Applied Communication Research in the 21st Century

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Over a quarter of a century ago, Mark Hickson founded the Journal of Applied Communication Research and ran it virtually single-handedly for its first eight years. The field of communication is indebted to Professor Hickson, both for his vision that alternative, engaged, and socially relevant forms of communication scholarship were possible and desirable, and for his determination to establish an outlet for that scholarship.

When Hickson began JACR, there were only four communication journals published by the two major national associations—Quarterly Journal of Speech, Speech Monographs, Speech Teacher, all published by the Speech Association of America (now the National Communication Association), and the International Communication Association's Journal of Communication—along with one journal published by each of the regional communication associations. None of them published much, if anything, that could be regarded as "socially relevant" or "applied" communication scholarship. Now, not only do we have a journal that publishes exclusively applied communication scholarship, but, equally importantly, some of the others publish applied research as well.

My hope during the years I served as editor of JACR and thereafter was not that "applied communication" would come to be a legitimate and respected area of communication study, but that communication scholarship generally would exhibit more concern for questions and problems that make a difference to people besides ourselves (Cissna, 1982, 1995). I think this is happening, and, thus, I am very encouraged about the future of our field in the 21st century and of the role of applied studies within it.

The definition I used during my editorship was that applied communication research, regardless of context, methodology, setting, or epistemology, was inquiry that sought to make a difference in the world through examining some feature of human communication (Cissna, 1982). Hence, being situated in a context is vitally important in applied communication research, and applied researchers are immersed in and with "real-life" settings and respondents. Applied communication researchers are motivated not only to understand the world, but also to change

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it in some respect, with luck, in a positive direction. Applied communication researchers, then, typically start with a goal to be achieved, whether to reduce tobacco use or increase safer sex practices among some population, to improve productivity or perhaps morale in an organization, or to help a group of physicians have more satisfied patients or attorneys to have more success in jury trials. Applied communication research is, at least in part, intended for someone other than a community of scholars and includes in its conversation people who are not within the scholarly community.

I reviewed the four most recent issues of each of those NCA/SAA journals that were around in 1973, Quarterly Journal of Speech (QJS) Communication Monographs (CM), and Communication Education (CE). Although QJS published no articles during this year that I would characterize as applied communication research, both of the other two journals did. A brief discussion of those articles may be instructive.

These issues of CM contained four articles that could have been published in JACR, at least when I was editor. Browning and Beyer (1998) studied the U.S. semi-conductor industry for 4 years, examining, in particular, how agreement regarding industry-wide standards came to be achieved. They conducted on-site observations and interviews with key employees and identified seven incidents that were crucial in this process. Weitzel and Geist (1998) sought to determine how various community organizations used parliamentary procedure to make decisions. Extensive observations of various community groups in the San Diego area revealed that although there were frequent violations of technical aspects of parliamentary procedural rules, the organizations used parliamentary procedure in benign ways, largely as a mechanism to allow members to voice their opinions and to foster a sense of “groupness.” Sunwolf and Seibold (1998) interviewed actual jurors at a courthouse while they waited to be called for a trial. They explored five communicative challenges these prospective jurors expected to face and identified a number of rules that they might invoke to deal with those challenges during jury deliberation. Finally, Tardy and Hale (1998) examined the health-oriented conversations that “stay-at-home moms” had at their toddlers’ playgroup. Through participant observation, interviews, and questionnaires, they sought to identify the network structure, nature of the relationships, content of the talk, and impact of the support these women provided each other. In addition to discussing the implications of the results to diffusion of information theory and the opportunities for further research, the study also offered implications to health consumers and to the health industry about how to utilize the kind of informal interpersonal networks that were examined in this study.

Recent issues of CE also contained applied communication research. Rosenfeld, Richman, and Bowen (1998) compared the relationship between supportive communication and school performance for “at-risk” and other middle school students. The lower socioeconomic, at-risk students, in comparison with the students who were not identified as at-risk, received less social support yet benefited more as a result of the support they did receive. Rosenfeld and colleagues included a discussion of the implications of the study for those who would wish to intervene for the better in the lives of at-risk children. Souza (1999) examined the socialization processes students go through in an alternative high school, specifically, the impact of those processes on students’ inclinations to stay in or drop out of school. Observations and interviews yielded 70 pages of field notes, which were analyzed
to produce a series of themes. Not surprisingly, students and teachers had rather disparate perceptions of almost every facet of the school, their roles and behavior, and their purposes for being there. Souza concluded regarding the effectiveness of the program and provided suggestions that might be of benefit to alternative school teachers, administrators, and policy makers.

For this brief essay, I did not conduct a content analysis of the journals over time to attempt to quantify any changes that may have occurred, nor did I search earlier issues of the journals in order to identify other published examples of applied research or to ascertain when any change in these journals in this regard may have occurred. Nevertheless, that applied research in communication is being published not only in *JACR* but also in two of the older, more traditional journals, is, I think, very good news for the communication field.

Only three of these articles, however, contained any discussion of the implications of the study to the respondents who were studied, to others involved in similar situations, or to communication practitioners who might work with them. Browning and Beyer did not discuss how agreement might be facilitated in other interorganizational situations; Weitzel and Geist did not discuss how consultants might help community organizations improve their decision making; and Sunwolf and Seibold did not discuss how jurors might think about their task more effectively. By contrast, Tardy and Hale briefly discussed the implications of their study for health consumers and the health industry; Rosenfeld et al. included a section on “intervention implications” that makes explicit how one might use these findings to make a difference in the lives of other at-risk students; and Souza directed some recommendations toward teachers, administrators, and policy makers.

Why are some including recommendations to practice, and others aren’t? Some years ago, I published an article in *Communication Monographs* regarding the formation of stepfamilies that my coauthors and I thought had implications that might be useful to people who work with stepfamilies (Cisna, Cox, & Bochner, 1990). Therefore, we included several paragraphs regarding the practical implications of the study in the original manuscript that we submitted to *CM*. As the manuscript went through the review process, however, that section was removed. Perhaps similar paragraphs existed in earlier drafts of the three articles reviewed above that didn’t include them, and, like mine, were removed. Perhaps editors typically excise references to practical implications in favor of the development of theory, and Browning and Beyer, Weitzel and Geist, and Sunwolf and Seibold agreed to remove those deprivileged sections from their manuscripts in order to facilitate publication. Perhaps these authors knew not to submit manuscripts containing such material in the first place. Perhaps practical recommendations would have been welcome, but the authors feared including them. Perhaps the authors themselves didn’t recognize such implications or think them appropriate to include.

Although our field has come a long way in the past 25 years with regard to both the frequency with which applied communication research is being conducted and the acceptance of that research as significant in the field, we still have a ways to go before it will be more widely infused throughout our journals or before *CM* (not to mention *QJS*) will routinely include sections in articles on the practical implications of the scholarly work. Another possibility—and I’m not sure I don’t like this one better—is that this will become the major difference between *JACR*
and the other journals: All will publish articles regarding issues that matter to society, in which the research is conducted in field settings with real people, and in which the findings of the research might be of some import to somebody besides others scholars. In *JACR*, however, those practical implications will be made explicit.

In closing, I believe that the desirability of socially relevant scholarship is being recognized far more broadly throughout the field of communication than it was 25 years ago (or even 10). Far more of such research is being conducted, and as a result, the future of applied communication research in the 21st century is, indeed, bright and promising.

Endnotes


2. I examined the August, 1998, to May, 1999, issues of *JACR*, the October, 1998, to July, 1999, issues of *CE*, and the September, 1998, to June, 1999, issues of *CM*. I did not include the *Journal of Communication* because it was transformed in the mid-1970s into a very different journal than it had been (with its functions largely subsumed by a new ICA journal).

3. The movement toward "community-based scholarship" within the Interpersonal Communication Division evident in recent NCA conventions and the growing body of scholarship on natural and bona fide groups are similarly encouraging.

References


