Limited English health literacy among U.S. language minority communities has been linked to reduced healthcare access, poorer health outcomes, and health disparities. Hegemonic ideologies drive the discourse on health literacy, which is, according to most definitions and conceptual models, an individual skill or achievement, and focuses on patients’ ability to understand and act upon information from their healthcare providers. After more than thirty years, research and applied practice within the field of health literacy have had little impact on reducing disparities in healthcare access and health outcomes.

This presentation critically analyzes research linking health care access to health literacy and examines the role of provider communicative practices, as opposed to patient health literacy levels, in patient comprehension of health information. I call for interdisciplinary research that explores the dynamic interaction in medical encounters, the characteristics of which inevitably lead to inequitable access to health care. I make recommendations for more rigorous research that explores human interaction and language use in healthcare settings more systematically.

Dr. Jacobson received a PhD from the University of Arizona in 2002. Her cross-disciplinary research focuses foremost on language and health, with language minorities and communities impacted by health disparities constituting the driving force of her work. She has conducted health disparities research at the National Institutes of Health as Senior Research Fellow, and has an active research program at UNM aimed at advancing our understanding of language as a social determinant of health.