

Information Functions of an International Meeting

Attendants at the 18th International Congress of Psychology in Moscow evaluate its effectiveness.

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Reports submitted by psychologists who received travel grants from the American Psychological Association to attend the 18th International Congress of Psychology in Moscow, 4–11 August 1966, provided information on the functions and effectiveness of this meeting in the dissemination of scientific information. Approximately 100 recipients of travel grants were asked to comment briefly on their participation in the program and whatever value to themselves and the scientific community resulted from their attendance. By early October, 94 had submitted reports ranging in length from a paragraph or two to several pages and dealing with the following topics: (i) scheduled events at the congress and participation in other meetings before, after, or concomitant with it; (ii) informal interaction; (iii) types of information obtained; (iv) impact and utilization of any information received; and (v) general impressions and suggestions for the improvement of international gatherings. Since the respondents were not specifically questioned on all these topics, some volunteering far more information than others, the percentages employed for convenience in summarizing these data can serve only as rough indications of the occurrence of particular activities and reactions among a small group of participants, possibly not representative of the total group attending the meeting (1).

Scheduled Events and Supplementary Meetings

Nearly all respondents mentioned the session in which they made a presentation and many described such sessions in detail. About a fourth of them con-

sidered the symposium in which they participated a good one and said that it made some contribution to science; a tenth described their sessions as poor. Fourteen percent felt that the scope and content of the program were generally of high quality—some even described them as excellent; however, a slightly greater number (17 percent) commented unfavorably on the value and organization of scheduled events. About a third of the 94 respondents indicated at least one session, or specific presentations in a number of sessions, from which they derived useful information.

The fact that volumes containing the papers and symposium presentations were available at the time of registration for the congress led some respondents to expect that the sessions themselves would be given over to discussion rather than to the reading of papers. In the one reported instance when this procedure was attempted by a session chairman it was not successful. Most of the audience had not read the papers, there were language difficulties, and the authors read their papers anyway.

The main criticisms of scheduled events were insufficient time for discussion (30 percent) and poor (mechanically or in content) translations (28 percent). Other fairly frequent criticisms pertained to the transportation problems and red tape of daily living in Moscow which hampered attendance of sessions; the overcrowded program—too many papers per session and too many concomitant sessions; the lack of organization and homogeneity in most symposium sessions; the large crowds in attendance at sessions; and the absence of “new” information in presentations. On the other hand, 13 percent of the respondents highly com-

mended the organizers of the congress on the printed materials (volumes containing copies and abstracts of presentations) and described these as one of the chief “fruits of attendance.”

A few respondents were concerned over the domination of the program by Russian and United States participants and felt that a more balanced representation among countries should be a goal in planning future programs. One respondent who was disturbed by the heavy Russian representation made the following tabulation: 35 percent of the main speakers at symposia, 46 percent of the speakers at thematic paper sessions, 50 percent of the discussants, 51 percent of the organizers of sessions, and 26 percent of the session chairmen were Russian. The program also focused primarily upon topics in the major areas of emphasis in Russian psychology—classical experimental and physiological psychology. Roughly two-thirds of the scheduled symposia was devoted to these subject matter areas. Only one session was allotted to abnormal psychology, and only three to social psychology.

Fifteen percent of the respondents attended other meetings prior to, during, or after the congress. Seven of these meetings were in Western Europe, three in Eastern European countries, and eight in Russia (some attended more than one such meeting). Most of these supplementary meetings were small gatherings of persons engaged in related research and they were considered very worthwhile from the standpoint of exchanging scientific information; some found them of even greater value for this purpose than the congress.

Informal Interaction

Specific instances of valuable interaction with colleagues attending the congress were reported by 83 percent of the respondents. Such interaction apparently constituted one of the main objectives and chief benefits of attendance; in fact, a fourth of the respondents described informal discussion as the greatest or only value of attendance. Most often the interaction involved Soviet scientists (50 respondents described specific conversations with Russians); next most frequently men-

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tioned were scientists in Eastern European countries—Poland, Czechoslovakia, Romania, and Yugoslavia. Six mentioned discussions with Asian participants, and eight, with fellow Americans. Even when valuable information was obtained from United States colleagues who were seldom met, or known previously only through their published work, such interaction was typically regarded as outside the main function of an international meeting.

A second value resulting from attendance at the congress and emphasized by 40 percent of the respondents was the opportunity to visit educational and research facilities, most of which were located in Moscow or Leningrad. Such visits provided an opportunity to observe the apparatus and procedures used, to discuss the types of problems under investigation, and to discuss methodology with persons directly engaged in basic laboratory or applied work. Nearly all respondents who described such visits stated that they were productive of much worthwhile information and constituted a major benefit of congress attendance.

Possibly because establishing informal channels of communication was a main objective of attendance, comments about the difficulty of meeting other participants informally were not infrequent among this group of respondents. A third of them complained of the lack of time for discussion following symposium presentations, since such in-session discussion fostered post-session continuation of interaction, and about half as many expressed the need for regularly scheduled informal events in which participants could meet and discuss relevant work and mutual research interests. Ten percent described the technical difficulty of communication in Moscow, for example, the lack of a directory of those attending or the impossibility of telephoning those staying at Moscow State University (in which at least half the non-Soviet attendants were housed). About an equal number suggested that smaller annual meetings of special interest groups in addition to or in place of future large congresses might be more effective in stimulating interaction. One of the respondents, with two colleagues, took the initiative in organizing a small supplementary special interest session at this congress when it became apparent that the discussion at the formal sessions in a particular subject matter area was not affording sufficient in-

formation exchange. Those few respondents who were included in this improvised round table described it most favorably.

Not surprisingly, those respondents who were already in correspondence with Russian scientists, who were collaborating with them on research, who had previously visited Russia, or who were fluent in the Russian language generally had less difficulty in achieving informal interaction and deriving significant value from it than did less well acquainted and less well prepared participants. Reports of the former included such attentions as being asked to lecture at Russian research institutes, being interviewed by representatives of Russian mass communication media, or being invited to informal gatherings in Russian homes.

Among the chief values of this group of reports was the clue they afforded to the type of information received either from informal interaction and visits to research facilities or from scheduled events. About four-fifths (79 percent) of the respondents indicated increased knowledge of the types of research underway, of research emphases and trends, or of specific closely related research efforts in other parts of the world, especially in Russia and Eastern Europe. A third of the respondents received information pertaining to methodology and technique and almost as many (29 percent) obtained information on theory, hypotheses, or research ideas. One-fifth indicated a gain in perspective, that is to say, a broadening of outlook and the development of a better context within which to evaluate their own efforts. Small percentages also mentioned obtaining information on apparatus, receiving specific data, clarifying certain terms and definitions, and discovering possible new applications of their findings. These data, when compared to those on United States psychological meetings at the national, regional, and state levels (2) show that the international gathering, not unexpectedly, served a somewhat different information function. Information on methodology and technique was the type most emphasized at all three levels of United States psychological conventions; next in frequency were theoretical information and specific data. At the international meeting, the category pertaining to methodology fell into second place, with a substantially higher percentage indicating increased aware-

ness of the nature of research activity outside the United States as the most useful information obtained. A new category of information emerged—an increase in perspective—indicated by a fifth of the congress respondents and not reported at the national meetings. Clearly, for the congress attendants a knowledge of research effort in various countries as well as methodological and theoretical information and exposure to new viewpoints, objectives, and values were among the information gains from attendance at an international gathering.

Impact and Utilization of Information

A question of greater consequence than that of the nature of the information gained through attendance is whether the scientists receiving such information were influenced in any way by it. Nearly a fourth (23 percent) of the 94 respondents mentioned specific plans to incorporate some of the information gained at the congress into their current or future work—a research effort, the teaching of a course, or a manuscript in preparation. Two respondents were journal editors who mentioned that, as a result of their congress participation, they would receive contributions from foreign authors and give better coverage to foreign work. The percentage reporting the utilization of information is roughly equivalent to that for psychologists who presented papers at the 1964 annual convention of the American Psychological Association and were questioned about any modifications of their current or planned work which resulted from the interaction engendered by the making of a presentation (3). While the circumstances obviously are not strictly comparable, the similarities in the percentages reporting some effect of information obtained upon subsequent work are of some interest.

Twenty-one percent of the respondents described a particular incident in which they had given or received specific informational materials from a scientist with whom they talked or whom they visited, such as specific data, the description of a gaming technique, or a film left with a Russian psychologist. Nearly a third indicated definite plans for continuing, by the exchange of reprints, research reports, or data, some interaction with foreign psychologists whom they had met or

with whom they had renewed their acquaintance at the congress. Additionally, 7 percent planned collaborative research efforts with Russian, East European, or West European investigators. These findings as well as those related to the types of information received suggest that the informal interaction and establishment of new channels of communication mentioned so often by respondents as major goals of and values stemming from attendance are not entirely empty efforts to justify the expenditure which made such attendance possible.

Impressions and Suggestions

Among the psychologists who reported on the congress, 15 percent expressed disappointment and 11 percent stated that they had derived little or no value from attendance. On the other hand, a fifth of them deemed the meeting to be of exceedingly high value. Informal interaction and visits to research facilities were more emphasized in assessing the value of the congress than were scheduled events, though nearly a third did obtain some worthwhile information from the latter. The chief value for one respondent was the exhibit of foreign books; he also noted the absence of United States book and apparatus exhibits and the disappointment expressed by foreign scientists at this lack.

Many of the reports submitted contained detailed descriptions of respondents' impressions and experiences. Eleven psychologists, for example, commented particularly on the increase in international understanding and the basis for friendship and communication furthered, in their opinion, by this meeting. Their remarks stressed the role of international meetings in demonstrating the "supranational character of science" and the importance of getting behind slogans and catch phrases and getting to know people. Ten others were especially impressed

with the warm reception accorded them by Russian scientists and the interest in or previous knowledge of their work evidenced by these scientists. Five discussed in detail the Soviet psychologists' different style and manner of reporting findings, a type of reporting which dealt more with theory and conclusions than with actual procedures and data and which did not reflect clearly the work occurring in some areas of research effort. One respondent was particularly impressed by work he viewed, the quality of which had been obscured by "mediocre reporting." Possibly, the failure of written and oral reports to adequately depict research accounted in part for the value respondents attached to their personal visits to laboratories.

A number of psychologists offered specific suggestions for improving future congresses, among which were scheduling more informal events, restricting size of attendance and "tourism," developing a more balanced program with regard to subject matter and national representation, and using large, easily read name tags that included one's field of interest.

Conclusion

In spite of a number of difficulties and shortcomings, this international meeting was relatively effective for this group of respondents. They benefitted from the informal interaction of participants, from information that pertained to current and planned work, and from the prospects of continued exchange with colleagues in other countries. That the meeting could have been even more valuable was also the consensus. Additional data on another such meeting reinforce these findings and suggest that the results obtained are probably not peculiar to one social science or to this specific meeting. Reports of a small group of sociologists, who received grants from the National Institute of Mental Health

to attend the Sixth World Congress of Sociology at Evian in September 1966, showed marked concurrence with those of the psychologists who attended the Moscow congress. For both groups there was the same preponderance of United States and Russian presentations on the program, informal interaction was more productive of useful information than were formally scheduled events, and the main type of information obtained was a broader knowledge of research activity and effort in various countries. The sociologists emphasized even more than did the psychologists the importance of acquiring new points of view and perspectives. More than half the sociologists planned to use information obtained in their current or future work, and a fourth planned international collaborative research efforts; in both these respects they surpassed the percentages found in the data on the psychologists. Finally, all the criticisms voiced by Moscow respondents appeared also among the Evian group, though not in sufficient numbers to constitute a trend. These data suggest that international meetings can and do fill certain information needs in spite of organizational difficulties and the problems attendant upon any large gathering in an environment unfamiliar to most of those who participate.

References and Notes

1. Data resulting from a systematic series of studies on the authors of presentations and on representative samples of attendants at the XVIIIth International Congress of Psychology (and of the Sixth World Congress of Sociology as well) are being processed at Johns Hopkins University Center for Research in Scientific Communication. Thus far, these data closely resemble and reinforce those contained in the reports on which this article is based and suggest that the latter are not in fact atypical.
2. B. E. Compton, *Amer. Psychologist* **21**, 176 (1966).
3. *Reports of the American Psychological Association's Project on Scientific Information Exchange in Psychology* (American Psychological Association, Washington, D.C., 1965), vol. 2, p. 157.
4. The authors acknowledge the assistance of Harley O. Preston of the American Psychological Association and Alice Myers of the American Sociological Association, who permitted access to the data upon which this article is based.