Investigating the use of office space as a nonverbal message, this study hypothesized that desk placement is used as a corroborating message rather than a predictive message. Measured educational attitudes on the part of university professors supported this hypothesis. In addition, situational demands, e.g., number of students taught and number of advisees, also seemed to affect desk placement. Regression analysis revealed an interaction among the variables making any simple classification schema hazardous. It was concluded that desk placement is a complex activity resulting from a host of personality orientations and job-related activities.

PROFESSOR PROXEMICS
Personality and Job Demands as Factors of Faculty Office Arrangement

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It is by now well known that the immediate environment has a profound impact on human behavior. In one of the early studies of environmental effects, Maslow and Mintz (1956) demonstrated that judgments of the "energy" and "well-being" of others were significantly higher for photographs seen in a richly appointed rather than in a dingy room. Clearly, other persons are seen in a more favorable light if judgments of them are made in pleasant rather than in unpleasant surroundings. Further, the administration of this particular task was more amably accomplished in aesthetic surroundings. Unaware that they were the focus

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of a further study, research assistants lingered more in the beautiful room, and the feelings they expressed were of comfort, importance, pleasure, and a desire to continue the study. In the ugly room, those reactions turned to fatigue, irritability, discontent, and avoidance (Mintz, 1956). All in all, a well-appointed environment carries with it definite advantages coloring not only our impressions of others but extending to our own feelings of personal well-being.

It is not surprising that one of the lines of research to grow from these general findings should center on a person’s office. One of the first things to be done by virtually any new employee is to organize the assigned office space in some manner. If we accept the hypothesis that each individual arranges the assigned space in some idiosyncratic way, then it follows that every visitor may observe how the occupant, consciously or unconsciously, chooses to organize his or her workplace. It also logically follows that by seeing the office, we see something of the person.

Inevitably, this commonplace hypothesis of office space use was destined to be tested. Equally inevitably, the closest, most accessible offices were those of faculty colleagues. At least for this branch of nonverbal communication there exists, up and down the hallways of academia, an almost limitless reservoir of research sites. Zweigenhaft (1976), capitalizing on this sea of opportunities, hypothesized a relationship between desk placement and student-teacher interaction. Specifically, having the desk against the wall with no physical objects between the interactants—an “open” position—should promote enhanced student evaluations of the teacher. If the desk were between the student and the teacher—a “closed” position—there should be lower student evaluations. Using a 24-item student evaluation instrument, all 74 members of a small college were sampled, with 19 of the 24 items supporting the hypothesis.

Interestingly, not all the evidence concerning faculty desk placement has been so straightforward. Campbell and Her-
ren (1978) had students interview two faculty members in two different offices. One office used the open placement, the other the closed. Student evaluations of both the office per se and the professor were unaffected by desk placement. Further, Campbell (1979) had students rate pictures of offices that varied in furniture arrangement. While the effect of desk position was significant, it was “generally of too small a magnitude to be of importance in office interior design” (Campbell, 1979: 652).

At this point there is a parsimonious view that may explain all these findings. The Zweigenhaft study (1976) is quite clear in one finding—there is a relationship between faculty desk placement and student evaluations—although it is quite obtuse in another area—the causal nature of the relationship. It is extremely unlikely that by pushing a desk against a wall, a teacher will enhance student evaluations. In fact, it is questionable whether the students in Zweigenhaft’s study had ever seen the teacher’s office. More likely is the prospect that both student evaluations and desk placement are the result of a more fundamental orientation on the teacher’s part. The teacher who projects a formal, closed atmosphere in the classroom is likely to carry that same educational milieu into the office in the form of a closed desk placement. By the same logic, the informal, open classroom teacher is likely to have an open desk arrangement. Desk placement, viewed in this light, is simply a reflection of a global attitude of the teacher.

As shown in the hypothesized model (Figure 1), the relationship between office arrangement and student evaluations is indirectly linked to teacher attitudes (Campbell, 1979: note 1). The dotted line from student reactions to office arrangement indicates that students may take office arrangement into account in their assessment of the teacher, but only as a corroboration of earlier evidence. After the student has formed an impression of the teacher, the office arrangement probably serves only to reinforce that impression in the vast majority of cases. The reason for this is clear.
on reflection. Teaching is an exercise in self-disclosure. Much of this self-disclosure has been documented as a nonverbal leakage, information that others perceive about us in spite of the fact that we wish to conceal it (Ekman and Friesen, 1975). For example, the teacher’s sense of ethics, respect for students, and fairness in awarding grades are not typically matters discussed in the course syllabus. Yet these matters are obvious to students in a course. It would not be unrealistic to say that teachers reveal as much about themselves as they do about the topic of their course. These leaked revelations, spread over a course of study, are far more telling than a single detail—such as office arrangement—could be.

Operating from the perspective of the model, the Campbell and Herren (1978) and the later Campbell (1979) study now fit into a coherent pattern. Campbell and Herren (1978)
had students interview two professors. While the study fails to specify the degree of familiarity, there is the implication that the students did not know either professor. As predicted in the model (Figure 1), the students had very little reaction to meeting a total stranger for the first time. In a later study, Campbell (1979) did not ask students to interact with anyone nor did they actually see an office. Here, the students saw only slides of an office. In neither study was there much of a reaction by students to the desk arrangement per se. In fact, the findings of both studies are consistent with the hypothesis that student reactions and desk placement in the faculty office are both caused by an antecedent variable: the educational attitudes of the teacher. Directly, then, hypothesis 1 is that the more traditional the educational attitudes of the teacher, the more closed the desk arrangement. It also follows that the more liberal the educational attitudes of the teacher, the more open the desk arrangement.¹

In addition, the model (Figure 1) also suggests some job demand characteristics that would modify office arrangement. Specifically, as the number of students in a teacher’s classes increases, we might suspect a withdrawal to occur. Very few teachers object to spending time with students on an individual basis. However, when the number of students becomes overwhelming, the situation is radically different. An extremely large number of students would totally consume the teacher, leaving no time for class preparation, writing, or social interactions with other faculty colleagues. The subsequent hypothesis is thus: the larger the number of students taught, the more closed the desk arrangement.

Finally, we might speculate that advising responsibilities would alter the desk arrangement of the teacher in a rather different way. As the number of advisees increases, routine advising activities must be repeated again and again. Almost of necessity, for example, seating must be side-by-side to review records or examine correspondence, both typical advising activities. As a matter of convenience, the closed
A desk arrangement would not be suitable for effectively advising a large number of students. Hence, hypothesis four is: the larger the number of advisees, the more open the desk arrangement.

In sum, this study seeks to examine proxemic behavior as displayed in the faculty office by examining the effects of teacher attitudes on desk placement. In addition, two variables of job demand—number of students taught and advising responsibilities—will also be surveyed to ascertain their relationship to desk placement.

**METHOD**

The sample for this study was randomly selected from among the faculty at a large southeastern University. Using a current university telephone book and a list of random numbers, 89 faculty members were contacted for interviews. Five persons refused to be interviewed, and repeated attempts to contact four others were unsuccessful. These nine persons were replaced by another random draw.

*Measures.* The measure of educational attitudes chosen for use in this study is a subset of items from Kerlinger's Education Scale VII (Kerlinger, 1967). The original scale was developed using a sample of more than 1300 subjects (Kerlinger, 1967); the refinement and validation (Bledsoe, 1976) had almost 1500. Both studies identified two factors: progressivism and traditionalism. The scale used in this study was abstracted from the latter investigation (Bledsoe, 1976).

Both the number of advisees and the number of students taught were assessed in an interview with the professor. These issues were masked by also asking for a variety of other issues, e.g., academic rank, number of years as a full-time faculty member, how long they had been on the faculty, and so forth.
Procedure. Student interviewers (N = 23) from a nonverbal communication course contacted each of the randomly selected teachers to arrange an interview. As anticipated, the professors almost uniformly suggested their office as the location and their office hours as the time for the interview. Upon arriving, the student hesitated until the faculty member indicated an appropriate place to sit. The stated purpose of the interview was to "fulfill a requirement for a communication course." After a brief interview, the teacher was asked to complete the education scale. While the teacher was filling out the scale, the interviewer noted the position of the desk and of the chairs occupied by the interactants.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The first hypothesis predicted that more traditional educational orientations would predispose one to utilize a more closed desk arrangement. In fact, we found a substantial proportion of offices with an "intermediate" desk arrangement: the student chair sitting beside the desk. Hence, all analyses will use these three groups: open (N = 27), intermediate (N = 36), and closed (N = 24). The data, as shown in Table 1, strongly support the first hypothesis (F = 3.74; df = 2/84; p < .028). More traditional orientations do appear to affect office arrangement in the predicted manner. The second hypothesis, that more liberal educational orientations will lead to a more open desk arrangement, received no support (F = .13; df = 2/84; p < .88).

Admittedly, the results seem contradictory at first blush. However, it must be kept in mind that the dimensions of traditionalism and liberalism were orthogonal in both the earlier research (Kerlinger, 1967; Bledsoe, 1976) and again in this study. As an indication of the orientations' independence, the correlation between the two factors is a mere -.12. In short, the opposite of a traditional educator is
apparently not a liberal educator. It is quite possible for an individual to be a traditional and a liberal at the same time. Thus, the real reason we failed to find any differences on the liberal scale may well be that college faculty are, as a group, rather liberal people. If such liberality is a general orientation, then there would simply be no variance to measure. Obviously, then, the hypothesis of liberality would be better tested using a variety of educational levels rather than only one.

Turning now to the situational variables, the third hypothesis predicted a retreat to a closed desk arrangement in the face of an increasing number of students. This idea apparently has some element of truth to it ($F = 2.51; df = 2/84; p < .088$), but not enough for full support. The fourth hypothesis asserted that an increasing number of advisees would force a more open desk arrangement of necessity. This hypothesis is supported by the data ($F = 2.23; df = 2/83; p < .045$). These last two hypotheses, in particular the confirmation of the advising hypothesis, support the idea that office arrangement is occasionally dictated by circumstances beyond our control.

Additionally, it would be instructive not only to know that a variable is associated with desk arrangement but also to
know the strength of the association. Regression will not only answer this question but may also investigate any interactions between the independent variables by simply entering the sum of their cross products into the equation (Kerlinger and Pedhazur, 1973). The variables entered into a stepwise regression were: (A) traditionalism, (B) the number of students advised, and (C) the total number of students in the teachers' classes. In addition, all three first-order interaction terms were entered. The resultant equation is:

\[ R (.37) = 1.23 + AB (.22) + A (.21) + C (-.17) \]

The regression indicates that the interaction between traditionalism and the number of students advised accounts for .074% of the variance in desk placement. Traditionalism itself accounts for an additional .035% of the variance, with the number of students in classes accounting for a final .028%. The remaining three variables each account for less than .025% and were dropped from further consideration. Hence, the three variables of the equation explain .137% of the total variance of desk placement.

To further explore the intricacies of the equation, the upper and lower third of the distributions of number of advisees and traditionalism were plotted against the open and closed desk arrangements. The two plots shown in Figure 2 are revealing.

The plots (Figure 2) indicate that when a high traditional teacher has no advisees, the desk arrangement is usually closed. The low traditional teacher with no advisees overwhelmingly chooses an open desk arrangement. However, as the number of advisees increases, the high traditionalist becomes indistinguishable from the low traditionalist. In short, without some prior knowledge of both the number of advisees and the total number of students taught, any inferences made about the educational orientations of the faculty member based solely on office arrangement would be perilous. However, this caveat is not to be taken as a sign
of defeat. Simply because the world is complex does not mean that proxemics cannot and does not tell us things about social reality. But proxemic behavior, like all other human behavior, must be put into a total context to be meaningful.

In sum, the importance of this little study is to illustrate that whatever impression or message we convey to the world by way of office arrangement is not a matter of whim. While there are powerful situational constraints, individuals who see the world in different ways tend to use their territory in different ways as well.

NOTES

1. The original typology is made explicit in the writings of Dewey (1902). He hypothesized the existence of a "traditional" and a "progressive" type of educator. The ensuing years have seen many changes in terminology if not orientation. Hence, in this article we will frequently use the traditional orientation as being
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synonymous with conservative and the progressive orientation as being synonymous with liberal.

2. An extended report of the factor analysis is available upon request.

REFERENCES


