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Steimel, Sarah, "Mapping a History of Applied Communication Research: Themes and Concepts in the Journal of Applied Communication Research" (2014). *Papers in Communication Studies*. 61.

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This is a pre-publication draft. See full article at:

Steimel, S. (2014). Mapping a history of applied communication research: Themes and concepts in the Journal of Applied Communication Research. *Review of Communication*, 1-17. doi: 10.1080/15358593.2014.942353

Mapping a History of Applied Communication Research: Themes and Concepts in the *Journal of Applied Communication Research*

Abstract: In recognition of the National Communication Association's 100th Anniversary, this article maps the content published in the *Journal of Applied Communication Research (JACR)* over the last four decades to develop a picture of what applied communication research has emerged and how that research has changed through the journal's history. This study mapped 678 research articles over the four decades of *JACR*'s existence. Results reveal a strong overall orientation towards applied research in nine interest group divisions: *organizational, health, public, group, family, interpersonal, training, women, and media*. Analysis of the four individual decades that span *JACR*'s history depict a journal responsive to its socio-historical time and place and a journal adapting and adopting more expansive definitions of *whose* communication (voice) and *how* communication (model) over time. This analysis demonstrates future opportunities and challenges for applied communication scholarship as an important part of our National Communication Association specifically and communication research generally.

Keywords: Applied Communication, *JACR*, NCA, *Leximancer*

Mapping a History of Applied Communication Research: Themes and Concepts in the *Journal of Applied Communication Research*

The *Journal of Applied Communication Research (JACR)* was founded in 1973 as an “outlet for scholars who test communication theory in the crucible of applied communication settings”.¹ When Mark Hickson founded *JACR*, only four communication journals were published by the two major national communication associations – *Quarterly Journal of Speech*, *Speech Monographs* and *Speech Teacher* (all published by what is now the National Communication Association), and the International Communication Association’s *Journal of Communication*. Certainly, at that time, none of those journals had as their focus the publication of applied or “socially relevant” research.² Over the last 41 years, *JACR* has remained the sole National Communication Association journal whose primary mission is defined not by “any particular context, setting, methodology, epistemology, or conclusions”,³ but rather is defined by the focus on “clearly and explicitly describe[ing] the ways in which scholarship makes a difference for communication practice”.⁴

As Cissna and Frey document, over the course of the past four decades, applied communication research has become a respected and institutionalized field within the communication landscape.⁵ Applied articles appear not only in *JACR*, but also throughout both regular issues and special Applied issues of many of the Communication field’s journals. As a result, Cissna and Frey argue that given the scope and impact of applied communication within the communication discipline, taking stock of that scholarship helps us to see “where it has been and where it needs to go.”⁶ Given ongoing conversations in the communication field about what

applied communication scholarship is⁷, understanding what gets published in the journal with that name is meaningful.

On this, the 100th year of the National Communication Association, an examination of the content found in the *Journal of Applied Communication Research* since 1973 provides us with a microhistory of what themes and concepts the communication discipline has centered its applied contributions on in this particular journal and challenges us to think about where our applied contributions may lie in the future. As such, this study was guided by the research question: *How has the field of applied communication studies evolved, as reflected in articles published in one of NCA's journals, the Journal of Applied Communication Research?*

Empirical studies of scholarly journal content are often done via citation and/or co-citation analysis. These analyses give valuable information about the authors who cite papers in a journal and who a journal's authors cite, but they do not formally examine the concepts within the articles themselves.⁸ Other scholars have provided content analyses of articles or abstracts to develop journal histories.⁹ However, Cretchley, Rooney and Gallois argue that to develop a richer sense of both the content and the themes being developed across a journal's history, scholars should look at the semantic relationships between and among concepts in a journal.¹⁰ As a result, in this article, I used *Leximancer* (a text-mining tool for visualizing the structure of concepts and themes in text) to track the conceptual and thematic history of the *Journal of Applied Communication Research*.

Method

For this study, I collected abstracts of original research articles published in *JACR* between Volume 1(1) in Winter-Spring 1973 and Volume 41(4) in October 2013. While all abstracts for original research articles were included, I omitted other types of articles, including

book reviews, editorial letters and calls for papers for a final total of 687 articles over the 41 years. In this way, I sought to look specifically at what research was being presented in *JACR*. In some issues where abstracts were not provided by the author/journal (see, for example, Volume 4(1) published in 1976), titles were used instead. I sourced titles and abstracts from the publisher's website. Abstracts are appropriate for analysis because they are lexically dense and focus on the core issues presented in articles. Though titles are an imperfect substitute when abstracts were absent, titles similarly highlight (though in an more abbreviated form) the key issue(s) or concept(s) under analysis.

To facilitate an analysis that would show, in part, how ideas and concepts in *JACR* have developed from 1973 to 2013, I created subsets of the data by breaking the journal's 41 volumes (at the time of this analysis) into even divisions. Division 1 included *JACR* volumes 1-10 (which spans 1973-1982). Division 2 includes *JACR* volumes 11-20 (which spans 1983-1992). Division 3 included *JACR* volumes 21-30 (which spans 1993-2002). Division 4 included *JACR* volumes 31-41 (which spans 2003-2013). There are certainly other ways the data could have been broken down (for instance, by editor or by number of articles rather than my number of issues). I chose this method because in this article I am primarily concerned with the content trends of the articles themselves over time. Other scholars have productively discussed the influences of particular people (for instance, Mark Hickson, *JACR*'s founding editor) on the journal's development¹¹. What this article adds to this conversation then is a deeper look at the semantic relationships between the concepts in the journal over the four decades of the journal's existence, and that was most productively accomplished by breaking the issues of the journal into relatively even historical divisions.

The data decades did produce an uneven distribution of articles (1973-1982 had 106 articles, 1983-1992 had 119 articles; 1993-2002 had 204 articles; and 2003-2013 had 258 articles). These discrepancies can be explained in a large part due to the fact that *JACR* only published two issues a year from 1973-1990 and published four issues a year starting in 1991-present. Following this, I used *Leximancer* text mining software (see description below) to produce a set of concept maps and reports showing semantic structures in *JACR* through its history. I then provided my results and initial analysis to four other scholars in a data conference format to help enhance interpretive validity of the results.

Leximancer Analysis

Leximancer is a text analysis software that allows for the inductive discovery and mapping of concepts in a body of text.¹² Within *Leximancer*, concepts are developed and linked through a systematic examination of the proximity with which words appear in the text. This means that *Leximancer* identifies which concepts exist in a set of texts, allowing concepts to be generated in a grounded fashion.¹³ Importantly, *Leximancer* distinguishes between words and concepts, with concepts being those most semantically significant words.¹⁴ *Leximancer* builds its analysis by looking at both word occurrence and co-occurrence frequency to produce a word co-occurrence matrix from which concepts are identified. *Leximancer* then builds a list, called a *thesaurus*, of closely related words, associated by proximity to a particular concept. Measurement of direct links between concepts establishes the strengths of relationships between concepts. The more times a concept co-occurs directly with another, the stronger the relationship will be. Second, *Leximancer* then compares one concept's thesaurus with those of other concepts. This process develops the indirect links between concepts as well.

Finally, clusters of concepts are grouped by theme circles to summarize the main ideas in particular clusters. Each theme is named after the most prominent concept in the group. Using the concept map, rank-ordered concept lists and text query options, the researcher can read instances of specific concepts to understand their relationships. Thus, the map visually depicts the strength of association between concepts and provides a conceptual overview of the semantic structure of the data.¹⁵ Generally, *Leximancer* is considered to have reliability both in terms of stability and reproducibility.¹⁶

Procedure

I first ran an initial (automatic) overall analysis of the most frequently occurring concepts in the overall data set (N=687). I excluded common function words (e.g. *and*, *not*) that comprise a standard set of excluded words in *Leximancer*. I also removed general terms about research process (e.g. *essay*, *examined*, *method*, *implications*) that are present in many research articles but do not contribute meaningfully to a thematic analysis. Finally, I merged most singular and plural nouns (e.g. *organization* and *organizations*) because they tended to be very closely related in semantic space. I then ran subsequent analyses, following the same procedures on each of the individual decades: 1973-1982 (N=106); 1983-1992 (N=119); 1993-2002 (N=204); and 2003-2013 (N=258).

Results

Figure 1 presents the overall map of concepts and themes. Specifically, Figure 1 displays the concepts that emerged from the grounded analysis and positions each decade within the semantic terrain described by the map. By looking at the position of individual concepts it is possible to determine the closeness of their semantic relationship to other concepts as well as their closeness to a particular decade. If a concept sits closer to one of the decades marked on the

map, it is, in relative terms, more associated with that decade. Similarly, the more central a concept's location on the map, the more it is shared across decades. Finally, concepts are organized into thematic clusters, represented by circles. The themes (represented by capitalized titles in the paper below) are numbered in order of significance/impact on the semantic landscape (see, for example, Figure 1).

As can be seen, the four decades of *JACR*'s history are associated with different parts of the concept space. The earliest two decades are relatively close together, indicating more overlap in the content of articles. These 20 years are both highly connected to the most central theme across *JACR* scholarship, *Organizational*. In addition, the 1983-1992 decade is connected closely with the moderately important theme *Volunteers*. The 1993-2002 decade is located in a very different part of the concept map, most associated with the themes *Family*, *Political*, and *Music*. Finally, The 2003-2013 decade is most closely tied to the *Health* theme, but also clusters near *Organizational* and *Family* themes as well.

To get a sense of which prevalent concepts are shared across time, I asked *Leximancer* to sequentially reveal concepts, beginning with the most prominent. The single most prevalent Name-Like concept (concepts often grammatically treated like a proper noun in the articles) is *communication*. This matches the claimed content and focus of both the journal and of the National Communication Association. Of the 12 most prevalent word-like concepts (drawn from words not treated as proper nouns), 9 of the terms closely align with Interest Group divisions from the National Communication Association (*organizational*, *health*, *public*, *group*, *family*, *interpersonal*, *training*, *women*, and *media*). At the least then, a grounded analysis of *JACR* reveals that over the last four decades, the most prominent concepts being discussed are closely aligned with and reflective of many of the largest interest groups at NCA. This also demonstrates

that historically the journal is living up to its assertion that “health, politics, organizations, conflict, relationships, family, media, culture, new technology – all of these topical areas, and more, are welcome at *JACR*”.¹⁷

In the overall analysis, no single method seems dominant in *JACR*. Word concepts like *rhetorical*, *variable*, *validity*, *interpretive*, and *respondents*, all of which might reflect various methodological traditions, were present in relatively equal relevance (all had *Leximancer* concept relevance scores between 9-13%). In this way, there is also evidence to support the *JACR* assertion that it accepts a variety of methodological approaches, as long as they are “relevant to the questions asked, rigorous in terms of both argument and method, cognizant of alternative interpretations, and contextualized within wider bodies of scholarship”.¹⁸

Finally, as a journal primarily concerned with how communication theorizing and research can be translated into implications for practice, word concepts like *future* (31% concept relevance), *practice* (27%), *practitioners* (26%) and *contributions* (21%) all appear within the top 20 most prevalent concepts. These concepts, however, are notably all lower in the top concept list than the aforementioned topic area concepts (e.g. *organizational*, *health*, *interpersonal*, etc.). Whether this means that topic area theory and scholarship are driving the studies (a wonderful reason for their relevance to be so high) or this means that practical implications are under-featured at the end of articles (a less desirable reason for their lesser prominence) cannot be determined by this analysis. Certainly this is an area where future interpretive work would be valuable.

Analyses by Decade

1973-1982. Figure 2 presents the themes (rank ordered) and concepts for the first decade of *JACR*'s existence. The most prominent theme is *Theory*, with its most important concept

(*theory*) connected to concepts like *speech*, *expectations*, *research*, and *performance*. Relevant example excerpts from the texts include “An ‘act’ based theory of communication...,” “A speech theory of human communication...,” and “The speech act theory of human communication...” This thematic cluster indicates that in this first decade *JACR* research seemed to center around building and applying theories of communication. This makes sense given that, especially in the early years of *JACR*’s existence, prominent writings (see, for example, Donald Ellis’s (1982) “The Shame of Speech Communication”¹⁹) juxtaposed pure research and its “truly important scholars and... truly significant work” with applied research in which scholars operated at best as snake-oil salesmen and at worst as drones producing “theoretically trivial labor”.²⁰ In order to craft a defense of applied scholarship, many of those doing it sought to position applied scholarship as “*pure* research carried out in *applied* settings”²¹. To do so, scholars like Miller and Sunnafrank argued that researchers should focus their applied articles and projects centrally around theoretical conceptualizations, relationships and boundary testing. As a result, the dominance of theory as a theme in this first decade (and the relative absence of this theme/concept in later decades) might be a signal of the work applied scholars had to do early on to justify *JACR*’s much more applied focus.

The second theme was *Group* (with concepts like *group*, *competence*, *public*, and *leadership*) and the third theme was *Organizational* (with concepts like *organizational*, *organization*, *rhetorical*, and *development*). Taken together, these reveal the relative significance of applied research in organizational and group contexts in this first decade of *JACR* publication. *JACR*’s first editor Mark Hickson wrote in the first pages of *JACR*’s first issue that the challenge being issued by his journal was for researchers to “leave the laboratory, the classroom, and the library; to enter the business organization; and find social contexts in which individual

communication problems exist—therefore providing a means for applicable solution”.²² Though other “social contexts” for applied research were left to the imagination, the challenge for scholars to make their research relevant to solving business problems was explicit. In the concept list for this decade, the 15 most important concepts (in terms of relevance) include *organizational, analysis, organization, information, group, competence* and *performance*. The text excerpts surrounding these words reveal that many of these early articles were in fact answering Hickson’s call and focusing on how to make communication function more effectively in business contexts.

1983-1992. As Figure 3 indicates, the second decade of *JACR* publication had *Health* as its most prominent theme (with concepts like *health, organizational, training, cognitive, development, AIDS, and anxiety*). The predominance of health articles was driven in part by two special issues related to health in this decade: a special issue on Doctor-Patient Communication in 1985 (Volume 13, Issue 2) and a special issue on Values in Health Communication in 1988 (Volume 16, Issue 1).

Notably, the only health condition significantly central to enough articles in this decade to generate its own concept was *AIDS*. Though the Centers for Disease Control (CDC) released its first report on the disease in 1971, the disease wasn’t officially dubbed AIDS until 1982. Widespread fear supported by misinformation, stereotyping, and discrimination dubbed “AIDS hysteria” became widespread in the media and public life in the mid-80s.²³ As a result, the prevalence of concepts like *health, AIDS* and *anxiety* in this decade would indicate a journal both responsive to and in conversation with the public health fears of the time.

The second most prominent theme from this decade was *Harassment* (with related concepts including *harassment, sexual, organizational, system* and *competence*). This

prominence was promoted in part by a 1992 special issue on Sexual Harassment in the Communication Discipline (Volume 20, Issue 4). Similar to the Health theme above, the Harassment theme appears to be resonant with the news. Though Cornell University activists coined the term Sexual Harassment in 1975, it was in 1991 that law professor Anita Hill alleged that Supreme Court Justice nominee Clarence Thomas had sexually harassed her when they worked together.²⁴ Though Thomas was confirmed, Hill's very public testimony sparked more public discussions of sexual harassment in a wide variety of workplace contexts, making the discussion of sexual harassment in the communication discipline at the end of 1992 timely.

Both of these themes indicate a journal whose scholars intended to be part of the national conversation on issues deeply affecting society at the time. The thematic analysis over this decade reveals that *JACR* authors were, as former editor Kenneth Cissna hoped, "immersed in and with 'real-life' settings" as they attempted to "make a difference in the world through examining... human communication".²⁵

The third theme in this decade was *Paid* (with concepts including *paid* and *volunteers*). Just as in the overall analysis of all four decades combined, the concept with the highest overall relevance in this decade was *organizational*. The focus of organizational research in this decade (1983-92) moved beyond the functional analysis of issues like competence and performance in business environments to more fully recognize some of the alternative organizational relationships (e.g. volunteering) that would merit an applied analysis.

1993-2002. Figure 4 presents the themes (rank ordered) and concepts for the third decade of *JACR*'s existence. This decade, like the previous, features *Health* as its most central theme. However, the concepts that comprise *Health* as a theme seem to have a different focus. Concepts prominent in this *Health* theme include words like *health, negotiation, learning, motivation, fear,*

instructional and *ill*. Rather than a focus on large public health crisis(es), like in the AIDS-centric decade of the 1980s, the focus of *Health* in this decade seems more focused on health understood at the individual level (e.g. how is health negotiated, learned or taught, motivated, etc.).

The second most common theme in this decade was *Group* (including concepts like *family*, *group*, *authority*, and *interpersonal* as well as *conflict*, *contradictions*, and *resistance*). Two special issues in this decade—a special issue on Research in Families in 1995 (Volume 23, Issue 4) and Language and Intergenerational Communication in 1998 (Volume 26, Issue 1)—contributed to the emergence of familial groups as a significant theme in this decade. The concept *family* was the fourth most centrally relevant concept in this decade (following only *organizational*, *health* and *future*).

Also worth noting is the significant shift the other terms in this theme reveal in the nature of communication being studied. While communication (especially communication in groups) in the first decade of *JACR* clustered most significantly around words like competence and performance, group communication in this decade clusters more significantly around concepts of *conflict*, *contradictions*, and *resistance*. These concepts are interesting in light of some public critiques in the early 1990s in which applied communication research was criticized for prescribing overly simple cures for communication problems “in the same way that doctors prescribe medicine”.²⁶ Applied theory was called to reconnect with the generally accepted viewpoint that communication is inherently relational and what constitutes good or bad or effective communication was inevitably complex and perhaps contradictory.²⁷ In this decade, the growth in relevance and centrality of terms like *interaction*, *conflict*, *contradiction*, and

resistance shows that the simplistic functional sender-to-recipient approach to communication had been expanded and challenged in significant ways.

The third theme in this decade was *Organizational* (comprised of concepts like *employment* and *industry* as well as concepts like *cultural*, *interaction*, *ethical* and *critical*). The 1981 Alta conference and the subsequent Putnam and Pacanowsky (1983) edited volume highlighted both interpretive and critical perspectives in organizational communication as central to the future of organizational research.²⁸ The prevalence of concepts like *cultural*, *interaction*, and *critical* indicate that by this decade, spanning from ten to twenty years after that Putnam and Pacanowsky volume, organizational communication researchers had integrated a more interpretive approach into their applied research.

2003-2013. As Figure 5 reveals, the most significant theme in this decade has been *Public* (including concepts like *public*, *media*, *cultural*, *connection*, *future*, and *ethical*). In 2003, only 54.7% of US households reported having internet access in the home, while in 2011 (the most recently available Census Bureau Number), 71.7% of households reported internet use in the home.²⁹ At the end of 2004, Facebook estimated they had one million unique users a month. In May of 2013, Facebook reported 1.11 billion unique users a month.³⁰ By looking through the text excerpts from the abstracts clustered around the *public*, *media*, and *connection* concepts in particular, the rise of scholarly and practical interest in the ways that electronic and social media are transforming both public and individual communication are significant concerns.

The second most common theme was again *Organizational*, but this time *Organizational* was related to concepts like *interaction*, *diversity*, *interpersonal*, *conflict*, *commitment* and *teleworkers*. While *teleworkers* as a significant concept reinforces the interest in transformations fostered by electronic media, all of these themes reflect a recognition described in the 2004

special issue on Paradox, Contradiction and Irony in organizations (Volume 32, Issue 2) that organizational life is messy, and that tensions are not problems to be solved, but rather organizational realities to be embraced and managed in varying ways.

The third theme of Group related to *family*, *disabilities*, and *adults* as well as *rational*, *cognitive*, *interaction* and *talk*. While *family* was most semantically linked to the *Group* theme, a second theme of *Parents* with related concepts like *adoption* and *stepchildren* demonstrates that taken together, families played an important role in this decade of research. The concepts clustered around *Group* and *Parents* also indicate that the definition of families expanded significantly in this decade to include different types of families created through legal processes of divorce, remarriage and *adoption*, as well as more discourse dependent families created more principally through *interaction* and *talk*.³¹

Discussion

The field of applied communication research has remained remarkably stable in some ways since its formal record began in 1973 with the launch of the *Journal of Applied Communication Research*. In all four individual decades analyzed, the list of rank-ordered word concepts listed *organizational* as either first or second in terms of overall relevance, and in all but the first decade analyzed (1973-1982), *health* appeared in the top five of the rank-ordered concept lists for each individual decade. In some ways, these contexts are not surprising because applied communication lends itself fairly clearly to these settings. Improving communication between bosses and employees or between doctors and patients, for example, are both socially relevant communication challenges (and are settings for which consulting dollars might be accessible to scholars). However, other communication settings in which applied communication research might be fruitfully applied (e.g. schools) are entirely absent from any of the individual

decades or the overall picture. Admittedly, *instructional* does appear as a relevant concept from 1993-2002, but does not appear in the ranked concept lists for any other decade. This may be because other National Communication Association journals like *Communication Education* and *Communication Teacher* are likely receiving the bulk of those research papers. This may be the same reason that, for example, neither *international* nor *intercultural* appear on any of the ranked concept lists for any decade in *JACR* (NCA publishes the *Journal of International and Intercultural Communication*). NCA does not, however, publish any journals with an explicitly organizational or health focus. As a result, applied research may uniquely attract organizational and health scholars, or organizational and health scholars may be emphasizing applied outcomes of their research simply to find space in one of NCA's most explicitly non-subject matter nor methodology driven journals. Of course, we must be careful to not assume that the ONLY reason certain articles are getting published (or not getting published) in *JACR* are issues of fit. *JACR* has a high rejection rate overall. However, if we do not believe that generally instructional articles are more poorly written than organizational communication articles, for example, (which I do not believe), then it is interesting to note the relative absence (or lower presence) of some of the National Communication Association's largest divisions across the decades of *JACR*'s publication. Understanding which topics/themes do find a home in *JACR* can allow for future productive conversations about the mission and role of *JACR* specifically and about the approaches to and outlets for applied communication research more generally.

Second, the particular topics being studied in organizational and health contexts, among others, show that across the four decades *JACR*'s applied scholarship has consistently adapted to and addressed contemporary communication issues of social concern. In the 1980s, health research focused on the public AIDS epidemic. In the 1990s, health research focused more

specifically on individual health concerns and their negotiation by patients, families and medical practitioners. In the 1970s, organizations were defined primarily as businesses. In the 1980s, the scope expanded to include volunteers. In the 2000s, the rise of teleworkers appeared as an issue of organizational concern. Neuman, Davidson, Joo, Park and Williams describe one of the primary virtues of communication research as *normative connection*, or “the potential relevance of the reported research to social, cultural, or political values and matters of real world public concern.”³² This analysis demonstrates that applied research in *JACR* has established normative connection. Thus, this analysis provides evidence for the continued relevance of communication research to matters of real public concern.

Further, while terms like cultural and diversity were not present on the 1973-1982 list of relevant concepts from the thematic analysis, both concepts are significant in the 2003-2013 analysis. This reflects a growing awareness of the need for including and valuing multiple voices and perspectives in communication research. Additionally, while *women* (though not *men*) appeared as a relevant concept in all four decades, the semantic relationship between *women* and other concepts in the maps demonstrate how theorizing about women has changed in focus. In the first decade (1973-1982), *women* as a term was most closely linked to *Theory* (the largest theme in the decade) and concepts of *divide*, *humor*, and *assess*. Looking at the terms surrounding women in the text, women were often mentioned when the researcher divided the data into two groups (men and women) and then assessed how those divisions affected the theory (in one article, specifically on the topic of humor). As a result, women in this regard are being described as part of a variable (sex) that might affect communication. In 2003-2013, however, *women* was most significantly linked to themes of *Health* and *Organization* as well as concepts of *rape* and *stigma*, as well as concepts of *learning* and *media*. Rather than treating sex as a

variable, looking at the articles from which these terms come demonstrates that these articles sought to understand in more depth how women (often a particular group of women) understood, responded to, or talked about a particular issue of impact in their lives.

Other sources of difference (e.g. race, ethnicity, lesbian/gay/transgender issues, migrant/immigrant status, etc.) did not appear as significant concepts in any decade. Thus, the applied communication field clearly has more room to continue to value multiple voices and identities in communication research.

Fourth, while words like *interaction*, *connection*, and *system* are on the list of significant concepts in the 2003-2013 analysis, none of them appear in the 1973-1982 conceptual list. This shift from a more functional sender-to-receiver transmission model of communication present in some of the significant concepts from the 1970s to the more complex, constitutive, interactive perspective on communication in the last decade demonstrates an evolution in how communication is conceptualized in applied work. Given the much richer possibilities for research and for meaning fostered by a constitutive view of communication³³, this trend is a welcome one in applied communication research.

Finally, while *Theory* was the most important theme in the 1973-1982 decade, theory never again appears as a theme or even as a ranked relevant concept in any of the remaining decades. As a result, theory does not appear as either a theme or a concept in the overall analysis of the 41 years of *JACR* existence. While I do not doubt that applied research is still theoretically motivated and makes theoretical contributions, the lack of theory as a theme is worthy of note. This makes the *JACR* Special Issue call for papers on “Building Grounded Practical Theory in Applied Communication Research” issued in April 2013 by Robert Craig and Karen Tracy seem especially timely. As the call explains, “Grounded practical theory (GPT) is a conceptual and

methodological approach that aims to develop normative communication theories useful for reflecting on real-world dilemmas and practical possibilities of communication”.³⁴ I sincerely hope that developing such theories is one of the challenges *JACR* authors will embrace in the next decade.

Conclusion

This historical analysis of the *Journal of Applied Communication Research* on the 100th Anniversary of the National Communication Association’s founding reveals both consistencies in and changes across the ideas, topics and approaches in applied communication research throughout the last four decades. Across the decades, *JACR* research prominently features concepts like *organizational, health, public, group, family, interpersonal, training, women, media* that align closely with many of the National Communication Association’s largest interest group divisions. However, the research within those concepts has evolved over the four decades to reflect not only the social issues of relevance at any given time, but also to embrace increasingly diverse and complex communication relationships (for example between individual and organization). The future challenges (and opportunities) of applied communication research clearly center around continuing to embrace diverse voices, contexts and methodologies while making foregrounding theory more as both a tool for an outcome of applied research.

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