

Acknowledgements

It is said that the the parts of a thesis that are read most often are the acknowledgements and the bibliography. Though probably true, this is fascinating because in many aspects the acknowledgements and the bibliography are the most boring parts of a book. They are rather dull lists of names, combined with respectively compliments or article details. If anything, the real meat of a thesis is not to be found in any of those two sections. What is it that attracts so many people to these sections?

Let me guess. Lists of names give the reader a peek into the personal life of the author. Who are his friends? What does his professional network look like? As a researcher on the subject of privacy, this begs the question. Actually, two questions: Why does one voluntarily give up one's own privacy? Why don't all the mentioned people object to being mentioned? The answer to the first question boils down an undisclosed mixture combination of politeness, window-dressing, and sincerity. The answer to the second question is more intriguing.

There is an implicit contract that one shall only say positive things about the people mentioned in the acknowledgements. Privacy infringements are not that bad if only positive information is disclosed. But what if politeness urges one to mention somebody, though the author is not generally positive about the person in question? The trained reader immediately recognizes such cases. Typically, supervisor X has been praised extravagantly, and supervisor Y is acknowledged only for "the interesting discussions". Why stick to the contract?

Though the availability of dirty laundry is not a constraining factor, I will leave the question unanswered. Instead, I will focus on another dilemma, proportionality versus exhaustiveness. When I want to express my gratitude towards someone, a logical place to do so is in the acknowledgements. As not all people have contributed equally, some people deserve more attention than others. Consider the situation where person X did everything possible, and even a bit more, while person Y was so polite to answer an informational email. Would it be disproportional if I took only ten times as many words to express my gratitude towards X ?

I daresay it would. Absolutely. As such, and in this context, exhaustiveness implies disproportionality. Still, and in this context, exhaustiveness is a negotiable concept. A close friend of mine chose to simply thank virtually everybody he knew.¹ Instead of listing my whole address book, I wonder whether there exist valid criteria for omitting people from the list.

¹ Moreover, he thanked everyone he forgot to mention to whom he owes gratitude for not being offended by that. [Koo03, page x]

One possible criterion for omitting people is the question whether their contribution was to be expected based on their job profile. It seems superfluous to thank somebody for just doing his or her job. However, in a context where meeting one's obligations cannot be taken for granted, this criterion is far too general. Another possible criterion is to only mention people who actually influenced the contents of my thesis. This does not work either, as soon as one observes that one's general well-being influences one's work. Where does this leave me?

Factually, it leaves me with an acknowledgements section which is composed completely by subjective opinions, and filtered to meet some unwritten norms. As a bonus, the first page is not a dull list of names.

Of the people who have been professionally involved in the process of this thesis, the utmost important person to acknowledge is Rineke Verbrugge, my daily supervisor. She is this good, that if I *would* have had any problem with her, I could be sure the problem would have been on my side. If anyone is a role model for a good supervisor, she is. Any list of appreciated competences would be glaringly incomplete, and therefore I will not even try to enumerate just the most important ones.

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Here is the Hollywood part.

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Wouter Teepe
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