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Having Scholarly Impact: The Art of Hitting Academic Home Runs

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With more and more academics feeling more and more pressure to produce numbers of publications, I articulate the value of papers that are perhaps fewer in number, but have more impact on the subsequent research and thinking of others. Based on a presentation at a 2011 Academy of Management Professional Development Workshop entitled, "What Is an Academic Home Run and How Do I Hit One?," this paper describes the attributes of "home run" papers in our field using four exemplars. From this analysis, I distill their lessons for all of us about the nature of both the ideas presented and the processes involved in creating articles with scholarly impact.

Our field rightly devotes a lot of time and attention to improving our research work. From junior faculty and doctoral consortia in many divisions at the annual Academy of Management meeting to various "how to" articles showing up in various Academy outlets (e.g., the seven-article "how to" series recently published in the *Academy of Management Journal*), we work hard to provide specific advice on how to do and present our research. Given this detailed and readily available information, I was surprised that a talk I gave in a session in the 2011 Academy of Management meetings resonated with the audience more than any I have ever given.

The session was a professional development workshop (PDW) entitled, "Understanding Scholarly Impact: What Is a Scholarly Home Run and How Do I Hit One?" The title's metaphor invoked the game of baseball in which players can add value to their teams by hitting singles (they advance one base), doubles (advancing two bases), triples (three bases), and the highest level of value, a home run, in which a single hit (that travels over the outfield fence) allows a runner to touch every base and score a run for the team. Even home runs vary in quality from those hit with no runners on base that score one run to those with one or more runners already on base that score more runs; from those hit in early innings or when the game is already long past won to those in crucial moments where the fate of the game (or of a series) is determined.[1] Perhaps because of the recent fixation in our field on "hits" bemoaned in speeches by many Academy of Management presidents, the PDW session invoked this metaphor, with those special home runs in mind, as a catchy way to attract scholars to come together and talk about how we do our craft. The session involved several prominent academics talking about their views on this topic. The audience was a large one, made up of many junior faculty and doctoral students along with several more seasoned colleagues. Looking back on the strong reaction that my contribution received, I have concluded that it's not that I had any particular greater wisdom to pass on (each contributor's talk was replete with great advice on

I would like to thank Scott DeRue and Chris Myers for organizing the PDW on which this paper is based and Jim Walsh, Peren Ozturan, Alex Luksyte, and Jane Dutton for their comments as on earlier drafts. I also would like to recognize and thank two scholarly communities, the Management and Organizations group at the Ross School of Business, University of Michigan, and the May Meaning Meeting community, two groups that have always inspired me to aim high in my scholarly work. My life is enriched by you both.

[1] For a detailed description of the game of baseball, see http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Baseball.

how to achieve the "home run" goal), rather, that I spent my time in the PDW focusing as much on the ideal, the aspiration of trying to do more with our scholarly work, as I did on issues of technique; more time emphasizing issues of "want to" (motivation) and "where to?" (i.e., aspiration—the qualities of a home run) as "how to." My conclusion about the strong reaction to my talk is that sometimes in our eagerness to give useful advice that helps people to improve their potential contributions we miss the chance to simply remind ourselves about and reinforce for ourselves our most sacred aspirations—to make important contributions to our collective understanding of organizations and life within them. We miss the chance to encourage the heart, the ideal, and to reinforce the aspirations that many of us entered the field with and that still motivate our deepest selves. My talk struck a chord because it seemed to do just that. I was invited by the *Academy of Management Learning & Education* to submit the content of this talk to share with a wider audience. I hope that you will both enjoy it and find it useful.

"HITTING HOME RUNS"

Let me open by articulating my biases when it comes to measuring the power or quality of a contribution (be it a single, double, or home run) and addressing the issue of whether home runs are even possible in "this day and age." I am fairly ecumenical when it comes to contributions. I love a lot of different "flavors." I get as excited about a well-done meta-analysis published in the *Journal of Applied Psychology* as I do a creative theory paper published in the *Academy of Management Review* or *Administrative Science Quarterly*. I don't always worry about citation counts and am mindful of the various papers pointing to important concerns about using citation counts as a metric of success (e.g., Aguinis, Suarez-Gonzalez, Lannelonque, & Joo, 2012; Starbuck, 2005; Walsh, 2011). I care most about work that really seems to contribute to or change the intellectual conversation about its topic. This [Impact] shows up in citation counts . . . also in what people are talking about . . . and what influences their work, either [in] the topics they take up or their take on those topics. In my writing, my personal aspiration often is to write papers that would be selected for inclusion in a doctoral syllabus at another institution. That actually is a very high bar. When you teach a doctoral course (say a survey course of our field), you find that you only get to pick five or six articles on each topic. You need to weigh the inclusion of classics as well as modern pieces, and you end up having to be quite choosy. It is a high bar, but it is a motivating aspiration for me, as it lifts my sights and helps me keep my eye on what is most important. And one of my most treasured indicators of the quality of my own work came not from its citation count, but from a brief e-mail I received from a colleague in the field whom I admire who said about a recent publication, "This is a paper I wish I had written." To me, it doesn't get any better than that as far as impact—to have a sense of the conversation you want to enter and influence and to generate such a positive response from an important person in that conversation.

Some say this is all well and good, but are home runs even possible in today's world where evaluation committees seem to *count* (i.e., focus on numbers of publications) rather than *read* (i.e., make considered judgments about the quality of those publications), and control systems are getting ever more narrow and focused? I think the conversation is even more important under such conditions. Important not only in terms of how we might advise young scholars, but also in terms of inspiring more senior colleagues to take a more vigorous stand within their institutions on just what quality work is and how it should be measured. There are schools that account for the impact and quality of an article as opposed to the number of articles. Some schools have decided explicitly not to look at citation counts in their evaluations of faculty, and some are perceived by their faculty to be looking for "home runs" explicitly and who have a record of promoting people with a clear home run over people with more publications without one. This issue is an important one—it defines the goals that a faculty member will set for him- or herself, and those goals have been shown to matter. Research on scholarly impact in the strategy field, for example, has shown that those who write fewer but high-quality papers earlier in their careers go on to also write fewer but high-quality papers later in their careers; while those who write a large number of poorly cited papers will continue to write lots of poorly cited papers (Bergh, Perry, & Hanke, 2006). These data-based conclusions suggest that one story that many young faculty members tell themselves—that they will wait until later to do more important work, but will start off doing smaller pieces of work now so they can increase their publication counts—may not pan out in real-

ity. Bergh et al.'s (2006) research suggests that there is an imprinting effect of these early decisions. Faculty members who started off doing bigger and more impactful pieces of work continued to do so post-tenure, and faculty members who started off doing smaller pieces also continued in that pattern post-tenure. So it matters what we aspire to, and it may especially matter what we aspire to in early on our careers. I suggest we aim high, that we aim for home runs.

I am not here to hold myself up as a home run hitter, but I am a person with a lot of passion about our field, and I get very excited about many of the important scholarly contributions to it. I read articles that I don't just like, but I *love*. I love the ideas, admire the methods, and feel awe at the quality of the writing. In preparing for the PDW, my thought was "what better way to understand what we should aspire to in terms of hitting home runs that matter than by looking at some examples and analyzing them?" I chose four "home run" papers. These four are papers that show up over and over again in the research related my particular areas of interest, and they all are papers that I hear people raise again and again in their conversations about various topics. These four might not show up on other people's lists given their specific content interests, but I present them as "home runs" (and home runs that matter) with a lot of confidence about their quality. The four are as follows:

- Ibarra, H. (1999). Provisional selves: Experimenting with image and identity in professional adaptation. *Administrative Science Quarterly*, 44: 764–791.
- Edmondson, A. (1999). Psychological safety and learning behavior in work teams. *Administrative Science Quarterly*, 44(2): 350–383.
- Morrison, E. W., & Milliken, F. G. (2000). Organizational silence: A barrier to change and development in a pluralistic world. *Academy of Management Review*, 25(4): 706–725.
- Bunderson, J. S., & Thompson, J. A. (2009). The call of the wild: Zookeepers, callings, and the double-edged sword of deeply meaningful work. *Administrative Science Quarterly,* 54: 32–57.

Each is an excellent paper. Each was published in one of our field's top outlets. The Edmondson paper won the Outstanding Publication in Organizational Behavior Award from the Organizational Behavior Division of the Academy of Management in the year 2000. Further, despite the above-mentioned discomfort with citation counts, these papers each have impressive ones with the exception of the Bunderson and Thompson paper, which is quite new. It, however, received the William A. Owens Scholarly Achievement Award from The Society of Industrial and Organizational Psychology (SIOP), the Positive Organizational Scholarship Best Paper Award, and the Best Paper Award from the Organizational Behavior division of the Academy of Management in the year of its publication—nice testimony to the potential that people see in this paper.

Of course, one person's home run is another person's "double," creating some variability in the evaluation of any one paper. The reaction to these four papers, however, suggests a pretty strong, positive average evaluation—and it is papers that generate just such reactions that I'm hoping to describe. So let's accept for the moment that each of these is a home run. What do these articles tell us about what a home run is and do they give us any insight into how to hit one?

[Impact] shows up in citation counts . . . also in what people are talking about . . . and what influences their work, either [in] the topics they take up or their take on those topics.

To answer this question, one approach might be to carefully parse and "reverse engineer" each article to see in great detail exactly what they did, resulting in a set of "how to" prescriptions for doing good work. A fortuitous event while preparing for the Academy presentation, however, took me in a different direction. The fortuitous event was reading the March 2011 issue of *Vanity Fair*, a magazine that my sister has given to me for years to keep this semi-absent-minded professor at least somewhat in touch with popular culture. For those of you who don't read *Vanity Fair* regularly, it typically contains a mix of celebrity interviews and exposes, long articles about obscure European royalty, and an occasional excellent and memorable article that takes you behind the scenes of some current news event or creative endeavor.

It was an article of the latter type that caught my eye. The article, written by Weller (2011), describes the making of a particular film. Weller states that this film has been compared to such greats as *Butch Cassidy and the Sundance Kid* and *Bonnie and Clyde*. It was nominated for five Oscars and is

said to have changed the national conversation on gender in the United States. This was a film that, according to the article, "hit like a brick through a window" when it first came out. A film where in some screenings, including Cannes, audiences cheered at its conclusion. It was lauded as "being ahead of the curve and exhilarating" (Weller, 2011: 351). This film also inspired a dedicated anthology of scholarly essays published by the University of Texas (Cook, 2007) and a collection of monographs published by the University of California analyzing its themes and impact (Birch, 1994). The *Vanity Fair* article (Weller, 2011: 351) ended by saying "in just two decades it has become a classic." I think that if an article any of us wrote were to have an analogous impact within the Academy, each of us would be proud of it, and we would definitely rate it an important "home run." And thus I now had a template for analyzing home runs in academia.

The film the article discussed was, of course, *Thelma and Louise*. For those of you who are unfamiliar with this film, it is a story of two working-class female friends who embark on a weekend get away from the men in their lives. They end up at a roadside bar where a tipsy Thelma is assaulted by a would-be rapist, and Louise kills him to defend her. The two decide that they have no choice but to go on the run. They have various "on-the-road" adventures while being pursued by a particularly dogged policeman and, in the film's dramatic climax, they take their own lives in a high-speed car plunge over the edge of the Grand Canyon.

What is so useful for our purposes here is that the article gives a clear and detailed behind-the-scenes description of what went into the making of this film. Its description of the creative processes involved helps us to see practices and attributes that we might emulate in our own research. As such, even something so seemingly far afield as the making of a crime movie is instructive for us in the making of our own home runs. To test the utility of generalizing from the creative process Weller describes to the process of creating academic home runs, I applied the lessons from the making of this film to the aspirations set for and the making of the four home runs suggested above. I surveyed the authors regarding these issues (with no mention of any film etc.) and used their responses in my analysis.[2]

IDEAS MATTER: CHARACTERISTICS OF HIGH-IMPACT IDEAS

Simple and Communicable

Thelma and Louise was written by a 30-year-old music-video producer named Callie Khouri. She said that the idea for this film came to her in a flash of insight while driving home one night: "Out of nowhere I thought, two women go on a crime spree. That one sentence! I felt the character arcs—I saw the whole movie" (Khouri quoted in Weller, 2011: 318). What I like in this quote is the idea that the essence of her endeavor was based upon a simple, communicable idea: Two women go on a crime spree. This description of the genesis of *Thelma and Louise* raises the first important attributes for understanding academic home runs—the very best papers are based on simple, communicable ideas. Their theses can be conveyed easily and briefly. With a simple, communicable idea, people can use it because they can remember it and can convey it easily to others.

Consider the four exemplar papers on this dimension. Ibarra's paper on provisional selves is based on the simple idea that individuals figure out who they are at work by trying on various "ways of being" (provisional selves). Edmondson's paper on psychological safety has a similar simple story arc: People learn better when the context is supportive of openness. The empirical paper by Bunderson and Thompson makes the easily communicated point that meaningful work may come at the expense of money (i.e., pay). The paper by Morrison and Milliken shifts the long-standing discussion of individual-level voice decisions within organizations by making the easily grasped point that organizations and their leaders often create cultures of silence. Simple, communicable ideas make these four papers impactful. People are interested in them and can understand and begin to use what they are trying to communicate immediately.

Timely and Fundamental

It is notable that *Thelma and Louise* was novel for its time. A "buddy movie" with women had never been done before, and in 1991, it fit with a growing

[2] Quotes presented in this paper and references to these authors' thoughts were collected via personal communications (including primarily e-mail, but also phone and in-person conversations) with the authors from July, 2011, just prior to the Academy of Management presentation, through March of 2013 during the preparation of this paper.

women's movement in the United States. This pattern reflects the oft-given advice that being the hundredth paper articulating a simple communicable idea is not as impactful as being the first. But timeliness also reflects how a piece relates both to what is occurring in the culture (and, for us, in the literature to which it hopes to contribute). *Thelma and Louise* was also timely in this second sense. Feature films (and papers) are written, produced, and sent out into a particular cultural zeitgeist (meaning the fashion or preoccupation that typifies and influences the culture of a particular period in time), and its relationship to the zeitgeist matters. For example, Weller notes about *Thelma and Louise*,

> The Zeitgeist was at work in their favor. Here was a movie about wronged women addressing their situation with comic and tragic extremism. Versions of that same extremism were being played out by their real-life counterparts in news stories all over America.

The same movie coming out at a different time likely would have had a different impact. This observation suggests that [W]hether any piece of academic writing will have a major impact is not totally determined by the things an author does prior to its publication. It also depends on the state of the literature and what is occurring in the world.

For example, Ibarra's work on people's active stances during transitions was part of a movement at the time of its publication to consider the ways individuals are more active in their organizational lives. If that movement hadn't been there, the paper might have had less impact (or might have started one off!). Bunderson and Thompson highlight the possibility that people end up trading off money for meaning. The zookeepers they studied were paid very little, but felt called to do the work anyway, as it was personally meaningful to them. The article was timely in that meaning and the meaning of work were emerging at the time of their writing as a key theme, as Millennials began to be integrated into the workforce. And it was published during difficult economic times, making its juxtaposition of two elements foundational to life, meaning and money, sacred and profane, that much more impactful. I suspect that this paper will be heavily cited across many domains for articulating and providing evidence for this difficult trade-off. Morrison and Milliken's paper was published during the height of the pedophilia scandals within the Catholic Church. Given the many concerned about that set of events, this paper had special impact.

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Thelma and Louise also touched upon fundamental themes in our society. Themes of gender, power, and violence as a possible justified solution to abuse were woven throughout the film. These themes are relevant to people interested in women and feminism, but also to people interested in the social contract or the question of whether violence is ever justified. Because they touch on fundamental issues, the themes are broadly relevant to many groups with different interests. The film also brought together and integrated ideas that don't often go together, such as "buddy picture" and women and "road picture" and feminist parable. Thus, the film created interest and impact through touching on something fundamental that shows up in other areas of life beyond two women going on a road trip and also juxtaposing ideas that are not often seen together.

Home-run papers often do the same. For example, Edmondson's article highlighted the theme that "relational comfort governs individual action." This is a fundamental idea about human behavior and one that is relevant to scholars studying medical settings as Edmondson did, but also to many researchers in various areas examining a variety of different outcomes and making a variety of different arguments. For example, her ideas have been invoked in articles on knowledge creation and transfer (Levin & Cross, 2004); leadership development (Day, 2000); quality improvement (e.g., Choo, Linderman, & Schroeder, 2007); resilience (Weick & Sutcliffe, 2007); and cultural diversity (Ely & Thomas, 2001).

Ibarra's paper has had a similar broad appeal. It raises the theme of individual agency at times of transition—that transitions are not simply contexts that happen to an individual, but that the individual is trying to create reality as well as react to it. This idea is simple, communicable and fundamen-

tal. By fundamental I mean that the idea touches on something basic to humans in collective settings. As such, it is relevant across many domains. In her case, scholars have invoked her paper while studying topics as diverse as leadership development (Lord & Hall, 2005); dynamic delegation (Klein, Ziegert, Knight, & Xiao, 2006); and communities of practice (Handley, Sturdy, Fincham, & Clark, 2006), a sure indicator that this paper is raising something fundamental. Her paper is also a good example of juxtaposing ideas that don't often go together and being timely. At the time of her writing, transitions and identity weren't often considered together; perhaps because the research literature had tended to focus on the stable and enduring aspects of identity. In transitions, people also were mostly seen as trying to conform to the demands of a new situation and the thought that they also try to influence that situation by creating a particular image and identity within it had not been highlighted. Her article thus has had impact in part because it raised something fundamental and juxtaposed ideas that don't often go together.

Personally Relevant

The next attribute exemplified by the making of *Thelma and Louise* is one that has interested me for years. I have found it to be a common pattern among our field's very best academics—and that attribute is that this film resonated with its creator on a personal level. Weller (2011) notes that the screenwriter, Callie Khouri, had been the victim of two violent encounters in her life and had spent her early years working in the sexist world of music-video production. She also notes that this background all came out in the screenplay—that this story was personal for her.

My Michigan colleague, Karl Weick, and I both incorporate this idea into our PhD teaching, and he has discussed it in his writing (Weick, 1992). It is an attribute that often gives research articles the punch or "zing" that we associate with home runs. I don't know if it is that authors put more energy and passion into articles on issues that are personal for them or if those issues are more real and intriguing to the authors, and therefore, they "see more" about their topic, but it is certainly a trend that shows up in our four home runs.

Ibarra writes about her treatment of experimenting with image and identity: "I only realized afterwards just how autobiographical it was. There was a huge parallel between the experience of the professionals I studied and my struggle to become a credible MBA teacher at Harvard Business School. I was always advised 'be yourself in the classroom,' but that made no sense to me. I had to try on possible selves first." Edmondson notes a personal motivation for focusing on psychological safety, "I have to admit that I'm more interpersonally cautious than I wish I were. It's often hard for me to speak up, to criticize, and to admit error." Both Morrison and Milliken and Bunderson and Thompson talk about how their articles related closely to their experiences of their work and workplace. From Jeff Thompson:

> I feel like academia is a calling for me. And the "sharper edges" of calling show up all the time as I observe the challenges of the profession. [He goes on to note two examples:] For example, the euphoria I sometimes feel in the classroom comes with the burden of having to evaluate student performance, and possibly deflate the very people I have been hoping to inspire. The thrill of landing a publication is only possible because of grueling hours of lonely toil and inevitable setbacks.

Morrison and Milliken comment on the workplace origin of their theorizing about organizational silence:

> During this period of time [prior to beginning to write about organizational silence], speaking up with a different perspective than that favored by the leaders of our institution was perceived as extremely risky by many (most?) people in the organization. Thinking about whether and how to speak up with a dissenting opinion or about a sensitive issue occupied a lot of people's time and emotional space, including our own, and the climate of silence that was created led to widespread feelings of frustration and cynicism. Working within such an environment convinced us that the phenomenon was both real and important to understand.

It may be that personal relevance increases the authors' motivation to do the work necessary to make a fundamental contribution. It also seems to increase their attraction to discovery—to figuring out the puzzle that they are working on because it's something that they have been thinking about and working on

in their own lives as well. While not every home run paper in our field has personal relevance to the lives of its authors, this pattern shows up enough times that it's worth noting that there might be a payoff to authors from focusing their scholarship on things that they personally experience and are personally troubled or bemused by.

These four attributes characterize the content of both *Thelma and Louise* and our four exemplar articles: raising or touching on fundamental themes; integrating things that often don't go together; being timely/novel; and focusing on things that resonate on a personal level. These four form a template against which we might judge our own aspirations and work.

PROCESS MATTERS—CHARACTERISTICS OF A HIGH-IMPACT CREATIVE PROCESS

High Commitment–High Effort

The making of *Thelma and Louise* offers other, more process-related attributes that I believe also exemplify the making of most home runs in academia. Specifically, Weller's article describes the making of this film as one involving intense work, the need to overcome many obstacles and to keep going despite adversity. Weller (2011) notes that Khouri's screenplay was turned down by four producers before it was picked up by Ridley Scott. Once the film went into production, their main investor was caught up in a scandal and absconded with the money to pay for the postproduction work. This was a film that came to fruition only after much perseverance. In addition to that perseverance, though, everyone quoted in Weller's article talked about the process of filming *Thelma and Louise* as being one of high passion. There was very high commitment from all parties, and the process was very intense. Two implications for hitting academic homeruns strike me about these two attributes when considered together. The first is the idea that it's intense work. I don't believe that important home-run papers are papers that ever come easily. Rather, they involve some level of passionate commitment on the part of their authors and are typically bigger "chunks" of research involving lots of effort to bring to fruition. Second is the idea that adversity and roadblocks do not necessarily indicate that the endeavor is a bad idea. Those involved in the production of *Thelma and Louise* kept going despite setbacks; the same is true of many of our best papers.

Certainly, the authors of our four exemplar papers also noted attributes similar to the making of this movie in their work. While none of the authors described the work on their papers as fun, Ibarra comments that, "I don't know if the paper was fun, but it was very compelling—I wanted to work on it and it was hard to put down." Jeff Thompson reinforces this same message in his comment about his paper with Stuart Bunderson:

> This paper was far more personal, far riskier, and far more time-consuming than anything else I've done. The outcome seemed so uncertain. Our topic was a bit off-center and our mixed-method approach didn't fit easily into standard templates for how to write up research. As a result, I never felt certain that anyone else would be interested or that a good journal would publish it. So it was hard to keep going sometimes.

Morrison and Milliken describe a similar level of commitment:

> [O]f all the papers that either of us had written to that point in time, what stood out about this one was that we were both motivated to write this paper by a *very strong conviction* [*emphasis theirs*] that this was an important phenomenon for us as organizational scholars to write about and to understand. We had the sense that by writing about the organizational nature of the phenomenon of silence, we might be helping people to understand something important about their own personal experiences in organizations. We had a message that we wanted to convey, that was not merely "here is an important/interesting finding" or "here is a new theoretical insight or model."

And Edmondson describes the passion that went into her treatment of psychological safety and learning: "The paper was an unfolding journey. . . . Sometimes I feel I am still processing these data to figure out what they all mean." I love this quote because it suggests her passion and commitment to the topic. Her thinking about her topic didn't end when she got a "hit" in a journal, it wasn't a game to be played for her, but rather her topic still preoccupies her to this day. That is academia at its best. It shows a passion for the topic that I think gives us a better chance to create home runs.

Enabling Support

A feature film doesn't get made without the effort of many. Weller provides a detailed account of all the work that director Ridley Scott did in the making of *Thelma and Louise*, work without which Callie Khouri's original vision couldn't have gone anywhere. The authors of these four papers each similarly described the out-of-the-ordinary help they received in the review process as important to their success. Indeed, to mix metaphors horribly, it may take a village to create an academic grand-slam home run. Ibarra notes that an especially supportive editor helped neutralize a very hostile reviewer. Morrison and Milliken and Bunderson and Thompson note similar help from editors who believed in the work. And Edmondson comments that the reviewers of her paper helped immensely. She states,

> There is no question that what I originally submitted was not good enough to be published in ASQ. They [the reviewers] were generous sensemakers and saw a diamond in the rough, I suppose. They were kind—editors and reviewers alike—and helpful.

This pattern suggests an important lesson from these home-run papers: that many actors play a part in their creation. Reviewers who extend themselves to see what *Academy of Management Journa*l editor, Beyer (1996) also labeled, "diamonds in the rough" in particular papers and editors who go out on a limb, not just to follow reviewers in their comments but to look carefully to see possibilities in the work and offer support for it help to co-create the papers that the field comes to cherish. In this way reviewers and editors don't just fulfill their duties, but shape our field. Their eye for and effort toward the creation of home runs benefit us all.

Loose–Tight Properties

Two final process attributes from the making of *Thelma and Louise* also pertain to our home-run papers. The first is about getting the details right and the second is about incorporating improvisation in the process. Weller (2011) notes that Ridley Scott, the film's ultimate producer and director, was fanatical about details—about getting the feeling and tone just right. Weller (2011) recounts that on one trip driving back from scouting locations in Arkansas and Oklahoma, Scott "happened upon a female cement-mixer driver with a pack of Marlboros rolled into the sleeve of her T-shirt and knew he had the trucker hat for Davis, 'because this is what Thelma—who would start out a frilly-dress Barbie—will evolve into' (Scott quoted in Weller, 2011: 326). In another scene he personally sprayed Evian on one actor's abs, trying to get the look of a sex scene just right.

This hypersensitivity about the details shows up in our four exemplar articles as well. These articles are carefully crafted, with great attention to detail in the qualitative analyses presented by Ibarra, and Bunderson and Thompson, in the theorizing of Morrison and Milliken, and in the multimethod study presented by Edmondson. Thompson notes: "I can't tell you how agonizing it was to molecularly analyze the same interviews over and over to make sure that we had captured the meaning accurately and coded reliably. It was probably the most painstaking work I have ever done." And Edmondson remembers: "I obsessed over nearly every sentence." Apparently there are few shortcuts to a home run. However, both the film and these papers balance obsessive control over details with some degree of playfulness and improvisation in their creative process. Jeff Thompson talks about launching his project with Stuart Bunderson playfully: "Hey, let's go talk to zookeepers!" and notes how the fun of the research setting really buoyed him through tough stretches of the project's development. Amy Edmondson notes that at one point in developing her quantitative data she panicked, thinking

> that the study was overly dependent on survey measures and survey-survey relationships, so I developed a structured interview protocol as a triangulation test against some of the key team design variables and asked a research assistant (RA) blind to the other data to interview managers in a position to comment on each of the 51 teams' structure (not outcomes). The RA coded the managers' raw descriptions to produce quantitative scales, which were correlated with the survey data.

In other words, these authors were working down a path, attending carefully to details, but also improvising as conditions unfolded. Bunderson and Thompson describe an even more uncertain process, noting that the paper they ended up with, the paper that won multiple awards, was not the one they originally intended to write, but was

something that emerged from the data, causing them to shift the story that they wanted to tell. They started out to tell a story about people who worked for a cause and ended up telling the far more interesting story about how a calling to a cause can be both a blessing and a curse for their zookeepers and by extension for others. Along the way they describe a process of extensive analyzing and digesting of qualitative data—a process lasting "at least 2–3 years." Attention to detail, and loosening up, and improvising combined to create this award-winning paper. Thompson, though, would even take issue with this sentence, noting that "It was more like the paper revealed itself to us—ever so tortuously—than that we intentionally crafted it." This statement captures wonderfully the interplay of hard work and improvisation/openness that may help us to create home runs.

These then are the core lessons to be learned from Weller's description of the making of this iconic film for our own production of articles with high impact: Focus on a fundamental process, not just the relationship between two variables but understanding something at the level of process that can be used for exploring the relationship among a variety of variables; distill your understanding down to a simple communicable idea—the "whole movie" (whole idea) should be able to the communicated in a simple sentence; focus on something that has some personal relevance for you—perhaps it's a theme that relates to your life, something you haven't quite figured out yet; integrate things that perhaps other people haven't yet seen as going together; engage the work with both passion and careful attention to detail, don't stop when you face obstacles and be prepared to improvise along the way.

ADDITIONAL ATTRIBUTES: HELPING PAPERS CUT THROUGH COMMUNICATION CLUTTER

Two other attributes probably contributed to the impact of *Thelma and Louise*, and likely help make certain papers a home run as well: a little controversy and a little sex appeal. *Thelma and Louise* generated controversy. Reactions to the film were generally laudatory, but it also generated divided reactions: Weller (2011: 351) quotes John Leo of the *U.S. News & World Report* as saying that a close friend called him to say that *Thelma and Louise* "is a very disturbing film and I must write about it immediately." He did, stating that "Thelma and Louise's repeated paean to transformative violence was explicitly fascist." Sheila Benson, writing in *The Los Angeles Times*, called the movie, "A perversion of the women's movement's values of responsibility, equality, sensitivity, and understanding" (Benson, in Weller, 2011: 351). Richard Johnson, writing in the *New York Daily News* characterized the movie as justifying "armed robbery [and] manslaughter as exercises in consciousness raising" (quoted in Weller, 2011: 351).

While none of our exemplar articles generated overt controversy (e.g., in the form of published response articles, etc.), there certainly was much discussion at the time of their publication about, for example, whether psychological safety was rightly characterized as a group-level variable (as opposed to an individual belief/feeling); whether Bunderson and Thompson had truly captured the "correct" notion of *a calling* as it was interpreted in the literature; whether silence was already being covered in studies of voice (as the lowest levels of voice); and whether it was always bad. Articles that get people talking, debating, and questioning, are articles with more impact. The goal of "influencing the conversation" on a topic means more than just influencing the scholarly conversation among researchers in print—it starts with stimulating and influencing actual conversations in actual hallways, brown bags, seminars, and meetings. A little controversy can help.

And of course, the movie had a little sex appeal. (Some of you who remember the movie well have been waiting for me to get to this point!) This film was the making as a sex symbol of a virtual unknown actor at that time, Brad Pitt. The scene where a bare-chested Brad Pitt holds Thelma's hairdryer aloft as it was a gun and gives her his bank robbing speech was seen as the beginning of "Brad Pitt"—and definitely added sizzle to the film.

And a little sizzle certainly helps to create a home run, even in academia. We live in an age where academics are inundated with information—there are many more journals than there used to be, online journals, web versions of articles that can be obtained prior to the article ever coming out in print, presentations at the Academy and other conferences, blogs, list serv's, chat groups, and on and on. Putting a bit of something into your article that helps it stand out among this deluge is not a bad idea.

Our four exemplar articles all have that sizzle. Three of them coined new terms: psychological safety, provisional selves, and organizational silence. Certainly the phenomenon of people being anxious about speaking up in groups was present

prior to the Edmondson article. Jane Dutton and I had featured image risk as a prominent variable in our earlier work on selling issues within organizations (Dutton & Ashford, 1993), for example, and people had referenced it in work on help seeking (Lee, 1997); and feedback seeking (Ashford & Northcraft, 1992). But there was something about the naming of that phenomenon "psychological safety." I don't know if it was putting it in a positive frame (safety as opposed to risk) or the fact that the article featured the mechanism (safety) rather than the dependent variable (speaking up or seeking help), or if it was the newness of her finding that perceptions of safety varied so strongly from group to group even within a company with a strong corporate culture, but it achieved instant prominence. Everyone was talking about this variable.

Morrison and Milliken's labeling a concept related to the long-researched topic of people's unwillingness to speak up in an organization, "organizational silence," also put it instantly on people's conceptual maps. This new concept highlighted a different level of analysis, but it also captured a complex phenomenon (fear of speaking up in organizations) in just two words. Following the publication of their paper in 2000, Morrison and Milliken were immediately asked to host a special issue on organizational silence in *Journal of Management Studies*, and people immediately began considering whether voice and silence were two sides of the same coin or different phenomena altogether. Ibarra's labeling of the experiments that people engaged in agentically during transitions as "provisional selves" also added that dash of sex appeal. People had noted individuals' agency during transitions and had even argued that individuals try to shape their jobs or themselves during this process (Nicholson, 1984), but no one had talked about people taking on a new "self," one that was provisional, just one to be tried out to see if it fit and to see if it would be validated—and that idea, captured in her new label, enlivened the research area tremendously. As mentioned above, it has caught the imagination of scholars well beyond those studying transitions. And finally, any study that focuses on zookeepers in a thoughtful way as did Bunderson and Thompson has instant sex appeal. Who wouldn't want to learn more about this unusual profession?

Would these articles have been home runs if a clever concept or an interesting sample had been all they had? No. But it doesn't hurt. The new constructs and the interesting sample capture attention in a busy marketplace for ideas and help the ideas have impact. Don't underestimate the power of a little sex appeal.

Combining ideas, we come to an aspirational statement of what we might aim for in trying to create a home run in academia. Home runs begin with a simple, communicable, and timely or novel idea, raise or touch on fundamental themes relevant to our field broadly, integrate things that often aren't seen as going together, and express something that resonates with the author on a personal level. Home runs are characterized by a creative process that involves very hard work, perseverance in light of obstacles, and attention to detail, but also passion and improvisation. They often create or at least don't shy away from controversy and often have a little sex appeal as well.

THE FINAL LESSON FROM *THELMA AND LOUISE*

There is one final message from Weller's description of the process of making *Thelma and Louise* that is an important one for those of us who hope to create home runs in our research work. This final lesson comes from what became both the script's tagline for the film's characters and the motto for its production. And that tagline was "you get what you settle for." The two characters in this film were depicted as not settling for their lives with an alcoholic husband and an indifferent boyfriend, but rather as breaking out and creating what they most wanted: freedom and connection. Weller (2011: 351) ends her article by saying that "theirs was a motto that seemed to say at all: you get what you settle for." Regarding the making of the film, Weller (2011: 351) goes on to note, "Not on artistic, commercial, emotional, or sociopolitical grounds did *Thelma and Louise* settle. That is why in just two decades, it has become a classic."

The advice for all of us hoping to at least once in our lifetime contribute something that will become a classic couldn't be clearer: Don't settle! Don't settle artistically, don't settle methodologically, don't settle conceptually, and don't settle politically. Focus on topics to which you resonate, take the risks that need to be taken, get the details right, add a little sex appeal, and keep going no matter what the roadblocks. The most profound lesson from exploring the making of this film and our four exemplar articles perhaps is just this—to keep your aspirations high. Don't settle—go for the big hit, go for the home run!

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