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## The Power of Interpersonal Generosity

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## Chapter 5: General Discussion

How can one understand and promote cooperation and trust in everyday situations that incorporate a social dilemma (i.e., a conflict between self-interest and collective interest)? The past decades, there has been a strong consensus among scientists and others that reciprocity was *the* answer to this question. Direct reciprocity (through exchange) and indirect reciprocity (through reputation) could enhance the emergence of cooperation and trust among people. However, it appears that most prior work has overlooked some important features of social situations, most notably the presence of “noise”—the notion that people sometimes make errors in their actions or perceptions (e.g., accidentally saying the wrong thing) or can be prevented from acting according to their intentions by an external factor (e.g., a breakdown of the mobile network). It is plausible that noise exerts detrimental effects on cooperation and trust, and may result in patterns of negative reciprocity (e.g., escalation of conflict).

Therefore, the purpose of the present dissertation was to examine “the power of generosity” (i.e., doing slightly more than one did for you) for overcoming potential harmful effects of noise. Inspired by two complementary lines of research, I designed five studies to test my hypotheses. Together, these studies provided good evidence for my ideas regarding three beneficial functions of generosity (trust-building, generosity-reciprocity symbiosis, evoking an other-regarding mind-set) for eliciting cooperation and trust among “friends” (exchange-based cooperation) but also within communities of “near-strangers” (reputation-based cooperation). In the following, I will summarize the main findings of the five studies, discuss some implications, provide some comments on strengths and limitations of the present work, and finally, offer some avenues for future research.

In Chapter 2, I examined with two experiments how *direct* forms of generosity may promote cooperation and trust among “friends” (through repeated exchange) in noisy situations. In both studies, participants engaged in a series of tasks with another individual via the computer network. In reality this ‘other’ was not a real participant, but was played by a pre-programmed computer opponent. The computer-based interaction made it possible to manipulate the interpersonal strategy of the ‘other’ *and* create occasional noise incidents in the interaction. In total, I compared five different strategies with one another. A ‘tit-for-tat’ strategy was used as a baseline, default strategy, as this strictly reciprocal strategy is assumed to be commonly used. Tit-for-tat was compared with two classic strategies in social dilemma research, namely ‘unconditional cooperation’ and ‘unconditional noncooperation’ (Study 2.1.) and with two more realistic variants of a tit-for-tat strategy, namely, ‘generous’ (i.e., doing slightly more than one did for you) and ‘stingy’ (i.e., doing slightly less than one did for you) (Study 2.2.). The effectiveness of these strategies had been examined before, but rarely, if not never, in realistic “noisy” situations.

The most important finding of Chapter 2 was that both other-regarding strategies (unconditional cooperation, generous) were considerably better at dealing with noise than a tit-for-tat strategy. That is, with respect to cooperation and trust, the effects of noise were less detrimental for cooperation with the other-regarding strategies than for cooperation with a tit-for-tat strategy. Also, the other-regarding strategies elicit greater impressions of benign intention and feelings of trust, are perceived as having more other-regarding intentions, and having higher moral standards than people who adopt a tit-for-tat strategy. The two self-regarding strategies (unconditional noncooperation, stingy) performed worse on almost all aspects. We also found that the majority of the participants was indeed inclined to behave in a reciprocal manner, regardless of which strategy the 'other' adopted. Together, these studies revealed two of the three supposed functions of generosity: (1) generous individuals can create a buffer against negative effects of noise by communicating trust and benign intent, and (2) generous individuals can unilaterally promote cooperation through benevolently 'exploiting' the tendency of most people to reciprocate generosity.

Chapter 3 complemented and extended the findings of Chapter 2 by revealing a third functional aspect of generosity. Using an identical procedure as in the previous chapter, Study 3.1 again demonstrated the benefits of a generous strategy over a tit-for-tat strategy in dealing with noise. However, this study contained an important extension: after the experiment had ended, the experimenter unexpectedly offered the participants an amount of actual money. Participants could keep the money for themselves, but they could also choose to give (part of) this money to the 'other' with whom they had just interacted in a series of tasks. As it turned out, a substantial number of participants actually donated some money to the 'other'. Moreover, participants donated more money to generous others than to reciprocal others when noise incidents were present. These results reveal a third function of generosity that even goes beyond the interaction itself: it seems that generous individuals (rather than reciprocal individuals) are capable of activating some sort of 'other-regarding mindset in others that motivates them to forego their own personal best interest. This function is particularly salient in 'noisy' environments.

While the findings of Chapters 2 and 3 revealed the power of direct (exchange-based) forms of generosity within ongoing relationships of two individuals, Chapter 4 examined with two studies how *indirect* (reputation-based) forms of generosity can promote cooperation and trust in communities – characterized by short-lived interactions among near-strangers. Such interactions become more and more frequent nowadays. In both studies, a small virtual community was simulated in the computer lab. Within this community participants engaged in a number of short-lived pair-wise interactions with random strangers. Participants could build a reputation, which was of course dependent on how they behaved within the community. As in prior studies, occasional incidents of noise in the task could be created by the experimenters. While prior research had revealed that the reputation mechanism could promote cooperation, Study 4.1. demonstrated that cooperation and trust is undermined in "noisy" communities. These findings suggested that the functional value of indirect reciprocity may well be constrained to noise-free environments that have been studied so far in simulations and empirical studies.

Because this is a somewhat “negative” finding, in Study 4.2 I sought to provide a “constructive” solution for the negative effects of noise within communities. Inspired by the findings of the prior chapters regarding the benefits of exchange-based generosity, I designed three types of communities that varied from purely reciprocal to very generous. To manipulate the behavior of the ‘others’ in the community, *all* others secretly were pre-programmed computer opponents. In the generous communities, the ‘others’ were programmed to behave slightly more cooperative than the reputation of the participant would warrant – they gave the benefit of the doubt thereby communicating trust, whereas in the reciprocal community the ‘others’ behaved strictly reciprocal (tit-for-tat like) with respect to the reputation information of the participant. The most important finding of this study was that generous communities are better able at reducing or overcoming the detrimental effects of noise on cooperation and trust – that is, that reputation-based cooperation is more effective among generous communities than among reciprocal communities.

### ***Theoretical Contributions***

The studies that were presented in this dissertation make several theoretical contributions. To begin with, it is very important to realize that acknowledging key features of social situations, such as the occurrence of noise and misunderstanding, are essential for understanding the development of cooperation and trust. Past research that focused on noise-free social dilemmas (in which individuals have perfect information) revealed the apparent superiority of reciprocal mechanisms: tit-for-tat is crowned the “winner” (or least one of the winners) in eliciting and maintaining cooperative interaction, whereas indirect reciprocity is one of the most important explanations for the evolution of cooperation. However, as the present findings indicate, the occurrence of noise seem to expose the Achilles’ heel of reciprocal tendencies—in both direct and indirect forms. That is, unlike other-regarding strategies, tit-for-tat under noise (a) does not give others the benefit of the doubt, (b) does not maintain high levels of trust, and (c) is, by itself, not able to get out the trap of noncooperative interaction (chapters 2 and 3). Also, Chapter 4 shows that indirect reciprocity (reputation-based cooperation) is strongly undermined by noise incidents: there are lower levels of cooperation and trust in noisy communities.

From a general theoretical perspective, it is interesting that the results for exchange-based cooperation within dyads (Chapters 2 and 3; also see Van Lange et al., 2002) are very similar to findings regarding reputation-based cooperation within communities (Chapter 4). Apparently, the three functions of generosity (signaling trust, generosity-reciprocity symbiosis, evoking an other-regarding mindset) are not only effective against noise within dyads, but also within a larger community of near-strangers in which cooperation is partly based on reputations. In both cases, reciprocal tendencies play a central role for how noise undermines cooperation and how it can be restored by adopting a warm, generous stance towards others behavior and reputations.

Some readers might wonder how generosity relates to altruism. Generosity as defined here, is not identical to altruism, since one can be genuinely generous for reasons that serve one’s own long-term interests as well as those of others. In addition, generosity, as defined in the present dissertation, involves seeking the benefit of others while at the same time keeping an eye on the balance of outcomes (i.e., in terms of transformations; a

combination of MaxOther/MaxJoint and MinDiff) which is a form of ‘relaxed accounting’ (Kollock, 1993). As such, potential risks of exploitation and the negative consequences of feeling duped (cf., Vohs et al., 2007) can be reduced to a minimum. Interesting recent research has revealed that individuals who always contribute, regardless of others’ choices, may change other group members’ perceptions of their social environment (i.e., inducing a cooperative norm), thereby increasing the chances of cooperation (Weber & Murnighan, 2008). The present research further supports this line of reasoning in that it suggests that individuals who are adopting a generous stance towards others’ reputations may be the “saviors” of their community (i.e., eliciting greater cooperation levels) rather than “suckers” (i.e., continuously being exploited) as they may induce a generosity norm that helps groups and communities to cope with noise and misunderstandings.

Furthermore, it is quite important to note – and consistent with the overall message of this dissertation – that the present findings also demonstrated that noncooperative strategies fairly quickly elicited noncooperative interaction and were therefore ineffective in coping with noise. Studies 2.1 and 2.2 revealed that self-regarding strategies (unconditional noncooperation, and the stingy strategy), elicited very little cooperation overall; and indeed, there was a natural floor effect such that these strategies could not further suffer from noise. Also, Study 2.2 revealed that a stingy strategy (i.e., a strategy that combines reciprocity with stinginess) fairly quickly revealed a drop in cooperation (in the first three interactions), which continued over the course of the last six interactions. Such findings indicate that adding even small self-regarding tendencies to tit-for-tat is unlikely to be effective at eliciting cooperative interaction. Such tendencies tend to undermine trust, impressions of other’s morality, as well as overall affective evaluations. While other-regarding strategies may promote cooperation through enhancing trust and promoting a “relaxed accounting” climate, self-regarding may reduce cooperation because it undermines trust and, presumably triggers a climate of strict account along perhaps with tendencies toward “getting even”.

Although the issue of cooperation in noisy environments is very social (i.e., related to other members of the social environment) *and* psychological (i.e., exerting specific effects on feelings, thoughts, and behavior), the attention of social psychologists for these topics has yet to come. As such, the present research may serve a heuristic function for the integration of literatures within the field of social psychology as well as bridging to literatures from other disciplines. First, while computer simulations and economical models – that were commonly used to study noise (e.g., Axelrod & Dion, 1988; Bendor et al., 1991; Fudenberg & Maskin, 1990; Kollock 1993) are very useful for understanding the “logic” as to why, for example, a pair of two tit-for-tat partners should be especially vulnerable to incidents of noise, such insights need to be complemented by a “psychologic”. That is, the present research provides new insight into the various theoretically-relevant processes (such as reciprocity inclination, trust, transformations, personality impressions, affective evaluations) that helps us understand why people respond to others in “noisy” (and noise-free) situations in the way they do.

The present research also makes a substantial contribution to the rapidly growing literature on the evolutionary puzzle of why humans cooperate with strangers (for example, see Fehr & Fischbacher, 2003). The present findings demonstrate that the functional value of direct and indirect reciprocity may well be constrained to noise-free environments that have been studied so far in simulations and empirical studies.

Moreover, the present research may provide clues for how generosity might influence relationship initiation and development (i.e., promoting an atmosphere of trust and benign intent) and how it might function as a ‘social glue’ function within communities – even with near-strangers (see Chapter 4 findings), thereby identifying the proximate mechanisms (psychological variables like reciprocal tendencies, trust, negativity effects) that may feed the ultimate explanations for why people engage in other-regarding tendencies towards strangers.

In addition, the present findings may contribute to the emerging field of positive psychology which is defined as the study of the conditions and processes that contribute to the flourishing or optimal functioning of people, groups, and institutions (cf. Gable & Haidt, 2005; also see Seligman, 2008). It becomes more and more clear that acts of generosity facilitate maintaining positive relationships and enhance positive feeling and trust (Chapter 2 findings; Van Lange et al, 2002) –which may very well help to cope with negative events in times of uncertainty and misunderstanding (i.e., noise). Thus, the study of generosity may be relevant for a greater understanding of psychological well-being and coping and may contribute to neighboring areas of research (e.g., research on gratitude, willingness to sacrifice, and forgiveness in ongoing relationships; Algoe et al., 2008; Karremans et al., 2003; Van Lange et al., 1997).

Finally, to some extent the present work, particularly the community approach of Chapter 4, may connect to more sociological approaches (and also community psychology; e.g., Trickett, 2009) that examine how behaviors or ideas spread within social environments or communities (e.g., social contagion; Burt, 1987). Although social contagion has often been tied to negatively valued issues such as substance use or delinquency (e.g., see Rende et al., 2005; Rodgers & Rowe, 1993) it is not unlikely that more positive behaviors, such as generosity, may also transfer from one individual to another (also see Weber & Murnighan, 2008).

### ***Practical and Methodological Contributions***

Above and beyond the theoretical implications, I wish to outline some practical implications of the present findings. At first glance, one would say that the present results should be relevant for anyone who is interested in promoting cooperation and trust within a certain relationship, group or community. Although the power of generosity is likely to have its boundaries (to be discussed shortly), there are numerous everyday life situations that involve conflicts between personal interest and the collective interest, that are affected by noise and misunderstanding, that run the risk to escalate, while cooperation and trust are very much needed. This is not only true in the living room, the class room or the workplace, but may be even true on the international level.

An interesting question, particularly for an applied setting, is how generosity may work between groups of individuals, particularly in light of the consistent finding that groups are known to behave more competitive than individuals, exhibit greater distrust, and hence are more inclined to reciprocate negative behavior of another group (cf., Reinders Folmer, Van Lange, & Klapwijk, 2009; see also Wildschut, Pinter, Vevea, Insko & Schopler, 2006). For example, during the period that I’ve been conducting research for this dissertation, I came across several newspaper articles that mentioned that the Israeli government that – as a deliberate gesture of good will—released hundreds of Palestinian

prisoners. (Unfortunately, so far this “generous” strategy has not offered any constructive solutions which may be due to the fact that this government also adopted a variety of other (more aggressive) tactics). Another example is that, in the Netherlands, there are many occasions in which the Labor Union negotiates with employers over, for example, wages and working conditions. In both cases such interactions may be considerably “noisy” (e.g., a group member’s action that is inconsistent with the group’s opinion; inaccurate or biased reports by the press), leaving much room for uncertainty and doubt about actions and intentions of others.

Some work suggest positive effects of generous behavior for the health and well-being of people. In fact, there is evidence showing that “giving” (e.g., providing help) has beneficial effects for the giver, such as less distress and improved physical and mental health (Cialdini, Darby, & Vincent, 1973; Omoto & Snyder, 1995; Schwartz & Sendor, 2000; Wilson & Musick, 1999) and may be even beneficial in terms of expected mortality (Brown, Nesse, Vinokur, & Smith, 2003). Also, perceptions that are likely to be associated with giving, such as a sense of meaning or mattering to others, have been demonstrated to increase positive feelings (e.g., Taylor & Turner, 2000; for a review, see Batson, 1998). In addition, there is support for the notion that a balanced relationship is accompanied by greater sense of well-being and better health (e.g., Buunk, Doosje, Jans, & Hopstaken, 1993; Väänänen, Buunk, Kivimäki, Pentti, & Vahtera, 2005). These findings underline the power of generosity for health and vitality of relationships, groups, and society at large.

Given that generosity can be rewarding for self and others, another question that comes to mind is whether people can be “trained” (e.g., through child education) to behave generously in their everyday interactions. And if so, which variables should then be influenced?<sup>38</sup> It is very likely that factors that have been found to promote prosocial behavior in general are relevant here (e.g., see Eisenberg et al., 2002). However, as a thorough discussion of such factors goes beyond the topic of dissertation, I will only do some suggestions about which ‘buttons one has to push’ to make people more generous. To start with, I suggest that it is important to make people aware of the occurrence of noise and how it influences their lives. Also, it is important to explain how common psychological tendencies (i.e., negativity effects) might promote a rapid escalation of conflicts. And I believe that it is important that people focus on “the bigger picture” of their social lives, that is, that they are able to consider the future consequences of their current behavior (e.g., see Van Lange & Joireman, 2008). As soon as people start to realize that accepting a small loss (and perhaps a little bit of exploitation) now, may mean larger gains in the future (cf. Axelrod, 1984; Kollock, 1993), it may become worthwhile to invest slightly more in others than one has received from them (and perhaps give them the benefit of the doubt when uncertain about their intentions).

One noteworthy methodological contribution is that, for the studies that are presented in this dissertation, I designed a new research tool – the “parcel delivery game” (see the method section of Study 2.1 for a detailed description). One reason was that the methodology of social dilemma research (“experimental games”) has often been criticized

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<sup>38</sup> It appears that there are also drugs that may make people more generous: Recent research indicates that intranasal administration of the hormone oxytocin increases trust in humans (Kosfeld, Heinrichs, Zak, Fischbacher & Fehr, 2005). These authors argue that oxytocin affects the willingness of people to accept social risks arising through interpersonal interactions. Some desk research revealed that bottles full of “oxytocin spray” can easily be bought on the Internet nowadays, e.g., via <http://www.liquidtrust.nl>

for its limited generalizability (e.g. Komorita & Parks, 1995; Nemeth, 1972; Pruitt & Kimmel, 1977; see also Van Vugt, Snyder, Tyler, & Biel, 2000). Critics argued that the games that are used are too abstract and ambiguous, and that it is questionable whether participants in these experiments behave as they would in real-life interdependent situations. To illustrate, in some experiments cooperative intent was measured by having participants push buttons labeled 'C' or 'D' or switch on or off green and blue lights. My aim with designing the new paradigm was to be better able to capture the "mundane realism" of everyday social interaction – thereby seeking to bridge the gap between games and real-life. Some assets of the game were that it included (a) effort – one should actually "do" something for another, as in many everyday life situations, and (b) variability – our behavior in everyday life hardly ever has exactly the consequences for others that we anticipated or intended, as there is often some random variation (e.g., one is unlikely to help another for precisely one hour, even if planned). I believe that our understanding of cooperation and trust will become greater if we do greater justice to key elements of social situations as the naturally occur in everyday life.

### ***Future Directions***

While the present work helped to increase our understanding of the promotion of cooperation and trust, it may also give rise to many new questions. Many involve potential *boundary conditions* of the power of generosity. For example, what is the optimal level of generosity (intensity)? Does one always have to be generous (frequency)? And does generosity work under all circumstances, and in all social settings?

With respect to the first question, the studies in Chapter 2 revealed that an extreme other-regarding strategy (i.e., unconditional cooperation) and a moderately other-regarding strategy (i.e., generous) were both quite effective at reducing or overcoming the detrimental effects of noise. I also note that the other-regarding strategy used in Study 2.2 was somewhat more generous than the so-called tit-for-tat-plus-one strategy examined in earlier research (e.g., Van Lange et al., 2002). As such, the present research suggests that acts of generosity that are more substantial may actually also be quite effective. It is interesting to link this to classic research spanning three decades or more in which unconditional cooperation was demonstrated to be relatively ineffective ("nice but too weak") at eliciting cooperation (see, e.g. McClintock & Liebrand, 1988; Oskamp, 1971; Wilson, 1971). In addition, the findings of Study 4.2 suggested that, for communities of near-strangers, moderate and strong levels of (indirect) generosity appear about equally effective at coping with noise. Thus, while future research could provide more insight into the optimal level of generosity, it seems that adding at least some generosity is most essential.

With respect to the optimal frequency of generosity, it is impossible to draw any conclusions on the present results. In all studies of the present dissertation the pre-programmed generous 'other' behaved generously in *every* round of the game, and in Study 4.2, *every* single "stranger" within the generous communities behaved in such a manner. Hence, a key question for future research is: how often does one have to be generous? And what would be the consequences if one is generous only every now and then? Although it is very likely that consistent signals of trustworthiness are more beneficial than inconsistent signals (i.e., every now and then), computer models provide



support for the benefits of occasional generosity in “noisy” environments (once every three rounds; e.g., Nowak & Sigmund, 1992). Nevertheless, it remains unclear whether computer models (the “logic”) are congruent with how actual humans behave (the “psycho-logic”).

Evidently, it is difficult to discuss the optimal frequency and intensity of generosity in a social vacuum. That is, such issues are particularly important in relation to different aspects of the social environment or the characteristics of interaction partners. To begin with, social situations are sometimes characterized as ranging from “weak” to “strong” (Snyder & Ickes, 1985; Van Lange, 1997; but see Cooper & Withey, 2009). Strong situations provide strong guidelines for how to interpret the situation, predict and understand behavior of others and to effectively respond to their behavior, whereas in weak situations individual differences are more important. The present findings suggest that the power of generosity (relative to reciprocity) particularly lies in weak situations. That is, “noisy” situations challenge trust and give rise to uncertainty and misunderstanding and therefore may especially be likely to activate differences in personality (for a similar line of reasoning, see Tazelaar et al., 2004).

Thus, it is likely that the effectiveness of generosity is dependent of the frequency (e.g., “how often do they occur?”), intensity (e.g., “how strong is its impact”) and valence (e.g., “are actual outcomes more positive or more negative than intended outcomes?”) of noise. Computer simulations and theoretical models point out that generous strategies tend to outperform restrictive and punitive strategies—at least for moderately low levels of noise (e.g., Kollock, 1993; Molander, 1987). Not until noise becomes very frequent (more than 40 percent of the interactions) the advantages of these generous strategies disappear. While in the present studies, noise levels were sometimes considerably high (e.g., 33 percent in Study 2.2), future research may illuminate the power of generosity at lower levels of noise. Then again, anecdotal evidence suggests that people may also behave generously in very noisy situations. For example, two lovers who are on a first romantic date or a young mother who has a baby that cries all the time, may be very unsure about the other’s intentions and preferences. In both cases, they generally have the inclination to be generous and forgiving.

Furthermore, the power of generosity may depend strongly on the behavior of other individuals in the social environment. Several classic studies examined the reactions of people with different social values (e.g., prosocial, individualistic, competitive) to different behavioral strategies (e.g., Kuhlman & Marshello, 1975; McClintock & Liebrand, 1988; Van Lange & Visser, 1999). These studies revealed that a tit-for-tat strategy is effective in eliciting cooperation from prosocials and individualists but not so much from competitors. While my research shows that the majority of people (approximately 60 percent) behaves in a reciprocal manner, it is perhaps not wise to adopt generosity within competitive communities that consist largely of individuals that seek to maximize relative differences between self and others. I suggest that the trust-building function of generosity may be the most pronounced in mixed-motive situations in which people can choose between cooperating or defecting (this is perhaps also the region in which effects of noise can do the most damage) (e.g., see Kelley & Thibaut, 1978).

Other future questions may direct at the nature of generous behavior itself. In the present studies, participants always contributed something “extra” (coins, effort). However, one may argue that generosity may appear in different forms, that is, giving

(e.g., putting in extra effort for someone), taking (e.g., taking the blame for someone), keeping (e.g., withholding judgment or refraining from punishing someone) or leaving (e.g. remitting someone's debt). Future research should point out whether these forms of generosity will exert comparable or different effects (see for a similar discussion about resource and public good dilemmas: Van Dijk & Wilke, 2000). Related to this issue are questions about boundary conditions due to type of investment. In the present studies, the "currency of exchange" was constantly the same for all actors (e.g., coins for coins; effort for effort). However, future work should direct attention to the much more realistic and sophisticated manner that people use to interact thereby drawing on a variety of interpersonal resources, such as love, status, information, money, goods, and services (cf. Schaefer, 2009; also see Foa, 1971).

One important limitation of the present work is that I have treated trust, affective reactions and also attributions (i.e., perceived transformations) only as outcomes of social interaction. Reasons for doing so were mostly methodological in nature. However, it is very plausible that these factors are in fact determinants of cooperative tendencies. It is important, of course, to examine the underlying psychological processes through which the power of interpersonal generosity works. Study 2.1. and 2.2. already revealed that cooperation was accompanied by more positive (and less negative) feelings and thoughts about the other. These analyses provide preliminary support for the idea that an atmosphere of trust and benign intent may promote cooperative interaction – and may be shaped by cooperative interaction. As these findings remain somewhat preliminary, more research is needed.

### ***Concluding Remarks***

How can one understand and promote cooperation and trust in social dilemma situations? Historically, there has been a strong and enduring consensus among religious figures, philosophers, laypeople and scientists that reciprocity was *the* answer to major questions about human cooperation. This may be true for noise-free situations. However, the studies presented in this dissertation provide a converging picture that some level of interpersonal generosity – investing slightly more than one has received—may be a more accurate answer to these questions, at least when referring to realistic situations where people are bound to make errors (i.e., when there is noise). The unique contribution of the present work is that when unintended errors do challenge cooperative interaction, generosity not only promotes cooperative interaction, builds trust, and generates positive thoughts and feelings in others, it may also bring about true acts of generosity even when possibilities for "getting it back" do not exist.

Moreover, regarding the evolutionary puzzle of human cooperation among strangers, the present findings provide novel evidence for the functional aspects of indirect generosity in our interaction with others we hardly know. So, why do people behave cooperatively – and sometimes even generously– with strangers? One important answer seems to lie in the idea that communities in which it is a subtle but strongly shared norm to approach one another in a somewhat generous manner (i.e., giving the benefit of the doubt), are most functional in coping with conflicts of interests and misunderstandings. This is even more interesting given that current society, due to technological advances, is rapidly developing in a giant "global village" in which it becomes more and more unclear

who is a (digital) friend and who is a stranger (cf. Bargh & McKenna, 2004). As a consequence, reputational mechanisms become increasingly important while at the same time the growing social complexity will bring more uncertainty among people and challenge trust more than ever. To summarize, to me it seems that we have only just begun to understand the tremendous “power of generosity” for promoting trust and cooperation within close relationships, groups, and (digital) communities in which unintended errors and misunderstandings are bound to happen.