physical health, the communicative significance of psychosomatic symptoms may be ignored, and so forth.

Furthermore, the neurotic will misinterpret the outside world, including the person he is communicating with, through the subjective screen of his neurotic needs or other attitudes. Thus, the emotional interplay, the communication, will be distorted on the basis of this false view, rather than within a more objective framework. However, this avoidance of awareness does not mean that the particular level of communication is less evident or important. The somatic symptom, the dream, the gesture may be more striking in conveying a message than the verbal statement. But they will be on a deeper, more devious, more symbolic level of self-expression.

REFERENCES


COMMUNICATION AT OUR SCIENTIFIC CONFERENCES

JOOST A. M. MEERLOO

When I was invited to take part in a round-table discussion on distorted communication with the neurotic, I asked to be the last speaker because I felt it especially important to stress the countertransference part of the doctor-patient communication. The last speaker on a panel provokes the greatest amount of negative transference feelings in his listeners. In this case, you should now be in an appropriate mood to absorb my ponderings about our own limited means of communication.

It has become a more and more valid viewpoint in psychoanalysis to ask ourselves as therapists not merely, "Where did the patient resist?" but also, "Where—consciously or unconsciously—did we ourselves fail?"

Our meetings and mutual discussions often represent unwitting examples of how we fail to communicate and obtain rapport with our colleagues and, consequently, might also fail in similar ways with our patients. Our verbal prejudices must already have an impact on our therapeutic rapport with patients.

I have often wondered what intangible quality it is that makes some professional meetings so inspiring, sparkling, and fascinating, while others find us less interested, uninterested, and occasionally even bored. Even in science a certain degree of repetitiousness and redundancy is need-

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Communication, by its very essence, is a chance play, comparable almost to trying to knock down a row of pins in a bowling game. The more verbal throws we make toward a subject, the greater our chance of expressing its core. In trying to achieve our goal, we can rely on theoretical and intuitive forms of understanding and also on verbal or nonverbal tools. Communication, however, is a mutual play activity in which the invisible ball is tossed back and forth from speaker to listener and from listener to speaker. Sender and receiver influence each other mutually.

Clear, precise language facilitates communication, but it is no substitute for the total process. Unwittingly, therapists go even further in their communicative expectations because they come together with the common assumption that man can be helped and cured by means of communication and verbal interaction. They assume that human contact goes beyond anxiety and healing words beyond guilt. That is why it is so difficult to speak about specific distorted patterns of contact with patients. The process of interaction changes by the minute. Silence can sometimes be the epitome of communication, and words merely a mask to cover emptiness.

II

I have often asked myself what sort of meeting and discussion I would like best to attend. We sometimes describe a panel discussion as a symposium, but my first choice would be a symposium in the ancient Greek sense: a festive dining and drinking together after the tasks of the day are done. There is the play of words and the interaction of listening, and from time to time I can almost hear Socrates or Plato interjecting fragments of their wisdom. I was once a guest at such a symposium in contemporary Greece. We sat outdoors in the shadow of the Acropolis on one of those purple summer nights full of nostalgic fragrances. There was a minimum of lecturing; mutual communication was at a maximum.

What have we done with our lecture programs and our systems of scientific intercommunication? When I use the word we I mean mea culpa. Do we really try to communicate? Are we listening? Or are we allowing ourselves to be passively stuffed with too many concepts? Our competence to select the words and the speakers as being important has greatly diminished because of the overabundance of verbal feeding. I have been at meetings where the speakers, in true oral dominance, shoved their ideas down our throats with great emphasis on clever verbalization. I have been at oversized panels where the competition to be heard was far greater than the readiness to listen. I have also been at meetings where only the wise fathers or the inbred adepts of a particular scientific school were allowed to speak. That is why I am doubly grateful on this occasion that I, a nonmember and outsider, have been invited to try to communicate with you as an audience.

Indeed, many of our scientific meetings have become a strange ritual where the need to absorb wisdom loses out to the need to be seen and heard and, strangely enough, actually to be bored. Indeed, a ritualistic need to be bored plays an important role in our repeated trips to the scientific lecture room. Boredom sends us straight back to archaic feelings of deprivation. I have discovered this same yearning for ritualistic boredom