WCPCG-2010

Accessibility versus privacy: Turkish students' evaluation criteria for the location of university counselling offices

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Abstract

This paper addresses the role of the physical environment in facilitating or inhibiting the use of counselling services, by focusing on issues surrounding the choice of location. A questionnaire and interviews were used to survey university students' views on the counselling office location on campus. Results revealed two conflicting criteria for the choice of location: *accessibility* and *privacy*. The third criterion that emerged was *comfort*. Alternative locations were evaluated accordingly, while ways to find a location that meets students' privacy requirement without compromising accessibility are discussed. The importance of determining the location after considering students' needs was emphasized.

1. Introduction

In the past 40 years or so, research in the area of environmental psychology has dealt with a variety of settings for the purpose of improving our everyday physical environment (Bechtel & Churchman, 2002; Gifford, 2007). For example, hospital research has demonstrated that the physical environment of hospitals (e.g., views of nature from the window) can influence the result of medical treatment and the recovery time (Ulrich, 1984, 1991). Evidence from the research has been used to enhance healing processes through better hospital designs. The physical setting of counselling and psychotherapy can also influence therapeutic processes. However, as Anthony and Watkins (2002) point out, the psychotherapists' offices have rarely been studied. In the counselling literature, McLeod and Machin (1998) argue that counselling theories have ignored the significance of the physical context of counselling. Pressly and Heesacker's (2001) review paper reveals that, despite general recommendations available from the environmental psychology literature, theories and research directly addressing the issue of the physical environment of counselling are very limited. Existing studies are mainly concerned with the interior of counselling rooms such as lighting, décor and furniture arrangements (e.g., Miwa & Hanyu, 2002, 2006). Miwa and Hanyu's (2002) research in Japan, for example, investigated furniture arrangements in counselling rooms. They interviewed counsellors

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including those who worked at university counselling services. Miwa and Hanyu found that the counsellors paid attention to the atmosphere, sound and plants in their rooms. However, their study also reveals the fact that the location of counselling offices is usually determined by the management of parental organizations (e.g., university), and that it is difficult for counsellors to make any change to the physical conditions of their offices.

It has been suggested that *location* is one of the important factors for encouraging the use of counselling services. Setiawan (2006) explored factors that facilitate or inhibit students' use of the university counselling service. The top encouraging factor was informing the existence of the service, including its location. "The location of the service easy to be found" (p.413) was ranked as the 11th encouraging factor. Research on psychotherapists' offices also points to the significance of location. Based on informal interviews with psychotherapists, Anthony and Watkins (2002) came up with a list of design issues important for psychotherapists' offices. Apart from the issues related to the office interior such as furniture, lighting, plants and artwork, there also were those related to the placing of the office: location, image, visibility, privacy, and view. With respect to *location*, they suggest that convenience for clients is important. They also argue that the building where the office is located can project a certain image. Another interview study with 10 counselling or clinical psychologists (Watkins & Anthony, 2007) found that *location* was used by psychotherapists as one of the environmental responses to therapeutic needs.

Recommendations on the location of counselling offices are found in the school counselling literature. For example, Schmidt (2007) maintains that the location of the counselling service is as important as the interior design and recommends a visible, central location that is equally accessible to everyone. He points out that the counselling office has traditionally been located near the administration suite and this helps the close communication between school counsellors and administrators. However, according to him, this may also harm the confidential and impartial image of the counselling service by creating an association between counsellors and the school administration on students' minds. In the context of university counselling services, Margolis (1976) proposes the use of three criteria for the choice of location: accessibility, privacy and confidentiality. According to these criteria, he rules out such locations as the administration building and the student union. He suggests that a small house that is centrally located on campus would be the best location. He recommends the student health service building if the separate facility is not available. In order to find out the validity of recommendations in the literature, research is needed.

Despite the suggestion that it is an important factor for encouraging or discouraging the use of the service, the location of the counselling services on university campus is usually determined without research. As a consequence, the needs and expectations of students are not taken into consideration. The notion of *social design* (Gifford, 2007; Sommer, 1983) in environmental psychology aims at creating a more fitting, humanistic environment by taking into account not only the owner's or the administrators' but also *users'* perspectives. According to the principle of social design, it is crucial to consult students as well as counsellors in order to effectively locate and design counselling offices at university. Therefore, the present study is designed to reveal students' perspectives. It aims firstly to identify the criteria students use to evaluate the location of counselling offices, and secondly to explore the location that can best serve the needs of students.

2. Method

In total, 120 Turkish university students, whose age ranged from 18 to 29 years ($M = 21.7$), took part in the study. The study consists of two parts. A questionnaire about the physical environment of university counselling service was administered to 109 students (58 males, 51 females). The questionnaire contained closed- and open-ended questions regarding the location of counselling offices on campus:

- "Is the location of the counselling offices important?"
- "Why is it important/not important?"
- "Where should the counselling offices be located?"
- "Would you prefer a separate 'counselling centre' building where more than one counsellor can be found?"
- "Why yes/no?"

In addition, 11 students (3 males, 8 females) were recruited from the users of the university counselling service and interviewed in depth by their counsellor regarding their ideal counselling room. Verbal descriptions given in response to the open-ended questions in the questionnaire and in the interviews were analyzed by means of content analysis.

3. Results

Among the questionnaire respondents, 68.5 % stated that the location of the counselling offices is important. They explained why it is important and offered descriptions of ideal locations. Although 26.9% of the respondents did not think the location is particularly important, the majority of them still commented on the location and suggested the ideal location. The aim of content analysis was to elicit an evaluation criterion for location that is underlying each student's overall description, rather than focusing on the responses to each question. Initially, with careful interpretation of verbal descriptions, a set of criteria were hypothesized by the researcher. Subsequently, the researcher and an independent rater judged the criterion thought to represent each participant's description. Consequent inter-rater reliability was 0.81. Any disagreements between the two raters were further discussed and appropriate solutions were found under mutual agreement. As a result, some descriptions were found simultaneously reflecting more than one criterion. Table 1 shows three criteria that emerged from the content analysis of the students' descriptions.

Table 1. Evaluation criteria for the location of counselling offices

Evaluation Criterion	No. of questionnaire respondents using the criterion ($n = 109$)	No. of interviewees using the criterion ($n = 11$)	Descriptions	Suggested locations
Accessibility	57.8%	45.5%	Easy to access Central Visible Busy, Frequented Legible	Senate house Social building Ground floor, Near entrance Counselling centre Own academic building
Privacy	26.6%	81.8%	Private, Confidential Less visible Not central Not crowded, Not busy Hidden, remote	Top floor End of corridor Far from classrooms Different academic buildings
Comfort	20.2%	72.7%	Comfortable Serene, Calm View of nature, Sunlight, Fresh air Spacious Not like hospital, Informal	Near green areas Office floors

Accessibility is concerned with the ease with which one can reach the location. Visibility, closeness, and centrality were emphasized by the participants in relation to this criterion. Suggested accordingly were such locations as the senate house and the social building where canteens and restaurants were found, and also the academic building where the student's own department was found.

Privacy is associated with the fear of being seen and identified by fellow students when visiting the counselling service. Privacy requires less visible, less busy, remote and difficult to find location. The students who emphasized privacy preferred counselling offices to be scattered in different academic buildings and to be located on the top floors of the building where no classrooms were found.

Comfort is concerned with the physical environment of a comfortable counselling room. The participants' descriptions were associated with both the interior and the exterior. Commonly used adjectives are: "serene," "calm," "spacious," "not suffocating," "not depressing" and "not like a hospital." A room with a view of nature and sunlight was described as ideal. The feeling of discomfort was expressed with regard to a hospital-like setting.

As indicated in Table 1, for the questionnaire respondents, *accessibility* was the most frequently elicited criterion followed by *privacy*. The same criteria were elicited from the interview with 11 students who have been on counselling. For them, *privacy* was the biggest concern. The examples of their statements are as follows:

If the room is in a very visible place, for example, the ground floor of the social building or the senate house, where human circulation is always intense, people would find it difficult to go there. When it comes to choosing a location, I mean, maybe somewhere less crowded would be better. I think a place next to a canteen would be a big problem. (Female, age 29)

> I myself don't hesitate to say that I go to a psychologist, nor am I afraid to be seen going in and out of the psychologist's office. So, my friends know that I come here. But for our friends who do or may hesitate, less busy places would be more appropriate, for the sake of confidentiality. (Male, age 19)

> In my opinion, firstly, very crowded places, places where many academicians and students would go, should be avoided, because, you know the way people think in Turkey, the way psychologists are viewed here. So, it should be somewhere that wouldn't make people uneasy. Somewhere not too noisy and not too many academicians and students are found. (Male, age 29)

The expression, "the way people think in Turkey, the way psychologists are viewed here" (Male, age 29), above implies the fact that psychologists are often called *deli doktoru* in Turkish slang, meaning "the doctor for the crazy." Some of the students who use the counselling service fear being labelled as "the crazy." The interview accounts indicate that the privacy concern is deeply rooted in this fear of stigmatization. For this reason, nine out of 11 interviewees rejected the idea of counselling centre, either as a separate building or as a part of the student health service building. Moreover, they tended to associate the counselling centre with hospitals. Thus, as an alternative, they suggested that counselling offices should be located in different academic buildings and that students should be able to go to the one they like:

> Assuming that people who come and go would not like to bump into each other, not me, but at least for some, I mean those who think they are not crazy but who actually are. Each faculty building should have a separate counselling office…People should be able to go to the one they like. I think people might not like to go to their own faculty building because their friends might see them. (Female, age 27)

> The counselling centre in a separate building can have an atmosphere of a psychiatric hospital. No way. Being that noticeable, I think it's not appropriate in terms of confidentiality. (Male, age 19)

> (Counselling offices) should be scattered on campus. Otherwise, they will be too much like a hospital, really. (Female, age 25)

> I wouldn't like any other doctors know what sort of help I needed. This is a campus with 17,000 people and I am aware of the fact that rumours spread very quickly. I wouldn't like the counselling centre to be located in the student health service building. (Female, age 29)

As regards the counselling centre, 51.4 % of the questionnaire respondents liked the idea, saying that it would offer a greater choice of counsellors and that it would be accessible to more students. However, 28.4 % of the respondents resisted the idea, of which 29.0 % stated that they did not like the idea because the separate facility would be "like a hospital" and "reminding them of illness."

4. Discussion

Accessibility and *privacy* are conflicting with each other by nature; a place of high visibility is required for accessibility while privacy points to a location where students can go without being noticed. However, in fact, 14.1% of the participants emphasized the importance of both accessibility and privacy simultaneously. As one participant points out: "There are pluses and minuses of easy or difficult to find locations" (Male, age 22). As in any service sector, accessibility to the counselling service is of primary importance. However, in the Turkish society, where stigma related to counselling and psychotherapy still exists, privacy is also crucial for many. As a result, while a central and visible location such as the senate house was suggested by those who valued accessibility, a less visible location was preferred by those who were more concerned with privacy. To solve this conflict, accessibility should be implemented in another way. As Setiawan (2006) found, the most important encouraging factor for the use of counselling services was informational accessibility. Therefore, by providing information about the location of the service through effective advertising, it is possible to choose a less visible location that meets students' privacy requirement without compromising their accessibility. In this way, the building of counselling centre can be located in a less central area of campus. The entrance and the reception area can be designed so as to minimize unnecessary encounters.

The third criterion, *comfort*, points to the psychological impact of the physical surroundings. An example of comfortable location was somewhere close to nature. This is in accordance with the literature that suggests the therapeutic effect of the natural environment (e.g., Ulrich, 1984). This criterion also reveals the symbolic meanings students infer from the location of counselling offices. Despite the recommendation by Margolis (1976), a separate counselling centre and the student health service were negatively judged by some students partly due to the "hospital-like" image of these facilities. Since the students are unwilling to view their problems as medically related

(i.e., "serious" and "pathological") and are afraid of being stereotyped as a "sick" person, any association with medical facilities is likely to cause discomfort.

The comfortable counselling environment the participants requested was to do with the room interior as well as the location and physical surroundings of the room. Future research should also look into aspects of interior design and decoration in order to find out what properties of the room contribute to the feeling of comfort.

5. Conclusion

The location of counselling offices should be determined by taking into account the criteria elicited from the students: *accessibility*, *privacy* and *comfort*. In the context of Turkish universities, where the fear of stigmatization exists among the users of counselling services, privacy is particularly important. Although finding a location that satisfies both accessibility and privacy criteria is challenging, physical accessibility can be compensated by informational accessibility. Thus, to ensure privacy, the administration building or the social building in the central area of campus should be excluded from the choice. An independent counselling centre is preferable for its functional advantages. However, it should be located in a less central area of campus, with an entrance and a reception room that are private and discrete. It should also avoid making a hospital-like impression with its appearance and structure. If a location within the health service building is used, the counselling service should be clearly separated from the medical department in order to prevent associations with illness. Alternatively, each academic building can have its own counselling office. In this case, students should be allowed to go to any office, either the one in their own building or the ones in other buildings. In addition, counselling offices should ideally face green areas, so that the view from the window can have a healing effect.

Acknowledgement

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