

Square Peg, Round Hole

By Dan Perryman

One of the common questions we answer in our certification sessions is around the Birkman Map and the placement of the symbols – especially Needs and Stress. *Is it normal that my circle and square overlap? Is that true for everyone? Well, then **why** is that true?!?!?*

Let's approach the topic from two different perspectives and start all the way at the beginning.

First, let's remember that Birkman is a data-driven assessment. Of the 298 items of information collected on the questionnaire, the Birkman Map uses only a certain number of those items that clearly and statistically are useful in a high-level kind of visualization. So, for example, there are over 100 items that inform the whole concept of Usual Behavior. How many of those are used for the Birkman Map symbol placement? What is the algorithm that generates the location? I don't know. *Those secrets are locked up in a vault along with the secret recipes for Coca Cola and the Colonel's chicken.*

The same is true for the Needs symbol. Maybe only 25% of the Needs data is used in the placement of the Circle. They give a good idea of the expectations of the respondent in the context of the general population. Is it exact? No. The Birkman Map is not designed to be specific. It identifies the broad patterns in the differences between people.

So, we know there are 100+ items that could be used for both Usual Behavior and Needs on the Birkman Map. How many questions are you asked on the questionnaire about Stress? The correct answer is zero. *There are **no** items on the questionnaire that ask you about how you freak out or react when under pressure.* For the explanation of this, we have to switch from statistics to scientific method.

Having statistics is good, relating that to human behavior is **so** much better. Roger Birkman's brilliance was in the dogged determination to gather empirical evidence (observed behavior, feedback from others, evaluation data) that he matched to the scoring pattern of each respondent. In gathering this data, Roger found that the observed Stress Behavior of his subjects could be predicted reliably through their answering pattern on Need. Basically, a person typically over-reacts to get their own Needs met or to remove themselves from the situation that is triggering them.

So, the Needs items actually can be used to predict how that person might look when over-reacting to an uncomfortable situation. So, we would call Needs and Stress directly correlated. Therefore visually, the Circle and Square show up overlapping on the Birkman Map.

But why a circle and a square? I would like to think that Roger Birkman had a sense of humor pretty similar to mine, and that the two symbols are not accidental. That Roger could have been using "a square peg, in a round hole" imagery makes me smile.

I see in my mind a toddler sitting with some wooden blocks, a hammer and a board with round holes. Hand the child a round peg and it slides right through. No effort, no pressure, no problems. Having fun! Start handing them square-shaped blocks and things start to change. It's obvious that the square block almost fits. Just a little elbow grease, a few kinetic adjustments, that's all it takes. Attitude starts to slip and finally, **bam!** Splinters fly and the child crawls away frustrated.

The same is true of us as adults. The way we prefer life to happen (our Needs) is pretty much set. When life hands us situations that fit our context, we get along swimmingly. But one day life starts handing us square pegs and existence becomes a struggle. When we don't like the way things are going, we try to force the situation to fit our expectations. It may take some force. There may be some damage. We might shock those watching us. But we make it happen. In an ugly, often costly, destructive way.

So, is it **really** true that our Stress Behavior is **always** aligned with our Needs? No. About 90% of the time, the image of Needs and Stress on the Birkman Map is accurate. But if your respondent reacts strongly to one of the descriptors of Stress for the quadrant their Stress is, don't be surprised. Remember the Birkman Map is a big-picture visualization, not a detailed behavioral analysis. For that detailed analysis we need to look at the Components, where the report is using all the items of the questionnaire and looking at each perception one by one. At this detailed level we can see that about 10% of the time the Needs and Stress score diverge on a Component. Why does it do that? You'll have to come back in another segment of Report Support where we will dive into that!

Want to watch a fun video highlighting the "Square Peg" concept in a commercial for Levi's?
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=YMTGP9fM04A>