pseudoscience because it oversimplifies personality into colors.
- Erikson's work is a contribution to increase self-awareness and psychological well-being; it is not grounded in clinical psychology.
- Erikson's narrative is not peer-reviewed, and translation issue may have influenced interpretation between the Arabic and English versions.

Conclusion

In conclusion, the communication expert Erikson uses multiple color codes to determine different DISC profiles. He demonstrates a set of tactics to help readers avoid being controlled by psychopaths. However, the use of pseudoscientific typologies like DISC contributes to public misunderstanding of psychopathy and highlights the risks of relying on pseudoscientific models in mental health education. Erikson revisits the four-color personality model from his previous book to educate readers on identifying and defending against psychopathic behavior in everyday situations, as well as in corporate and government settings. Through the portrayal of real-life scenarios, Thomas Erikson emphasized self-assurance as a powerful strategy against all forms of exploitation. Although the DISC model is not part of clinical diagnosis, it can still influence cognition and behavior in ways that traditional assessments may not address. From a forensic and ethical standpoint, such models should be used cautiously to avoid biased interpretations. Nevertheless, the DISC model can complement formal psychological approaches to support self-awareness, interpersonal understanding, and emotional resilience.

Simon Sinek emphasizes, “A culture is strong when people work with each other, for each other. A culture is weak when people work against each other, for themselves.”

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