

Vanity in Anthropology

About the Art of Showing through Non-Showing

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André Köbben, whose final publication led to this special issue (see Bovenkerk, Brunt, and Tromp 2020), was my PhD supervisor and later became a friend. He was without doubt the most successful Dutch anthropologist of his generation and is generally considered the father of cultural anthropology in the Netherlands (Strating and Verrips 2005). More than 25 years after his retirement, at the age of 92, he published a thin book (95 pages) about the role of vanity in science (Köbben 2017). It was a curious document in which he aired his grievances about colleagues in the social and other sciences who in his opinion had been driven by (too much) vanity at the expense of the quality of their work. I recognised some of the stories about these colleagues from our conversations a long time ago. This little publication was seemingly his last attempt to settle certain accounts or at least to get some irritations

off his chest. The names of the ten scientists he was targeting were boldly printed on the cover of the book.

I knew he had begun working on this publication. But when I asked him some time later how the work was progressing, he told me that it had been published about a year ago. I was surprised because I had not noticed it. The publication had not received the publicity one would expect. He gave me a copy and asked if I could write a review. When I read the text that same day, I realised that I had manoeuvred myself into an awkward position. It was not the kind of book that academic journals would be eager to review. It was more of a personal testimony. At the same time, I liked the point he was raising: vanity as a driving force in science, including anthropology, a phenomenon that everyone could probably recognise but preferred to keep silent about. Was it a taboo, an uncomfortable

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truth, a skeleton in the closet? Or simply something that everyone took for granted?

Instead of a conventional review, I decided to write a more playful essay which was fortunately accepted in the only Dutch-language social science journal still existing in the Netherlands (Van der Geest 2019). This current article for *Etnofoor* draws on this Dutch essay and tries to extend it by including a discussion on recent digital developments that facilitate the production and exchange of scientific work and augment the visibility of academic publications. These developments simultaneously boost the seduction of vanity in professional careers. They also moot the question of whether vanity in academics is good and useful, even necessary, or a bad and harmful thing.

Discussions about the drive of vanity in academic anthropology have hardly taken place, as I was soon to discover. The near absence of these discussions is puzzling if we take into account the popularity of confessional anthropology (e.g. Van Maanen 2011 [1988]) and auto-ethnography (e.g. Davis 2008). But before focusing on anthropology's vanity, let us briefly look at vanity from a more general perspective.

Vanity

A glance at the varied meanings and connotations of vanity shows that it has overwhelmingly been condemned and viewed as a prelude to tragedy. Anyone looking for what philosophers and moralists have written about vanity will soon stumble on the Thomistic doctrine of virtue. Thomas Aquinas called vanity (pride, *superbia*) the worst of the seven capital sins. The

other six all come from vanity, because vanity means measuring yourself against God and thinking that you know everything and can afford to do anything. At the same time, vanity to him means idleness, emptiness, uselessness. One of the proverbs in the Old Testament is probably the best known statement about the foolishness of vanity: 'Pride goes before destruction, a haughty spirit before a fall' (Proverbs 16:18). Thomas Aquinas would probably have agreed with the more laical definition of vanity by the Oxford English Dictionary as 'the excessive belief in one's own abilities or attractiveness to others', or that by the Dutch dictionary Van Dale that mentions two meanings: 'too high an opinion of one's own excellence' and 'the desire to be admired and praised by others'. A Dutch synonym of vanity (usually translated as *ijdelheid*) is *verwaandheid*, which literally means 'having a delusion / being deluded'. These two characteristics, self-centredness and being misled, go together in the concept of vanity, but the overriding qualification is one of moral disapproval.

The moral condemnation of vanity is omnipresent in Greek mythology and narratives about 'hubris' (excessive pride or self-confidence, arrogance) that fill the classic Greek tragedies. The Dutch Wikipedia page on hubris provides a list of 24 Greek characters whose downfall was caused by an excessive belief in their own excellence.¹ Some of the best known are Achilles, Narcissus, Prometheus, Sisyphus, Tantalus, and Icarus. The Greek tragic heroes have their counterpart in Christian mythology in the fallen angel Lucifer (Satan) who tries to overthrow God. Lucifer's fall inspired several seventeenth century Christian poets such as John Milton (*Paradise Lost*) and the Dutch Joost van

den Vondel (*Lucifer*). Both Milton and Van den Vondel also described the expulsion of Adam and Eve from the Garden of Eden in the biblical book of Genesis as the result of their attempt to become immortal like God. The theme of vanity and pride causing one's downfall have also been a favourite topic for visual artists, thus confirming or spreading the idea of vanity's sinfulness and foolishness.

The contemporary Dutch philosopher Frank Meester (2010) thinks, however, that vanity is an underestimated virtue. I read his treatise, but the blurb on the cover of his book summarises his view on vanity best: 'Without the urge to be special, we dwell in the shadow of anonymity and would never reach immortality. There would be no art, literature, top sports or science. Without vanity we would be nothing, because we are simply not much more than the stories others tell about us' (my translation). Does this provocative reversal of the appreciation of vanity's contribution to human creativity reflect what moves present-day scientists, including anthropologists, to ostentatiously promote their own work in publications and e-mails, at conferences and on websites?

An anthropology of vanity?

The call for papers for this issue of *Etnofoor* invites authors 'to reflect on the role of vanity in the multiple social worlds that ethnographers inhabit'. My thoughts went to my many years of fieldwork in a rural Ghanaian community. Did I ever discuss concepts like pride (*ahantan*, *ahokyere*) or vanity (*ahuhude*, *ahuhusem*) with

the people in the town? In fact, I did not even know the latter two terms. When someone acted arrogantly or pompously, people disapprovingly said (and I did as well): *ɔkyere ne ho* (literally he/she shows him-/herself). A common proverb was my favourite way of jokingly criticising someone's self-satisfaction: *nkyene nkamfo ne ho* (salt does not praise itself); an approximate equivalent to the meaning and feeling of the Dutch expression *eigen roem stinkt* (self-praise stinks). The Dutch expression beautifully articulates that self-praise is counterproductive and reminds us of the biblical proverb that pride comes before a fall. Therefore, if you are complacent and proud, you should avoid showing this openly and rather find a way to make others praise you. Vanity only works if you are able to hide it and at the same time seduce others to express their admiration for you.

Returning to the Ghanaian (Akan) context, a concept that is a fairly close antonym to pride and vanity is 'respect' (*obuo*). The term 'respect' refers to modest and polite behaviour, whereas 'disrespect' (*ommu adee*; he/she does not respect) is a key term used to criticise all kinds of improper behaviour. During my research on concepts and practices of old age and care, discussions about respect and disrespect were plentiful. The older generation used the terms to praise or criticise the younger generation (and vice versa!) (Van der Geest 2002). Respect is a master key that can be applied to anything in life. It is a metonym for any imaginable act, word, or thought. If something (or someone) is good, it can be expressed through the term 'respect' or 'respectful'. If something (or someone) is bad, it is said that it (he/she) lacks respect. Respect designates

the moral dimension of life. It vaguely reminds me of Thomas Aquinas's statement that *vanitas* is the root of all sins. I cannot think of any act or gesture in the Akan context that is entirely excluded from the domain of (dis)respect. Moreover, and most importantly, respect is firmly attached to and dependent on visibility. What is not seen escapes the moral judgement of good or bad. Consequently, successful or counterproductive vanity depends on the subtle play of showing and hiding.

These words could have been the introductory lines to an ethnography of vanity (and humbleness) in a Ghanaian context, but my intention with this paper is not to pursue an anthropology of vanity; I rather want to write about the vanity of (or in) anthropology, following in André Köbben's footsteps.

The vanity of anthropology

Köbben's main question was whether an excess of vanity had harmed the quality of the scientific work of the ten colleagues he was targeting. Let us confine ourselves to Köbben's critical comments regarding two anthropologists (Claude Lévi-Strauss and Mart Bax) and one sociologist (Norbert Elias), the latter of whom influenced several anthropologists, including Bax.

Bax is an anthropologist who wrote about the politics of religious institutions in the Dutch province of Noord Brabant and in the pilgrimage town of Medjugorje in Bosnia. In 2013, Bax was accused of fraud by a special academic commission. The report concluded that Bax had probably made up or grossly exaggerated much of the ethnographic data in his publications. The term 'probably' was used because Bax never admitted any

wrongdoing. His defence was that he was obliged to hide the identity of his informants and therefore could not respond to the overwhelming evidence brought against him. For Köbben, Bax provides a clear example of anthropology being harmed by vanity; by his desire to publish 'exciting' data that would attract colleagues and reap admiration. His vanity not only drove him to embellish his ethnographic work unduly, but also to increase its quantity; his list of publications contained some titles that did not even exist and some that were heavily self-plagiarised (Van Kolfshoeten 2012: 190-202; Köbben 2017: 55-61). Admiration from colleagues was more important to Bax than anthropology, Köbben concludes.

Vanity's damage to science is obvious in the case of Bax's fraud, but is far more difficult to ascertain for the other two – renowned – scholars. In 'investigating' Norbert Elias, who had – and still has – a large following among Amsterdam sociologists and some anthropologists, Köbben quotes from Elias's own memoirs in Heerma van Voss and Van Stolk (1986). During seven extensive conversations with the 87-year-old Elias, which are included in the memoirs, one of his interlocutors said: 'You have always had a remarkable self-confidence'. The conversation continued as follows:

Elias: 'I don't know if it's remarkable, but I've never doubted that I was right'.

She: 'Isn't it remarkable when someone is certain that what he is saying is important?'

Elias: 'Yes, but I have and always had that certainty, even if it went against the people who were in charge. I am a little proud of that' (Heerma van Voss and Van Stolk 1986: 24-25, my translation).

Elias's complacency does not detract from the inspiration he provided to a large number of sociologists and anthropologists. Nor should the many debates and disputes about Elias's grand theory of civilisation and configuration be seen as signs that he misled science. The anthropologist Anton Blok criticised Elias's concept of civilisation in his contribution to a double special issue of the *Sociologische Gids*, but also wrote:

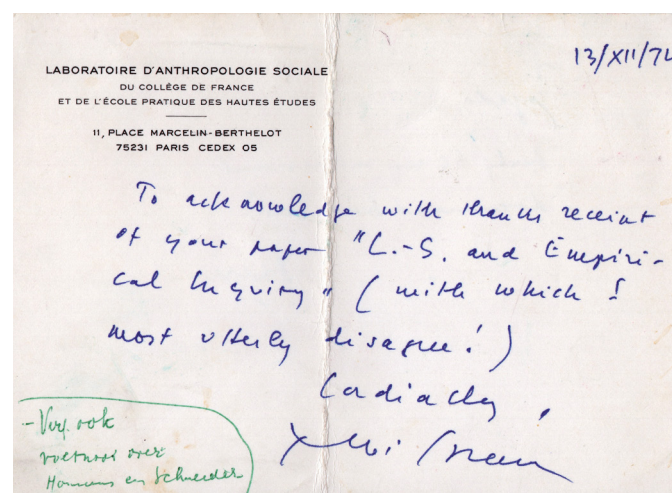
The merit of Elias's study of civilising processes in Western Europe is that it draws our attention to the theme, idiom, and functions of civilisation – not only in Western Europe, but also in other societies, including the so-called 'primitive' ones. His work thus offers points of departure for a more general understanding of civilisation and for a comparative study of civilising processes (Blok 1982: 205, my translation).

But, according to Köbben, Elias did inflict some 'limited damage' by refusing to respond to critical comments about his work. His 'excessive belief' in his own excellence and always being right prevented the type of debate that science – including anthropology – needs in order to progress. The critique by anthropologists of his over-generalised (and according to some, ethnocentric) concept of civilisation is a case in point (see also Thoden van Velzen 1982).

Another – intriguing – observation from Köbben is that most of the authors he criticises are brilliant writers. It is not only vanity that beats science, but aesthetics too. One could say that the beauty of the text is part of the author's vanity. Köbben's praise regarding writing style applies to both Bax and Elias, and most

of all to the third 'anthropologist' on his list, megastar Claude Lévi-Strauss.

Lévi-Strauss, like Elias, is criticised for his self-righteousness and the fact that he did not deign to respond to serious criticism of his work. Köbben provides a list of some solid criticisms of Lévi-Strauss's work (Homans and Schneider 1955; Aspelin 1975; Revel 1962; Korn 1973), which never received any serious reaction. The same happened to Köbben himself and two young colleagues of his, who spent two months writing a critique of Lévi-Strauss's kinship claims. Their article was published in *Ethnologist* (Köbben, Verrips, and Brunt 1974). When they sent Lévi-Strauss an offprint, as was the custom at that time, they received a postcard with the text: 'To acknowledge with thanks receipt of your paper "L.-S. and Empirical Inquiry" (with which I most utterly disagree!) Cordially, Claude Lévi-Strauss'. We shall never know if Lévi-Strauss actually read the article. I can imagine that Köbben maintained a lifelong grudge against such a condescending colleague.



Another issue regarding Lévi-Strauss's work and personality, according to Köbben and many others, is that he made numerous assertions with much aplomb that arose largely from his rich imagination and not from empirical research. And again, he simply disregarded any criticism of these claims. Lévi-Strauss's most celebrated book *Tristes Tropiques* (1974 [1955]) is a fascinating and erudite travelogue, but is not based on ethnographic empiricism, as the author claimed. Based on Patrick Wilcken's (2010) biography of Lévi-Strauss, Köbben describes his 'fieldwork' for this famous book as follows:

The author [Wilcken] fully admits that Lévi-Strauss never really did any anthropological fieldwork. He explains his statement with an accurate account of the eight months Lévi-Strauss spent in the Amazon in 1938. At the time he was part of an expedition entirely in the style of 19th century explorers. A caravan of 20 people (5 researchers and 15 subordinates), with 20 oxen, 15 mules, some horses and a truck, which had to transport tons of material and supplies. They moved painfully slowly through the area, but did not stay anywhere long. That alone made proper anthropological research impossible. For communication with the indigenous population, Lévi-Strauss had to rely on interpreters who spoke Portuguese, but his knowledge of that language was poor (he taught at the university in French). And, perhaps most importantly, he hated those Indians and they hated him (Köbben 2017: 20).

As I just mentioned, several examples of Lévi-Strauss's ethnographically unsubstantiated claims have been

exposed in anthropological publications. Let us look at one more closely. In his widely quoted article 'The effectiveness of symbols', Lévi-Strauss (1968) witnesses an Indian (Cuna) shaman performing a ritual for a woman in a difficult labour. He contends that the shaman's chant brings about physiological changes in the woman resulting in a safe delivery. Lévi-Strauss's reading of the event has been repeatedly criticised by students of Cuna culture and by medical anthropologist Carol Laderman (1983: 145-147), who argues that the words of the shaman were incomprehensible to the woman. Moreover, the text of the song and the resulting events are lifted out of their social and cultural context. Lévi-Strauss's point that words can heal certainly makes sense, as numerous other anthropological studies have shown, but it is not warranted by the author's brief observation. Laderman then continues to show how non-semantic (unintelligible) words can also bring about a sphere conducive to healing (see also Laderman 1987). As far as I know, Lévi-Strauss also never responded to these critical comments of one of his most celebrated publications.

Köbben's conclusion is that Lévi-Strauss presented his philosophical and poetic reflections as ethnographic data and, in spite of numerous criticisms, never seems to have admitted the ethnographic shallowness of the 'data' in his *Tristes Tropiques* and other publications deriving from his celebrated travelogue. The reason: vanity.

The charm of Köbben's reflection is not the scientific rigour of his argument but its personal autobiographical character. The oral tradition arising from his career in anthropology allows the reader to look behind the stately front of academic work and see the squab-

bling and quarrelling, the bouts of envy, and most of all the excesses of vanity and touchiness. Some amount and some kind of vanity is normal and indispensable in daily life, including when doing anthropology, but there is a point where it starts to become self-destructive. In my attempt to sketch the features of 'good' and 'bad' vanity in anthropology, I will now draw attention to modern technological, mainly digital, phenomena that have had a tremendous impact on vanity in academia.

Digital seducers

Let us look at a few examples of seduction techniques with which the internet constantly harasses (or caresses) us. A quick tour of my not-yet-deleted e-mail messages from a few months ago yielded some representative examples of that daily stream of temptations appealing to my vanity (see appendix). They will undoubtedly represent a phenomenon familiar to most readers. But not to André Köbben, who shrugged his shoulders and looked puzzled when I proposed to scan some of his publications and place them on the internet. He did not see the use of it, though today it is a basic necessity for every scholar (and increasingly also student) of the present generation. Köbben's indifference shows how quickly the internet has changed the academic landscape.

One of the first manifestations of this changing landscape was the counting and weighting of publications that started to occur at end of the 1970s, when academic institutions began publishing overviews listing all publications per employee in the past year. I remember my uneasiness when seeing in print, next to

each other, the achievements or the lacunas of myself and my colleagues. Both being at the top or near the bottom caused embarrassment, personal as well as vicarious. We had become used to it by the time annual reports began to count the number of times our book or article had been cited and to differentiate the citations according to the reputation (impact factor) of the journal where the citation had been made. It alerted us to check the score of the journal and the points that would be earned when submitting our manuscripts. Statisticians drew up 'quotation groups', authors that frequently cited one another. It was not always clear to what extent this mutual sharing was based on common anthropological interests or on calculated reciprocity and friendship. The first thing most of us do (if I am not misinformed) when reading a new publication in 'our' field is to check the references to see if our work has been cited. Vanity of vanities.

After the turn of the century, a host of sites appeared that increased the possibilities to search and share research and publications beyond imagination, and thereby facilitated and encouraged the 'cultivation' of academic vanity. ResearchGate was founded in 2008 as a networking site for scientists and now has about 20 million users. The interest of scientists in the tool can be explained by ResearchGate's free promotion of their work and its use of metrics to provide authors with 'RG scores'. To be frank, I did not fully understand what the RG score stands for, and searching the internet, the exact substance of the score remained rather obscure:

According to ResearchGate, the score includes the research outcomes that you share on the platform, your interactions with other members, and the

reputation of your peers (i.e., it takes into consideration publications, questions, answers, followers). The RG Score is displayed on every profile alongside the basic information about a researcher.²

Although ResearchGate has been criticised for many of its practices, such as its unsolicited invitations and the lack of transparency of its RG score, its popularity is immense.

Drawing from my own experiences, every Monday morning I receive a message saying: ‘Congratulations Sjaak, you achieved top stats last week’. Initially this came as a pleasant surprise, but by now it simply reminds me that a new week has started. I have no idea what ‘top stats’ means, top of what? Nor do I know whether my colleagues also achieved top stats the previous week. Almost every day, ResearchGate sends me messages informing me that I have been quoted by someone or that my weekly stats are ‘here’ (click), or that a colleague from a university somewhere on the globe is ‘following’ me (inviting me to check who or where that person is). Requests for publications from students and colleagues anywhere in the world are also frequent in the ResearchGate correspondence. All of these messages flatter me, but they have become a nuisance as well. A few years ago, I mercilessly redirected ResearchGate messages to my spam box, but I realised that by doing so I was missing out on messages that I did find useful. I welcomed ResearchGate back to my inbox and have learned to live with it. After all, it is a convenient way to find colleagues close by and faraway who are working on the same research topics that I do. Moreover, I am happy with the fact that my work is accessible to a wide audience, in particular to

students who do not enjoy the luxury of a well-stocked digital library at their home university. It is not my intention to reduce the platform to a vanity producer, but it would be naïve to call its vanity seduction a minor side effect.

There are numerous other networking sites, such as Academia, Mendeley, and LinkedIn that work in similar ways and therefore do not need to be discussed here (but see the appendix). Google Scholar, the world’s largest search engine for scientific publications, which started around 2005, should, however, be added to our discussion. In 2015, Google Scholar had almost twice as many users as ResearchGate when it came to searching for and accessing publications. Google Scholar is, furthermore, not intrusive and is more reliable and transparent than ResearchGate. I find it a wonderful site that helps me to find publications related to my research and provides credible insight into the quality of that literature. It also enables me to feed my vanity by tracking the interest that others have in my work and thus cite me. In addition, the site offers a citation index of my published work and a so-called ‘h-index’.

The h-index measures the productivity and citation impact of publications. Academic successes, research fellowships, and university positions are included in the algorithm ranking. Even if we do not understand what the h-index exactly indicates, we know that the higher the figure, the better. So we can satisfy (or frustrate) our vanity by comparing our h-index figure with that of others, for example our close colleagues. Furthermore, we can do so privately at home on our laptops, without anyone noticing our vanity-driven search for validation of our own excellence.

Another significant and attractive feature of Google Scholar, available since 2012, is the possibility to create personal ‘citation profiles’ that list an author’s publications in chronological order or according to the number of citations it received. For each listed publication, you can click on a link to see all other publications that cite it. As authors, we could spend hours clicking and following up on those who cite us and seeing what exactly was cited. The pleasure it provides is of the same order as that of the artist admiring his own painting, or rather enjoying the admiration of others for his painting. Wikipedia’s article on Google Scholar remarks that its ‘cited by’ feature poses serious competition to Scopus and Web of Science.³

The mushrooming of new commercially-driven journals that offer to publish manuscripts within two weeks or shorter is another symptom of academic vanity. There is a shortage of journals to digest the avalanche of manuscripts that are daily produced. The writers, not the readers, need more journals, preferably journals that do not pester you with – equally vanity-driven – peer reviewers or editors who reject ninety percent of manuscript submissions. Tragically, you may not be aware that the journal that finally places your article on the internet is known among your colleagues as a ‘fake’ journal and that the publication of your text in that dubious journal will damage if not destroy your reputation.

Several ‘fake’ publishers offer the publication of a thesis in a couple of weeks. Lambert Academic Publishing (LAP) is a prominent and notorious example. It spams scholars who have completed their thesis, promising to convert it into a real hardbound book. All they will do is scan and print your text as you

submitted it. You will then receive a ‘complimentary’ copy of the book and it will be up for sale (for a very high price) on the internet. The price for the author is also high, but the temptation to hold your book like a sweet baby in your arms within a couple of weeks may be irresistible for some. Regrettably, hardly anyone will buy the book, but if you are lucky, some may put the title in the list of references of their own publications. They have not seen, let alone read, the book, but the title may be enough to get it on the list. Unfortunately, having your book published by LAP will ultimately prove detrimental to your status when you submit your list of publications in the process of applying for an academic position.

The same applies to ‘predatory conferences’ that present themselves as legitimate conferences that will make you and your work more visible. They are, however, ‘... exploitative as they do not provide proper editorial control over presentations, and advertising can include claims of involvement of prominent academics who are, in fact, uninvolved’.⁴

I could go on pointing at digital innovations that enlarge the possibilities of ‘advertising’ and searching for academic work, and by doing so perfect the ‘toys’ that facilitate our academic vanity. I will close with two examples that I find particularly intriguing. The first presents itself as ‘The Scientific News’ and promises to increase the visibility of our published work on the internet (see appendix). The second is the most fascinating; numerous agencies and individual entrepreneurs offer their assistance to get you into Wikipedia (see my example in the appendix). On LinkedIn I found a message from ‘Viral your Website’ appealing to my vanity with the following words: ‘You really

know you've "made it" when there's a Wikipedia page dedicated to you. The challenge, of course, is getting yourself listed on Wikipedia in the first place'. But 'Viral your Website' can help. Wikipedia does not want self-glorifying contributions, but can it stop clever ghost writers from doing it for you? This is Wikipedia's take:

Are you planning to write a Wikipedia article about yourself? Are you planning to pay for someone to write an article on your behalf? Before you proceed, please take some time to thoroughly understand the principles and policies of Wikipedia, especially one of its most important policies, the neutral point of view (NPOV) policy.

Wikipedia seeks neutrality. An article about you written by anyone must be editorially neutral. It will not take sides and will report both the good and the bad about you from verifiable and reliable sources. It will not promote you. It will just contain factual information about you from independent, reliable sources.⁵

In other words, if you, or a friendly volunteer or a well-paid professional text writer, succeeds in getting your name and achievements into Wikipedia in a neutral manner, you have 'made it', to quote the LinkedIn message. The simple fact that you are on Wikipedia is more than you could have dreamt of when you started your career in anthropology: you are in an encyclopaedia! Not in the Britannica, but nevertheless. There is a risk, however. If my colleagues see my name appear in Wikipedia, they may wonder how I got there. They will assume that I had arranged it, probably with someone's help. My vanity will be exposed and behind my

back they may make fun of me. The game of vanity must be played cleverly!

Conclusion

I agree with Köbben that an excess of vanity may damage the quality of our work (without, ironically, damaging our reputation in some cases). But it is not necessarily true that disregarding critics and sticking to one's guns always impairs science. There are well-known examples of scientists who resisted or ignored their critics and were found to be right after all (Einstein, for example), but I think they are the famous exceptions to the rule. The three cases from Köbben's book that I present in this essay convince me that the quality of these scholars' work would have been higher if they had listened to their critics.

In this essay, my interest in academic vanity shifted, however, from Köbben's quest to uncover its damaging consequences to vanity as an attractive but problematic and risky thing in science, and in anthropology in particular, as I suggest in the subtitle of this essay. Vanity has without doubt always been a driving force in our discipline, but only to a certain extent. To use Elias's terms, *Fremdzwang* (external constraint) growing into *Selbstzwang* (self-constraint) keeps people from openly showing their vanity to others. Statistical developments followed by digital innovations have made it possible to increase our vanity without revealing it to others, as we have seen in the examples discussed above. But maintaining the delicate balance between showing and hiding remains a formidable challenge. The paradox here is that while the essence of vanity is to make others

see our excellence, we must hide the fact that *we* are trying to rouse their admiration. Our showing should not be regarded as showing off. The more modest you appear, the more effective your showing will be. The dissimulation of vanity is a crucial constituent of vanity's Janus face. Of course, *Quod licet Iovi non licet bovi*; some big shots (Lévi-Strauss? Elias?) may be regarded as not being affected by this psychological and social mechanism. They are allowed to advertise their exceptional status without inhibition.

At the same time, I believe that this particular force of external constraint is currently diminishing. We can afford and are expected to show off more today than we could a few decades ago. I speculate that digitalisation has increased our tolerance for the ostentatious advertising of one's achievements, perhaps because it does not have to be us but a machine or algorithm that is responsible for it. Automatic digital signatures in e-mail that list our honorific positions and titles plus the last five books that we have published are an example. Of course everyone knows that we ourselves fabricated this signature, but the machine has, as it were, taken over. Moreover, if others have those trumpeting signatures in every e-mail they send, should we not do the same?

This brings me to another aspect of shifting mores in vanity and *Fremdzwang*: the precarity of today's academic labour market contributes to a need for young academics to make themselves visible. The circumstances, one could say, force 'vanity' onto them. Vanity brought about through external pressures seems no longer 'vain'. The philosopher Frank Meester, whom I mentioned earlier, seems to me a product of this change in the academic world.

Vanity in science? Yes! And we see it all around us and within ourselves. Personal websites and whipped-up cvs, self-written entries on Wikipedia, publication lists in Google Scholar, ResearchGate, and Academia, the proliferation of dubious open access journals, and so on; they are all expressions and drivers of our vanity. But without that vanity – and Frank Meester may be right about this – we would not be noticed and we would not get the job that we want. Vanity is a driving force of the scientific multinational company. Or am I going too far in my own vanity to write an essay with print screens referring directly or obliquely to my own work in anthropology? Be that as it may, it is time to take to heart the playful rebuke of an emeritus professor such as Köbben. We need a larger and more profound self-reflective exploration of the role of vanity in our production of anthropological and ethnographic accounts. And to return to Köbben, we should be more attentive to the boundary between useful and harmful vanity. Where is the tipping point that the Austrian writer Marie von Ebner-Eschenbach referred to when she wrote: *Wo die Eitelkeit anfängt, hört der Verstand auf* (Where vanity begins, reason ends)?⁶ And how seriously should we take Arthur Schopenhauer's (2004 [1818]) warning that the importance of truth should not give way to the importance of vanity and pride?

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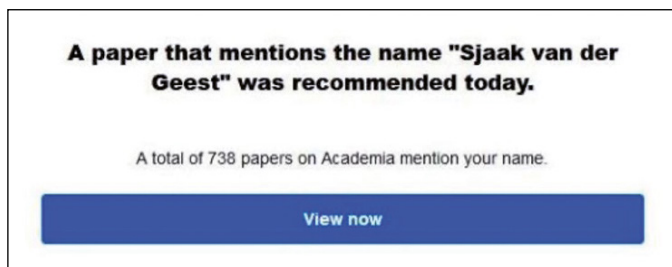
Acknowledgments

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Appendix: Appeals to vanity in science

To conclude, a few examples of the internet's seductions in my inbox. I am sure that most readers will recognise them.

1. Academia

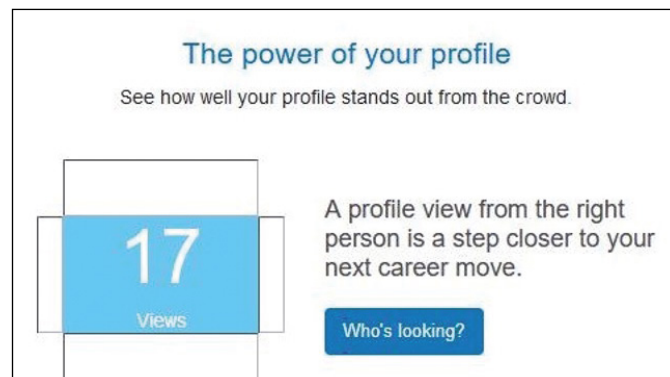


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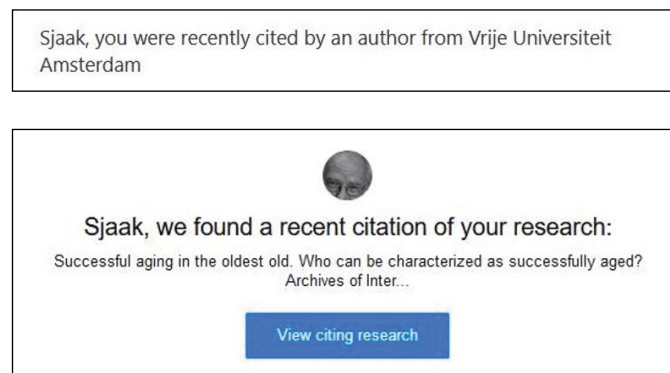
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17
Views


A profile view from the right person is a step closer to your next career move.

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3. ResearchGate



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Sjaak, we found a recent citation of your research:

Successful aging in the oldest old. Who can be characterized as successfully aged?
Archives of Inter...

[View citing research](#)

4. Wikipedia

Get Featured in Wikipedia

 Emily <editor@indexsciences.com>
Mon 3/18, 1:33 AM
Geest, Sjaak van der

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Dear Dr.Sjaak Van Der Geest,

Have you ever wondered of having a Wikipedia page for yourself or your company? We can help you get a Wikipedia page for yourself or your brand.

Usually Wikipedia only accepts pages on celebrities and famous companies, if you are looking to get one for your self, we can help you with that. Having a page for yourself in Wikipedia, brings you more credibility and makes you more famous.

We have been editing on Wikipedia for 7+ years and We've created tons of pages for companies, people, brands, products, and of course for academic purposes as well.

We own multiple accounts on Wikipedia with page curation and new page reviewer rights, so i can create and moderate pages with almost zero risk of another mod taking it down.


There are few wikipedia editors who are willing to create a page for money, and most of them are scared to offer this service directly, so they do it through their trusted sellers who markup the price to \$1500 - \$2500 per page.

Because you're buying directly from an experienced wikipedia editor and mod, you'll get your page a lot cheaper, faster and with more reliability.

Let me know if you are interested

Regards
Emily

5. News media

 Margaret <margaret@indexofscience.org>
Yesterday, 1:14 AM
Geest, Sjaak van der

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joelheid

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📄 Action Items

Dear Dr. Sjaak van der Geest,

Just a quick note to say I have seen some of your work online, Largely, a big congratulations for such an incredible amount of hard work and remarkable research. We are interested to distribute a news article featuring you and your research.

Our organisation works with researchers to help compliment their published papers with additional 'broadcasting' activities. This is shown to greatly increase the visibility and awareness of a published paper, and create compelling numbers in regards to public outreach. Something we understand is extremely important within the research community at present.

Why Work with the News Media?

A quote from you in Yahoo News, Google News, Bing News, the Daily Mail and The Guardian would reach an audience of over 23 million (based on National Readership Survey 2017/18). Possibly the best way to communicate with the public The majority of the public get their information about science from the media (Ipsos MORI Public Attitudes to Science 2018).

We are a specialist agency "The Scientific News" working within the research community to produce high-value, impactful communications content for researchers. This content is available to a broad global audience and distributed to over 500+ premium news sites including Google News, Yahoo News, Bing News, WND, Apple News, Ask, CBS, CNN, Bloomberg & More, which also include key research community actors, research peers, government figures, funding agencies, policy makers, NGOs, charities, schools and libraries, investors and commercial entities, and many more.

If our work could be of benefit to you, Please submit your most recent research paper as attachment to this email.

Notes

- 1 [https://nl.wikipedia.org/wiki/Hybris_\(Oudgrieks\)](https://nl.wikipedia.org/wiki/Hybris_(Oudgrieks)) (accessed on 11 February 2021).
- 2 <https://blogs.lse.ac.uk/impactofsocialsciences/2015/12/09/the-researchgate-score-a-good-example-of-a-bad-metric/> (accessed on 7-April 2021).
- 3 https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Google_Scholar (accessed on 11 February 2021).
- 4 https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Predatory_conference (accessed on 11 February 2021).
- 5 https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Wikipedia:An_article_about_yourself_isn%27t_necessarily_a_good_thing (accessed on 11 February 2021).
- 6 https://www.gutzitiert.de/aphorismen_parabeln_maerchen_und_gedichte-marie_von_ebner_eschenbach-kapitel_3.html (accessed on 11 February 2021).

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