Mindset and communication, part II
How acting as representative may influence people’s openness to pre-emptive clarifications and apologies\textsuperscript{18}

One of the enduring challenges in social life is that our interactions with others are “noisy”: on many occasions, people make mistakes, are misunderstood, or are unable to act as they would like. As a consequence, people’s actions may from time to time have unintended, detrimental consequences for others – to whom these unintentional consequences may appear intentional instead. “Noise” therefore often can give rise to misunderstandings, which may easily get out of hand, with potentially detrimental consequences for people’s relationships with others (see Axelrod & Dion, 1988; Bendor, Kramer, & Stout, 1991; Kollock, 1993; Nowak & Sigmund, 1998; Van Lange, Ouwerkerk, & Tazelaar, 2002).

In order to avoid such harmful misunderstandings, it is crucial that we avoid that others get the wrong impression of us – that because of a misunderstanding, they erroneously believe us to be selfish and uncaring. Previous research (see Tazelaar, Van Lange, & Ouwerkerk, 2004) has indicated that if our actions have different consequences than we intended, it may be helpful to communicate what our actual intentions were: by doing so, those afflicted may be more inclined to attribute our actions to an error, rather than to ill will. However, perhaps more often than not, we are not even aware ourselves if our actions have come across as we intended or not. For example, if a present we sent by mail does not arrive, we may not realize this until long after, by when our relationship with the recipient may already have suffered because of our apparent inattentiveness. Therefore, an important question is: what can we do beforehand, to prevent unintended errors from having such consequences?

The major purpose of the present contribution is to provide insight into this question. We focus on two major questions. Firstly, we examine the

\textsuperscript{18} This chapter is based on Reinders Folmer and Van Lange (in preparation).
effectiveness of pre-emptive communication at overcoming the detrimental effects of unintended errors. That is, we examine the influence of pre-emptive apologies (see Darby & Schlenker, 1989; McCullough, Rachal, Sandage, Worthington, Brown, & Hight, 1998; McCullough, Worthington, & Rachal, 1997; Ohbuchi, Kameda, & Agarie, 1989; Risen & Gilovich, 2007) and clarifications (Tazelaar, Van Lange, & Ouwerkerk, 2004) on interpersonal trust and cooperation following an instance of noise (in terms of our example, whether calling the recipient to tell them we have sent them a present, or to apologize beforehand for any potential delays, may effectively negate the detrimental effects of the present not being delivered). Secondly, we examine how the effectiveness of such communications may depend on the social context in which they are voiced – how the effectiveness of pre-emptive apologies and clarifications may be influenced by the goals and expectations that are activated in the present interaction situation. We therefore test these communications not only when people interact as individuals, but also when they interact as representatives of groups – a situation which may evoke a different, rather more competitive “mindset”. Because this “mindset” is associated with distrust (see Reinders Folmer, Van Lange, & Klapwijk, 2007), pre-emptive communications (and apologies in particular) may be rather less effective when people interact as representatives, rather than as individuals.

Pre-emptive communication: what and for whom?

Why would communicating pre-emptively be an effective way of preventing that unintended errors disrupt and harm our relations with others? And why might the social context influence the effectiveness of such communications? Either question hinges on uncertainty: on how people attribute the actions of others when they are uncertain about their intentions.

*Why communication may help overcome noise*

Noise gives rise to uncertainty because it distorts the link between people’s intentions and their actions: others may harm our interests (or vice
versa), but we are not certain whether they do so on purpose or not. How people interpret such actions may have far-reaching consequences. If they perceive the harm as intentional, they may choose to strike back – but if the other in fact was not responsible, this may further harm the relationship. If they perceive the harm as unintentional, they may choose to let it pass – but if the other in fact did mean harm, doing so will allow them to get away with it. Therefore, the uncertainty which noise brings about may lead to misattributions and misunderstandings, which may be costly for the individual and the relationship with others (see Morris, Larrick, & Su, 1999; Reeder, Kumar, Hesson-McInnis, & Trafimow, 2002).

Communication may allow people to reduce much of this uncertainty. By communicating, we can explain our intentions whenever we perceive that an error or misunderstanding has occurred. Consequently, others may be more likely to distinguish when our actions have been influenced by noise and when not. Indeed, a study by Tazelaar, Van Lange, and Ouwerkerk (2004) revealed that impressions of benign intent and cooperation were improved drastically if interaction partners specified their actual intentions following every instance of noise. However, on many occasions, this may not be feasible: in order to explain our intentions following an error, we must first be aware that an error has occurred – and in many cases, people are not aware themselves when their actions have been affected by noise (like in the example of the present lost in the mail). In the present contribution, we therefore focus on pre-emptive forms of communication, that is, of communicating before any errors have occurred. Pre-emptive communication does not require people to first spot instances of noise, and therefore could also prevent unsighted instances of noise from getting out of hand.

But if pre-emptive communication potentially could overcome the detrimental effects of noise, then in what manner should use them in order to be effective? As alluded to above, one essential element may be to communicate our actual intentions: by doing so, others may be able to recognize instances of noise whenever our actions are different from what we announced. However, there was a further element to the communication condition in the study by Tazelaar et al.
(2004), an element which might have contributed substantially to its effectiveness: an apology. Tazelaar et al. added apologies to some of the messages in the communication condition in order to bring a sense of realism to their preprogrammed communications, arguing that people often use small apologies when dealing with unintended errors and misunderstandings in everyday life. However, in the considerable literature on forgiveness, apologies are linked strongly to the way that people perceive others’ transgressions, and to their willingness to forgive: several studies indicate that after receiving an apology, victims may be less inclined to perceive a transgression as intentional and controllable (Exline, Deshea, & Holeman, 2007), and less inclined to attribute it to internal causes (i.e., to the offender’s personality; see Weiner, 1986, 1995; Kremer & Stephens, 1983). Furthermore, after receiving an apology, victims may be less inclined to punish the offender (Holtgraves, 1989; McLaughlin, Cody, & O’Hair, 1983), and more inclined to forgive the transgression (McCullough et al., 1998; McCullough et al., 1997). Furthermore, apologies voice concern for the other’s outcomes. Taken together, the above suggests that rather than merely providing realism, apologies may foster or rebuild interpersonal trust, and may increase forgiveness following a transgression. This suggests that apologies could be particularly effective at overcoming the detrimental effects of unintended harm – perhaps even more so than a mere clarification of one’s intentions.

How to communicate to whom?

But does that make pre-emptive communications – and apologies in particular – an infallible means of overcoming noise? It is important to note that although communications can reduce uncertainty about the intentions of others, they may also give rise to further uncertainty – uncertainty about the other’s reasons to communicate. Because noise obscures their actual intentions, it is easy for people to claim that circumstances made them appear more selfish than they intended – that is, people can feign noise in order to conceal their selfishness (“hiding in the fog”). Rather than reducing uncertainty, communication therefore can also give rise to the question: is the other giving honest insight into
his or her intentions, or is he or she attempting to deceive me? (see Skarlicki, Folger, & Gee, 2004). Communications therefore may be a two-edged sword: they may foster trust and forgiveness in some contexts, but may evoke suspicion and skepticism in others.

The key concept with regard to how people perceive communications may be interpersonal trust: people may be more inclined to believe the claims of people they trust than those of people they do not. While this suggests that there may be some interpersonal differences in how people perceive communications, a more interesting implication is that people's perceptions of (and hence the effectiveness of) communications may depend strongly on the context in which they are voiced. Through the schemas and beliefs that people associate with certain social situations, interactions in these situations may activate specific interaction goals, as well as specific expectations of others. Such situationally evoked “mindsets” may influence what motives people attribute to others, and hence may also influence their faith in the communications of others – particularly when such communications do, or do not fit their expectations.

One particularly interesting (and socially relevant) situation in this respect is that in which people interact not only on behalf of themselves, but on behalf of others as well – as group representatives. In everyday life, people frequently find themselves in interactions with others where their decisions have consequences not only for themselves and their interaction partner, but also for others – members of a group or category of which they are part, who are not directly involved in the interaction. For example, we may participate in discussions on behalf of our department, or we may negotiate a purchase on behalf of our family rather than just ourselves. In themselves, these interactions are no different than interactions between individuals: representatives also interact interpersonally, and are also interdependent. However, research by Reinders Folmer and Van Lange (2007) has revealed that people’s “mindset” in this context may be quite different: in context of an interaction between representatives, people are likely to have more competitive interaction goals, and are likely to expect interdependent others to be competitive as well. The study by Reinders Folmer and Van Lange suggests
that in this competitive “mindset”, misunderstandings may make representatives particularly likely to get caught up in harmful cycles of noncooperation, despite the harm that this may cause to the members of their group.

The above suggests that people’s perceptions of the communications of others may be rather different when they take part in an interaction between group representatives. As such interactions evoke a competitive mindset, characterized by distrust of interdependent others, people may be particularly sensitive to (perhaps quite subtle) cues related to the trustworthiness of their partner – and may be inclined to perceive these in a manner biased toward distrust. This may also have implications for the effectiveness of communications, particularly so for apologies. Apologies communicate concern for the interests of the other – which among individuals may foster interpersonal trust and forgiveness. However, such concern is clearly inconsistent with the competitive expectations that representatives have of each other. Therefore, apologies may be more likely to activate suspicion and disbelief in this context – and hence may be less effective, or even counterproductive at overcoming the detrimental effects of noise. In contrast, a more neutral, matter-of-fact clarification of one’s intentions may be less inconsistent with representatives’ expectations of each other. For this reason, clarifications may be somewhat less likely to bring this distrust to the fore, and may retain more of their effectiveness among representatives.

**Research Overview and Hypotheses**

Based on our reasoning, we advance the following hypotheses. First, we predict that pre-emptive communication will increase cooperation following an instance of noise, compared with no communication (Hypothesis 4.1a), and that of the two types of communication, apologies will evoke more cooperation than clarifications (Hypothesis 4.1b). Second, we predict that apologies will be less effective at restoring cooperation than clarifications in an interaction between representatives, but equally or more effective than clarifications in an interaction between individuals (Hypothesis 4.2). And finally, we predict that the credibility of apologies will be reduced if people interact as representatives rather than as
individuals, whereas the credibility of apologies will be affected less (Hypothesis 4.3). We tested these hypotheses in a social dilemma task, in which participants received a low contribution from their partner, which might accurately reflect the intentions of the partner, or might have resulted from noise. We now turn to the details of the experimental procedure, the manipulations, the experimental task, and the dependent measures.

Method

Participants and Experimental Design

Participants were 126 students at the Vrije Universiteit Amsterdam, 44 men and 82 women (average age 20.73 years). The participants were randomly assigned to conditions in a 2 (interaction type: between representatives vs between individuals) × 3 (message: no message vs clarification vs apology) × 2 (social value orientation: prosocial vs proself) between-participants design. The entire experiment was conducted by computer.

Procedure

Up to 15 participants attended each experimental session. Participants were welcomed and escorted to individual cubicles, each of which contained a computer. The entire experiment was computerized. Participants first completed a demographical questionnaire, then a filler task, and then proceeded to the experimental task. The aim of the experimental task was to examine the effectiveness of apologies and clarifications as a means of overcoming the detrimental effects of noise on cooperation, in situations in which people interact as individuals or as representatives. To this end, we manipulated the type of interaction in which participants took part: an interaction between a) individuals, or b) representatives of groups. In either condition, participants performed a dyadic social dilemma task, allegedly with another participant (who was also an individual or a representative for a different group). Participants learned that this task had a sequential decision order, and that their partner would make a decision
first. This decision would be revealed to them before they themselves made their decision. We emphasized that the interaction would be noisy, and that therefore the contribution which they received could be the amount their partner had intended to contribute, but could also be smaller or greater than intended. Subsequently, all participants received a low contribution. Depending on the message condition, the partner subsequently commented on his or her decision by sending a) an apology, b) a clarification (but no apology), or c) no message. Finally, participants made their own contribution, which was the main dependent variable of the present research, and completed a postexperimental questionnaire. After participants completed the experiment, they were debriefed, thanked for their participation, and paid 4,50 euros (about $6 in American currency). In the following, we will discuss both the experimental task and our manipulations in greater detail.

**Manipulation of Interaction Type**

Before the experimental task commenced, we manipulated the type of interaction in which participants would take part: in an interaction between two individuals (cf. Tazelaar, Van Lange, & Ouwerkerk, 2005), or in an interaction between two representatives of different groups (cf. Reinders Folmer, Van Lange, & Klapwijk, 2007). We told participants in both conditions that besides themselves, a number of other participants were attending the experimental session. In the individual condition, we informed participants that they would be coupled randomly to one of these participants, and that they would perform a dyadic decision task (the experimental task) with this interaction partner. In the representative condition, we informed participants that all participants attending this session would be divided into two groups, and that representatives of either group would perform a dyadic decision task on their group’s behalf. Participants were divided into two groups based on their (even or uneven) participant number – an arbitrary criterion; hence, the groups in this experiment were minimal groups. Subsequently, a representative was appointed, and we fixed the appointment such that participants were always “chosen” as the representative of their group.
The Experimental Task

The instructions proceeded to address the experimental task. Participants learned that they would perform a decision task with their interaction partner. This task was a dyadic give-some dilemma, in which the participant and the partner each received an endowment of 10 coins, worth 0.50 Euro each. In this task, both players could decide how many of their coins to give to the other. Any coins either player kept would remain equal in value (i.e., 0.50 Euro each), while any coins given would have double the value for the recipient (i.e., 1.00 Euro each). This task represents a social dilemma, as players individually earn more the less they give away (i.e., individual rationality), whereas players collectively earn more the more they give away (i.e., collective rationality). The decisions in this task therefore are a scale measure of cooperation, with a contribution of no coins reflecting minimal cooperation, and a contribution of 10 coins reflecting maximal cooperation (for more information on this social dilemma task, see Van Lange, 1999; Van Lange et al., 2002). In the individual condition, participants learned that the outcomes of the task would have consequences for either player’s payment, with higher outcomes resulting in higher payment. In the representative condition, we added that the outcomes of the task would also affect the payment of the members of either group, on whose behalf the representatives were acting.

Participants learned that the two players would make their decision sequentially, with the interaction partner deciding on his or her contribution first. This decision would then be revealed to the participant, who subsequently decided on his or her own contribution. We opted for a sequential decision order because this enabled us to present participants with a low contribution from their partner and a message from their partner about his or her contribution before making their own decision on how many coins to contribute (this will be discussed in greater detail in the following sections).

Noise

As noted earlier, our aim was to examine if pre-emptive communications could restore cooperation in noisy interactions – interactions where people’s
actions may not always reflect their actual intentions. To this end, we explained in the instructions of the decision task that we were interested in how people would make a decision in “a situation in which the actual decision of their partner might be different from the decision he or she intended to make” (adapted from Tazelaar et al, 2005; Van Lange et al., 2002). As noted earlier, the partner would decide first in the social dilemma task, and his or her decision would be revealed before participants decided themselves. We explained that there was a likelihood of 50% that their partner’s decision would be affected by noise before being revealed, which might result in a higher or a lower contribution than their partner had intended. Our introduction of noise therefore emphasized that the partner’s decision would not necessarily reflect his or her actual intentions. Finally, we stressed that participants’ own decision could not be affected by noise.

In order to examine if communicating pre-emptively might restore cooperation, we first needed the partner to defect in the social dilemma task. For this reason, participants interacted not with another participant, but with a preprogrammed interaction partner, who in all conditions made a contribution of three coins. On a scale of zero to 10, this is a rather low (i.e., not very cooperative) contribution. At the same time, however, a contribution of three coins could reflect both positive noise (if one expected the partner to give nothing) and negative noise (if one expected the partner to be (moderately) cooperative).

**Manipulation of Message Type**

We concluded the instructions by informing participants in the two communication conditions that either player would able to send a message about his or her decision. Participants learned that they would receive both their partner’s decision and the message before making their own decision; however, we stressed that at that moment, their partner would not yet know whether his or her decision had been affected by noise or not. We added that participants themselves would have the opportunity to send a message after making their own decision. With that, the instructions ended, and participants proceeded to the
decision task. Participants in the no communication condition received no information about communication, and proceeded directly to the decision task.

In the communication conditions, participants received a) an apology, or b) a clarification following their partner’s contribution of three coins. The apology stated: “I have given you six coins. I hope my decision has not been altered. If it has: sorry!” The clarification was based on this message, and stated: “I have given you six coins. I hope my decision has not been altered”. The two messages therefore were identical, with the exception of the (preemptive) apology.

**Message Credibility**

Participants in the clarification condition and the apology condition also completed a questionnaire measuring their impressions of the message their partner had sent during the decision task. Amongst several filler items, we included two questions measuring participants’ impressions of the credibility of their partner’s message: “With this message, the partner tried to deceive you”, and “With this message, the partner tried to manipulate you”, both reverse-coded (α = .69).

**Results**

Our major focus was to compare the effectiveness of pre-emptive apologies and clarifications among individuals, and among individuals as group representatives. To this end, we computed two orthogonal contrasts: (1) a contrast comparing apologies and clarifications with no communication (the communication contrast), and (2) a contrast comparing apologies with clarifications (the message contrast). Thus, the first contrast tests the effectiveness of communication at restoring cooperation after an instance of noise, whereas the second contrast compares the difference between apologies and clarifications in restoring cooperation.
Cooperation

We analyzed participants’ contributions to their interaction partner in a 2 (interaction type: between representatives vs between individuals) × 3 (message: no message vs clarification vs apology) × 2 (social value orientation: prosocial vs proself) analysis of variance. This analysis revealed a significant main effect of message, $F(2, 114) = 5.52, p = .01$. In line with Hypothesis 4.1a, a significant communication contrast indicated that, compared with the no communication condition ($M = 2.92, SD = 2.27$), both an apology ($M = 3.87, SD = 2.67$) and a clarification ($M = 4.47, SD = 2.93$) increased cooperation, $F(1, 114) = 7.89, p < .01$. The message contrast indicated that a clarification produced somewhat more cooperation than an apology, $F(1, 114) = 3.16, p < .10$.

The effect of message was, however, qualified by the expected significant two-way interaction between interaction type and message, $F(2, 114) = 3.46, p < .05$, the means for which are depicted in Table 4.1. The communication contrast did not interact significantly with interaction type, $F(1, 114) = 0.03, ns$, while the message contrast did, $F(1, 114) = 6.90, p = .01$. Communication evoked greater levels of cooperation than no communication, both for representatives, $F(1, 114) = 3.03, p < .10$, and for individuals, $F(1, 114) = 5.47, p < .05$. However, whereas for individuals apologies evoked similar levels of cooperation ($M = 4.57, SD = 3.01$) as clarifications ($M = 4.24, SD = 2.98$), $F(1, 114) = 0.39, ns$, apologies evoked significantly smaller levels of cooperation ($M = 3.14, SD = 2.08$) than clarifications ($M = 4.68, SD = 2.95$) for representatives, $F(1, 114) = 9.10, p < .005$.\footnote{Further comparisons revealed that among representatives, apologies in fact were no more effective than not communicating at all, $F(1, 114) = 0.03, ns$, whereas apologies did increase cooperation among individuals, $F(1, 114) = 5.51, p < .05$.}

Thus, these findings provide strong support for Hypothesis 4.2.

The analysis also revealed two effects involving social value orientation. First, there was a significant main effect for social value orientation, $F(1, 114) = 16.73, p < .001$, indicating that participants with a prosocial value orientation
exhibited a greater level of cooperation ($M = 4.45$, $SD = 2.63$) than participants with a proself value orientation ($M = 2.98$, $SD = 2.60$).\footnote{There was also an unexpected marginally significant three-way interaction between interaction type, message, and social value orientation, $F(2, 114) = 2.73, p < .10$. We computed contrasts to further explore this interaction. There was a significant interaction between message and social value orientation among individuals, $F(2, 114) = 4.52, p < .05$, but not among representatives, $F(2, 114) = 0.18, ns$. Among individuals, the message contrast interacted significantly with social value orientation, $F(1, 114) = 8.30, p < .01$. Among individuals with a prosocial orientation, clarifications evoked more cooperation ($M = 5.91$, $SD = 2.66$) than apologies ($M = 4.23$, $SD = 3.17$), whereas among individuals with a proself value orientation, apologies evoked more cooperation ($M = 5.00$, $SD = 2.91$) than clarifications ($M = 2.40$, $SD = 2.17$).}

Figure 4.1. Cooperation: level of cooperation as a function of message and interaction type.
Message Credibility

For participants in the clarification and the apology condition, we combined the two items on message credibility from the postexperimental message questionnaire into a single scale measure of perceived credibility of the partner’s message ($\alpha = .69$). We analyzed participants’ scores on this scale in a 2 (interaction type: between representatives vs between individuals) × 2 (message: clarification vs apology) × 2 (social value orientation: prosocial vs proself) analysis of variance. The analysis yielded a marginally significant interaction between interaction type and message, $F (1, 80) = 3.52, p < .10$. Further examination of this effect indicated that the simple main effect of interaction type was significant for apologies, $F (1, 80) = 4.62, p < .05$, but not for clarifications, $F (1, 80) = 0.27, ns$. Representatives perceived an apology to be significantly less credible ($M = 3.09, SD = 1.42$) than individuals ($M = 4.16, SD = 1.66$), whereas apologies and clarifications were deemed equally credible by individuals ($M = 3.93, SD = 1.71$) and $M = 3.95, SD = 1.63$). This finding therefore provides support for Hypothesis 4.3.

Discussion

The major purpose of the present research was to compare the effectiveness of pre-emptive communications, specifically apologies and clarifications, at overcoming the detrimental effects of noise on cooperation. Furthermore, we aimed to examine how the effectiveness of such communications may depend on the social context in which they are voiced – in this case, in context of acting as individual or as group representative. In line with our hypotheses, the results of our experiment revealed that in a noisy interaction, pre-emptive communications indeed did increase cooperation. However, the effectiveness of apologies (but not clarifications) was strongly dependent on the context: if people interacted as individuals, apologies were as effective as clarifications. But if people interacted
as group representatives, apologies backfired, and were much less effective than clarifications – in fact, in this context, apologies were no more effective than not communicating at all. In the following, we discuss these findings in greater detail, and describe a number of their implications.

**Effectiveness of pre-emptive communication, and the importance of “striking the right tone”**

Misunderstandings and errors are frequent in social life, and if they go unchecked, they can have severe, detrimental consequences for our relations with others. The present research converges to the important conclusion that such instances of noise can be overcome by pre-emptive communication – by communicating about one’s intentions before acting. It is particularly important to note that pre-emptive communication may even enable us to overcome some of the most harmful instances of noise – those which have escaped our awareness. Such instances of noise often go unchecked, and are particularly likely to get out of hand. However, if we have communicated our intentions beforehand, others may be more likely to perceive them as unintended errors. Therefore, they may be more inclined to give us the benefit of the doubt and to forgive us – and this may be a crucial step for overcoming noise (see Klapwijk & Van Lange, 2007; Van Lange, Ouwerkerk, & Tazelaar, 2002).

At the same time, the present research illuminates that if we want to communicate our intentions, then it is crucial that we consider carefully what we should (and should not) say in the present context. Through the “mindsets” that they may activate, social contexts may have a pivotal influence on how people perceive certain communications. For example, in context of an interaction between individuals, apologies were perceived as credible, and effectively restored cooperation following an instance of noise. In context of an interaction between representatives, however, which activates a rather more competitive “mindset” (see Reinders Folmer, Van Lange, & Klapwijk, 2007), apologies were perceived as far less credible, and yielded no greater cooperation than not communicating at all. Therefore, it is crucial to “strike the right tone” for the
occasion. Our findings suggest that in case of an interaction between representatives, that means to restrict one's comments to neutral, matter-of-fact statements, without much in the way of courteousness or empathy. However, this "tone" could easily be ineffective or detrimental in different contexts – for example, it would be a highly unusual way to address friends or family. Therefore, a major conclusion of the present research is that it is crucial to take the context into account when voicing our intentions – and that it could be costly to be careless.

**Acting as representative: change in “mindset”, but also in morality?**

The present research also provides important further insight into the "psychology" of interactions between representatives. Recent research has revealed that people approach what is essentially exactly the same dyadic interaction situation with a wholly different "mindset" if it takes place in context of an interaction between representatives (Reinders Folmer, Van Lange, & Klapwijk, 2007). The present contribution adds to such insights by revealing that people may also perceive the subsequent interaction in a wholly different way in this context. Representatives may be particularly sensitive to cues related to their partner's trustworthiness, for example in their actions or speech – and may be inclined to interpret these in a manner biased toward distrust. Such cues may be quite subtle: for example, clarifications and apologies were highly similar, but representatives perceived the latter message as far less credible. Cues could also be nonverbal (for example, an open or threatening pose), and might perhaps even escape our consciousness. The result is that people perceive the same actions and statements in a wholly different light.

That representatives perceived apologies as less credible is also interesting for a different reason: it implies that they believe that their partner is lying. Representatives therefore do not only expect that their partner has competitive interaction goals, but they also expect him or her to be quite ready to use immoral practices to achieve his or her goal. And -participants themselves may also be less concerned with norms and moral standards as representatives. According to recent work, the sincerity of apologies may matter little for their
effectiveness, because it is socially inappropriate to reject an apology (Risen & Gilovich, 2007; also see Bennett & Dewberry, 1994; Darby & Schlenker, 1989; Reeder, Kumar, Hesson-McInnis, & Trafimow, 2002). Representatives, however, felt rather less inhibited to do so, and were far less likely to take an apology at face value. But does this mean that representatives become – and expect others to be – immoral? A more likely option is that what people perceive as moral changes when they take on the role of representative: they may feel less bound by individual morality (which involves norms such as fairness, politeness, reciprocity, and cooperativeness; see Wildschut & Insko, 2006), and may shift toward group morality (which places the interests of the ingroup above all other concerns). For the group, the most moral thing to do is to further the group’s interests, regardless of the consequences for others. As such, actions become appropriate which would be incompatible with the moral frame to which people would normally adhere in an interpersonal interaction. Although out of bounds for the present paper, it is suggestive that a small number of representatives lied to their partner about their contributions in the task. In the present setting there was little reason to do so (the interaction ended after one round), but in different circumstances, perhaps representatives might indeed be more inclined toward unethical practices. We regard this as a question that deserves further attention.

We conclude on a more positive note, however, because the present research also gives reason for optimism. In this increasingly global age, more and more interactions between representatives take place to a background of difference in culture and customs, which may often lead to unintended errors and misunderstandings. Previous research has revealed that among representatives, such noise may be particularly likely to lead to harmful cycles of noncooperation – with detrimental consequences for constituents on either side. The present research reveals that among representatives, unintended errors need not just end in disaster. Despite receiving a low contribution themselves, representatives exhibited a considerable level of cooperation if their partner clarified his or her decision. Indeed, this level of cooperation was no lower than that among individuals, and substantially higher than what representatives received
themselves – which suggests that representatives were even willing to give their partner the benefit of the doubt. Therefore, our findings suggest that despite the “climate of distrust” which may predominate in such interactions, it is possible to overcome noise among representatives – by clarifying our intentions preemptively, in a neutral, matter-of-fact way. By doing so, our representatives may finally be free to focus on their ultimate challenge: to achieve solutions which are to the benefit of all.

Concluding Remarks

Unintended mistakes are perhaps the greatest threat to our cooperative relations with others. Because of such “noise” we may uninten dedly harm the interests of others (often without being aware of it ourselves), leading to misunderstandings which may disrupt or damage our relations. In the present research we show that noise may be overcome by communicating our intentions pre-emptively. However, the effectiveness of such communications may be highly dependent on the context: what is effective in one context, may activate distrust in another. These results therefore suggest that it may be crucial to “strike the right tone” for one’s audience. On the more optimistic side, if people take the circumstances into account when communicating, they may successfully overcome misunderstandings even in the most challenging contexts.