

Irvin Yalom's Existential Issues in Letters from the Future

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Research Task:

Irvin Yalom's Existential Issues in Letters from the Future

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FOREWORD

To finish my Bachelor of Science in the department of psychology I chose for a bachelor thesis in the field of mental health (Geestelijke Gezondheidsbevordering). This choice was made, because I want to do my Master of Science in this field. This master will give me the possibility to the advanced education as psychotherapist.

It was very important for me to work on a topic of personal interest. In the past I already chose a minor in the field of philosophy because I am highly interested in ancient philosophy. Furthermore, since philosophy is the origin of our contemporary science, this minor gives me a good scientific foundation. Accordingly, I am interested in the philosophical part of psychology and in psychotherapy.

In the first discussion with my supervisor Dr. Anneke Sools I told her that I am interested in philosophy. She suggested a research on existential psychology. This area of psychology was completely new to me, but has proven to be an inspiring topic.

Finally I wish to thank Dr. Anneke Sools and Drs. Vincent van Bruggen for their support. Their respective points of view allowed me to improve my bachelor thesis in various parts. By doing this, Anneke and Vincent have mentored me magnificently both in the field of science and personally: *Thank you very much for your support!*

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1. ABSTRACT

The aim of this qualitative research paper is to examine if and how the four existential issues, based on the theory of Irvin Yalom are found in letters from the future.

For this purpose, an already existing dataset, called 'letters from the future' was used. This dataset was collected in the ongoing study "Narrative future imagination and mental health" at the lifestory lab at the University of Twente. This study gives the possibility to examine how the four existential issues by Irvin Yalom are found in everyday writing in contrast to explicit elicitation and exploration of existential issues as in the case in existential therapy. Although the letters do not explicitly ask for those existential issues, but are rather open to any content writers might find relevant in their lives, the short form of the letters demands making a choice for what matters most. Therefore, the letters from the future as data collection method might trigger thinking about existential issues.

The analysis consists of three steps. First, all 86 letters were analyzed to explore the frequency of Yaloms existential issues. Second, an analysis of the writing mode in relation to the existential issues was conducted. Third, a deeper analysis of the existential issue of freedom based on three different dimensions (frequency, stable-dynamic and degree of existentialism) and two prototypic letters of the existential issue of freedom were shown to the reader and analyzed in detail to demonstrate the analytical tool developed for the study.

The analysis showed that many existential issues can be found in the letters from the future. There are both direct and indirect references to existential issues. Freedom and the search for meaning were the most frequent themes. Furthermore, writing mode appeared to be important for the occurrence of the existential issues, the more reflective the writing mode, the higher the frequency of the existential issues. Dimensioned analysis of 'freedom' showed, that in 42% of the letters from the future containing the existential issue of freedom, this issue is also high existential.

Finally, the frequent occurrence of 'freedom' and particularly 'autonomy' is interpreted in light of the cultural background of the participants in the study. Future study into differences between participants from western individualistic and from non-western collective cultures could reveal different autonomy-freedom patterns.

2. INTRODUCTION

“Every person, at some point in life, enters a ‘brown study’ and has some traffic with existential ultimate concerns.” (p. 16) is written by Irvin Yalom in the preface of his book ‘Existential Psychotherapy’ (1980) and shows the importance of existential approaches in the life of every human being.

The very first existential approaches started with Søren Kierkegaard (1813-1855) and Friedrich Nietzsche (1844-1900), who are considered as the first existentialists. Other well-known existential philosophers like Martin Heidegger (1889-1976), and the psychiatrist Ludwig Binswanger (1881-1966) added further suggestions to the existential topic. Rollo May (1909-1994) established the existential issues in the American psychology community. May also formulated the first existential therapy (Bugental, 1981; May and Yalom, 1985; Yalom, 1980). The Austrian psychiatrist and survivor of the Holocaust Victor Frankl (1905-1997) focused on the existential issue meaning and created the logotherapy (Frankl, 2006).

In my qualitative research paper I will study these existential issues in everyday writings of humans. For this purpose I will use an existing data set from ‘letters from the future’. These are writings in which the participants are asked to imagine themselves in the future and report about their future life and their future self. For example the writer has the possibility to talk about his achievements in his or her life. However, the participant is not primed on the existential issues, for example by previously given texts. I expect that existential issues will be found in the letters from the future because these topics build the basis of our human life.

There is no defined paradigm in the existential psychology, but different main topics, which are important, for example existential being, choice, freedom, death, isolation or absurdity (Yalom, 1980). It is possible that different existential psychologists have only these main topics in common, but nothing else (Yalom, 1980). Therefore, it is necessary that I choose a trend-setting and most clearly articulated model, as the basis of my research: The frameworks of Irvin Yalom. His concepts are influenced by underlying theories of famous existential psychologist like Jean-Paul Sartre and Friedrich Nietzsche and existential psychologist like Rollo May and Viktor Frankl. Furthermore, he studied under the famous existential psychologist Rollo May and is himself one of the most influential psychotherapists of the 20th century in existential psychotherapy.

2.1 EXISTENTIAL ISSUES

Irvin Yalom describes four primary existential issues - death, freedom, existential isolation and meaninglessness. These are elaborated in his textbook “Existential Psychotherapy” (1980). As mentioned before I will build my research on these concepts. Furthermore I will consider additional notes by other psychologists.

2.1.1 Death

Yalom (1980) states that death is one of the most important facets of human existence. This topic is also mentioned in a lot of different writings of well-known and influential philosophers (Yalom, 1980). Furthermore, it is one of the primary issues of existential psychologists. For example Rollo May (1983) states, that if a person denies death the result will be self-alienation. Yalom (1980) outlines that “life and death are interdependent” (p.29), a thought which also appears in different eastern approaches (Long, 1975). Furthermore, Yalom describes death as a primary source for anxiety, which he called ‘**death-anxiety**’ (Yalom, 1980). At a given moment in his or her lifetime, every individual will be confronted with this death-anxiety (Yalom, 1980).

Yalom (1980) describes two different coping mechanisms for this death-anxiety. The first one is one’s own **specialness**. The individual believes that he or she is special and could therefore escape illness or suffering. The second coping mechanism is the belief in an *ultimate rescuer*. This rescuer can be a deity, but also a human being like a spouse. The individual believes this ultimate rescuer could save him or her from death.

2.1.2 Freedom

Irvin Yalom considers freedom to be the second existential issue. The existential meaning of freedom is the personal responsibility of every human. Yalom depicts what this responsibility means, when he declares “I bear responsibility for what I do and for what I choose to ignore...”(p.221). Every human has to make his or her own decision and it is not possible to transfer this responsibility to someone else.

Yalom (1980) argues that for some people this responsibility results in the feeling of groundlessness. The psychoanalyst Erich Fromm explains in his book ‘escape from freedom’ (1994) that for humans a tyrant is better than no leader at all. The human being searches for another creature, which can bear the whole responsibility. The loss of such a groundbreaking authority produces an “anxiety of groundlessness” (Yalom, 1980, p.221).

2.1.3 Existential Isolation

Existential isolation describes that between every human being in the world there is an insurmountable gap. Yalom makes a sharp distinction between existential isolation and intrapersonal and interpersonal isolation. Interpersonal intends a geographic distance between two persons, while intrapersonal describes a defense mechanism – a dissociation of one’s own personality (Yalom, 1980).

The existential isolation describes, as already mentioned, the permanent distance between human beings. Thus, humans are not able to fully overcome their isolation. This limitation is part of our human being and the inability to accept this limitation may lead to different clinical patterns (neurotic, dependent and symbiotic relational patterns).

One of Irvin Yaloms clients describes this gap very metaphorically. This man has a serious sleeping disorder (insomnia) and is frightened of sleeping, since he has nightmares. In his dreams, while nothing happens to himself, but the world around him “... melted away, exposing him to nothingness.” (Yalom, 1980, p. 355).

According to Irvin Yalom (1980) the existential isolation is deeply connected with the existential issues of death and freedom. Yalom refers to Heidegger, when he says: “... leads us to recognize that we are finite, that we also must die, that we are free, and that we cannot escape our freedom. We also learn that the individual is inexorably alone.” (p. 353). Yaloms perspective on death, freedom and responsibility entail, that in the end the human being is an autonomous, independent creature.

2.1.4 Search for Meaning

Yalom designates meaninglessness as the fourth existential issue and states, that the quest for meaning is an especially important topic of the 20th and 21st century, due to the fact that there is not a given meaning anymore (Yalom, 1980). Nonetheless, humans have to find their own destination the individual has freedom and a choice. The importance of religion, which was a primary source of meaning until the 20th century, has rapidly declined (Yalom, 1980). Furthermore, the basic needs of the (western) people are fulfilled and they have the possibility to reach for the higher needs, like identity and self-esteem (Maslow, 1943, 1954). They have time to think about the meaning of life. Nevertheless, according to Yalom meaninglessness is a by-product and disappears automatically, if the client brings himself back into everyday life.

Yalom states five different categories, in which the meaning of life could be found. The first three of them focus on something outside the person, whereas the fourth and fifth focus on the person itself (Yalom, 1980):

1. ***Dedication to a Cause***: The person chooses an aim like family, religion or politics. Referred to Will Durant it is important that this aim facilitates a solid scheme in which the person can live. This scheme then provides support and meaning in life (Durant, 1932).
2. ***Altruism***: The person finds his meaning in his or her attempt to create a better world. Examples are aid or nature conservation organisations.
3. ***Creativity***: The person creates something new, outstanding. This can be a scientific theory, a famous book or a profit-making company.
4. ***Hedonistic Solution***: The purpose of life for this person is to live a fulfilling life. For example, someone can say at his or her deathbed: “I liked my life – I would change nothing!”
5. ***Self Actualization***: The person desires to have a personal growth, the purpose is to become the person he or she wants to be.

2.3 PRIOR RESEARCH

Different empirical studies based on existential approaches have already been conducted. Some research about meaning in life has shown that family and friends are especially important. It is shown that these are most important for college students (DeVogler & Ebersole, 1980), grownups from 30-80 years (DeVogler & Ebersole, 1981) and older couples (Ebersole & DePaola, 1987). A significant difference in meaning in life for youth and grownups is not found (Baum & Steward, 1990).

Erin Martz (2002) did research on the question, whether Irvin Yaloms existential concerns are found in the eastern philosophical approaches. He argues that if Yaloms four ultimate concerns are indeed basic to humanity, they have to be independent of the culture group. Therefore he did a literature study and illustrated that there is a lot of overlap between Irvin Yaloms four ultimate concerns and eastern philosophy. He concluded that Yaloms four ultimate concerns are universally valid.

Thus there are different indications that the existential concerns stated by Yalom are applicable to every person. Consequently, in my study I explore whether these existential topics are found in the everyday writings of people.

2.4 GOAL OF THE RESEARCH AND RESEARCH QUESTION

In my study I will perform a qualitative analysis if the existential issues derived from Irvin Yalom are found in the ‘letters from the future’ of the ongoing study “Narrative future imagination and mental health” at the lifestory lab at the University of Twente. More than 600 letters are already collected online and I will consider the first 100 of these letters.

Writing a letter from the future is a setting which is very different from the typical therapeutic session where existential issues normally come across. Whereas existential psychotherapy is aimed at explicit exploration of existential issues, the letters from the future focus on the imagination of a desired future. Although the letters do not explicitly ask for existential issues, they are rather open to any content writers might find relevant to their life. The short form of the letters demands making a choice for what matters most. Therefore, the letters from the future as data collection method might prime thinking about existential issues. Starting from this assumption, I will explore the question if and how an individual writes regarding existential questions without an external trigger. Therefore I will define if and how the above-mentioned existential perspectives can be found in the future imagination of the letter writers.

The **main research question** I state is:

- Are existential issues stated by Irvin Yalom (death, freedom, existential isolation and search for meaning) found directly and indirectly in the letters from the future?

The **sub-questions** I will ask in the elaborated analysis are:

- Are the existential issues (death, freedom, existential isolation and search for meaning) mentioned in a special context?
- How frequently is the existential issue (freedom) mentioned in the different letters from the future?
- How important seems the existential issue (freedom) to be for the writer?

- Is the treated existential issue (freedom) in the course of the letter from the future static or dynamic?
- How high is the degree of existentialism of the mentioned existential issue (freedom) in the letter from the future?

3. METHOD

3.1 DATASET: LETTERS FROM THE FUTURE

3.1.1 Design and Instruments

The dataset letters from the future consists of two primary parts. The first part of the survey is to write a letter from the future. The second part includes some demographic details about the participant and a depression-scale.

The letter from the future is a letter written by an imaged future self, who writes about his or her current self. What is meant by ‘future’ is not defined; it could be some month or 40 years in the future. Besides, it is possible to write the letter to his or her actual self, his or her family, spouse or anybody he or she wishes to write to.

The writer should imagine that some of his or her dreams and wishes came true and should describe his or her imagined self and situation. What to write about is not further defined and completely open. The original, Netherlands description of the writing of the letter is given in **attachment 1**.

When the letter is handed in, the second part starts, and it is not possible for the writer to switch back to the written letter to change anything. The reason for this is that the further questioning should not influence the writer and his writings. As already mentioned the second part of demographic factors consists of gender, education, income and age. Furthermore the writer is asked about his or her feeling of writing a letter from the future. Afterwards the mental health is measured by a clinical device called MHC-SF. This device measures the subjective, psychological and social well-being. The participant is primary asked about his or her well-being of the last month.

In the end the participant is asked for using his or her data for scientific research. Moreover, he or she is asked for publishing his or her data anonymously. If the participant wishes, he or she will be informed about the results and the possibility to participate in further studies.

3.1.2 Material

In this qualitative research the first 100 of the more than 600 collected letters from the future were chosen. The different letters were not chosen on a special attribute, a cross-sectional selection was done.

During the first observation it was found that 14 out of those 100 letters were not fit to analysis. 3 of the writers ignored the task, for example by writing an actual letter, telling about dream, wishes and plans in the future. In addition to that, 8 letters were double. Furthermore, 2 of the letters were incomplete. Finally, 86 letters were selected for analysis.

3.1.3 Participant

Demographic factors exist for 81 out of those 86 participants. Most of the 81 participants are born in Europe (N=75), 6 of the participants are originated to another culture. The distribution of gender within the sampling is 59 female and 22 male.

The distribution of the sampling over the different age and educational groups is shown in table 1 and 2. Table 1 shows, that most of the participants are between 16 und 25 years old (N=52). Table 2 illustrates that most of the writers have an educational degree of MBO (N=26), HAVO or VWO (N=30).

Table 1.

Descriptive statistics for the different age groups of the participants

Age group in years	N (participants)
16-25	52
26-55	25
>56	4

Table 2.

Descriptive statistics for the different education of the participants

Education (Netherlands)	N (participants)
Geen onderwijs	0
Lager onderwijs	1
VMBO	7
MBO	26
HAVO en VWO	30
HBO	9
Hoger wetenschappelijk onderwijs	0
Postacademisch	1
Zeg ik niet/anderes/no answer	7

3.2 PROCEDURE

For the further qualitative research **AtlasTI** was chosen as basic analysis tool. This program gives the possibility for coding, localization and annotates results and primary data. Furthermore, it is possible to weight and evaluate the importance of events. A graphic presentation is also possible.

The analysis of the letters from the future consists of three steps. At first, all 86 letters are analyzed to explore the frequency of Yalom's four existential issues – death, freedom, existential isolation and search for meaning. The second step is an analysis the influence of the writing mode of the occurrence of the existential issues. Finally, an elaborated analysis of the existential issue of freedom based on three different dimensions (frequency, stable-dynamic and degree of existentialism) is conducted. To demonstrate the analytical tool developed for the study two prototypic letters of the existential issue of freedom are shown to the reader and analyzed in detail.

3.2.1 From theory to practice

The further research builds basically on Yalom's theory, but some terms were modified to fit the further analysis. The main categories still have the same names as given by Irvin Yalom, only meaninglessness was renamed to 'search for meaning'. Different names were assigned to the subcategories. One reason was to discriminate between the main-, and subcategories. The second reason was to avoid confusion through similar names.

3.2.2 Process of coding

The first analysis-step is called **open coding** (Boeije, 2005). Here, the printed data material is carefully read and first passages with existential issues are highlighted. Some first codes are assigned to the marked paragraphs. These first codes were the same as the four existential issues mentioned by Irvin Yalom, and were therefore still unsophisticated and inaccurate. Another important step was screening the different text fragments for common features, variations and keywords.

This first coding was very free and the focus was to gain further information from the letters from the future. The first reflection gave the possibility to shape the research questions in a more differentiated way. In the course of this, first reflection peculiarities of the way of storytelling were found, which are described in paragraph 3.5. Furthermore, different dimensions are discovered. Dimensions are different features of the letters from the future in

connection with the existential issues. Those dimensions are further described in paragraph 3.4.

Axial coding (Boeije, 2005) was the next step to get more sophisticated codes. In this part, the main task is to section, differentiate and particularize the already existing codes. The code-tree (Boeije, 2005) in **attachment 2** shows the different codes and the connection between the different main-, and subcategories. The different codes are described in detail in **attachment 3**.

The final step was **selective coding** (Boeije, 2005), here the already developed codes were used within AtlasTi on the given data. During this process it is important to make sure that all letters from the future are coded the same way. For this purpose the code manager of AtlasTi was used to compare the different codes of one category to make sure that the coding pattern did not change.

3.3.3 Further description of Coding

This paragraph gives further description regarding the codes. Starting with the question: "what is coded"? In the letters from the future the first main goal is to find hints for the existential topics. In the elaborated analysis these hints for the existential issues are analyzed in depth, to answer the different sub questions.

The code itself is given per sentence. A sentence could be labeled for 'non existential' or a subcategory of 'others' if there is no existential clue. If there is an existential clue a decision must be made which existential issue fits best. It is possible to attach different existential codes to one sentence, then a memo can give further description about the choice. If an existential code is given, the whole sentence does not have to be existential. However a notable clue of an existential topic has to be available.

A memo is set if different codes are given for one sentence. Furthermore, memos are set if a dataset is double or unusable. In the memo is described where the double data can be found or why the data is not useable. Furthermore, suggestions for further research are given via memos.

3.4 DIMENSIONS

Three dimensions are created to give an elaborated analysis of the different existential issues. In the following three dimensions are shown, which are already fitted to the existential

issue of freedom. The shown dimensions are also the basis for the elaborated analysis of the other three existential issues, but must be adapted for each of them.

3.4.1 Frequency

This dimension describes the frequency of the existential issues in the letter from the future. The dimension frequency is further divided into quantity and quality. **Quantity** describes how much space the existential issue takes compared to the whole text. **Quality** is an estimate of the relative importance of the existential issue for the writer. The used scale is a four-point scale and contains: very low, low, high and very high.

3.4.2 Static – Dynamic

This dimension describes a possible change of the existential issue in the letter from the future. The attitude referring to the existential topic does not change, because it is an imagined future self. What changes is the way this attitude is acted out. **Static** describes that the way this attitude is acted out is the same in the present and in the future. **Dynamic** describes that the way this attitude is acted out by the current self is different from the way it is acted out by the imagined future self.

3.4.3 Degree of Existentialism

This dimension shows the amount of existentialism for each existential issue in the letter from the future. The scale is a two-point-scale and contains ‘low existential’ and ‘high existential’.

3.5 THE WRITING MODE

The writing mode of the ‘letters from the future’ seems to be important for the occurrence of the four different existential issues. Three modes of writing were distinguished: 1) episodic, 2) reflective and 3) third-person-storytelling.

An **episodic writing mode** consists of a high amount of different facts, situations and incidents. The writer describes what he has gained in life, or what event happened in the past years. For example: “I’m working as a clinical psychologist, and I enjoy this work. I’m

married with my former boyfriend Rick and we have two great children.” (PB2 TB1_102, 2011).

In the **reflective writing mode** the writer analyses the situation itself and describes for example the feeling the writer has in a specific situation. He or she writes how important the situation was for his or her life. Typically in this situation the writer is very introspective. The usage of this writing mode gives an indication for the occurrences of the existential issues. For example: “The way you are handling tasks and different responsibilities ... creates an intense love for you and therefore for myself.” (PB:10 TB1_120, 2011).

A letter from the future does not have to be labeled at a whole as either episodic or reflective; rather it can consist of both of them. For example the writer could first write about some events which happened in his or her life (episodic) and then reflect on his or her own feelings and well-being in this situation (reflective).

The **third-person-storytelling** seems to be a special case, because it is not a mode, but rather a change of perspective. Usually the own life is told in the letters from the future. Some writers are not telling primary their own life, but the life of another person. Mostly the life of the writer’s offspring is told. This way of storytelling gives a suggestion of the existential issue isolation (connection). For example: “You, Mariska and Marjan have done a great development, this is true for you and your spouse.” (PB5 TB1_110, 2011)

4. RESULTS

4.1 OCCURRENCE OF THE EXISTENTIAL ISSUES

First a description of the overall findings is given. Then a more detailed analysis on the writing mode is performed to show in which context the existential issues are primarily found. Finally, based on the already shown dimensions a deeper analysis of the existential issue of freedom is given.

4.1.1 General Findings

The analysis with AtlasTi has treated the main question whether the existential issues stated by Irvin Yalom are found in the ‘letters from the future’. In total, around 1/3 of the sentences are labeled for containing a hint for the existential issues. Furthermore the existential issue is least frequent with 20 different ‘letters from the future’, whereas existential isolation is found in 39 letters, freedom in 45 letters, and search for meaning is most frequent with 57 letters.

The distribution of the different existential issues is shown in table 3 to 6. On the left side the sentences are given which contain distinct hints for the subcategory of the existential issue. On the right side the number of letters from the future in this subcategory is shown.

Table 3.

Descriptive statistics for the frequency of sentences containing the existential issues of death

Existential issue of death	N (sentence)	N (letters)
Death itself	4	1
Mortality	39	12
Life	24	12

Table 4.

Descriptive statistics for the frequency of sentences containing the existential issues of freedom

Existential issue of freedom	N (sentence)	N (letters)
Freedom itself	19	9
Autonomy	124	39
Dependency	23	14

Table 5.

Descriptive statistics for the frequency of sentences containing the existential issues of isolation

Existential issue of isolation	N (sentence)	N (letters)
Isolation itself	4	1
Isolation	25	14
Connection	89	32

Table 6.

Descriptive statistics for the frequency of sentences containing the existential issues of meaning

Existential issue of s.f. meaning	N (sentence)	N (letters)
Meaning itself	54	18
Work	95	21
Family and friends	75	26
Altruism	38	10
Self-actualization	31	14
Hedonism	33	14

4.1.2 Existential Issues and the Writing Mode

The way of storytelling is the basis of the letters from the future. Therefore, the first deeper analysis is the way of storytelling. The subquestion in which framework the existential issues are primarily found can be answered.

As already described in paragraph 3.5, there exist two different ways of storytelling and a third special case called third-person-storytelling. During the analysis of the letters from the future for the existential issues it became apparent that the existential issues are primarily found in paragraphs in reflective style. Furthermore, generally more existential hints in mainly reflective texts are found compared to mixed texts. Short texts with an exclusively reflective writing mode have frequently appeared with the existential issues (for example freedom) as a main topic. Here, the letters from the future deal primarily with the existential issue.

Autonomy, isolation and all subcategories of search for meaning are normally found in reflective paragraphs. In contrast, connection and death are often found in episodic text

passages. The special case of third-person-storytelling in particular provides a strong indication for the existential issue connection.

Thus, the sub question “Are the existential issues (death, freedom, existential isolation and search for meaning) mentioned in a special context?” can be answered. The existential issues are mostly found in the reflective passages of the texts. If the reflective parts of the letters from the future are bigger, then there are typically more clues for the existential issues found. Furthermore, the third-person-storytelling mode gives an indication for the existential issue of isolation (connection).

4.2 IN-DEPTH ANALYSIS OF THE EXISTENTIAL ISSUE: FREEDOM

4.2.1 Overview

Some of the writers mention the existential issues of **freedom (autonomy)** only marginally. However, 9 participants write primarily or exclusively about freedom. The weighting is different there. To some writers responsibility is most important, while freedom of choice is to others. They want to be themselves and not be what others make of them. The first shown example letter in paragraph 4.2.3 is a prototypical one for the occurrence of the existential issue of freedom.

In the other 30 letters autonomy is not a primary topic. It is mentioned with different other (existential) issues and takes only little space. An example is also given in paragraph 4.2.3. Often, the issue of freedom comes just as a short encouragement.

Freedom (dependency) is only mentioned directly if the writer wants to change it. Mostly it comes together with autonomy. The writer has the feeling that his or her younger self does not take enough responsibility and wants to change this. His or her current, future self has changed from dependence to autonomy and consistently, and the writer is very pleased about this change. This change is as well shown in example 1.

Dependency without a change to autonomy is generally only indirectly found. The frequency of the sentences with those clues is typically very low. There are only a few sentences and the topic does not seem important to the writer.

4.2.2 Analysis based on the Dimensions

The three different dimensions give the possibility to elaborate the existential issue of freedom more deeply. Table 7 and 8 show the results of the **dimension frequency**. Table 7 shows how many percent of sentences each 'letter from the future' contains. At first, the percentage in the table seems low, however a percentage from 40 upwards is already very high, because the letters contain a lot of sentences lacking of content. Table 8 shows the perceived importance of the topic to the writer. The results show that the relevance of the topic of freedom has a high importance for more than half of the writers.

The **dimension stable-dynamic** has the following distribution: In 57% (N=24) of the cases the existential issue stays the same throughout the letter. In 43% (N=21) of the letters it changes from dependency to autonomy, while no changes from autonomy to dependency occur.

The analysis of the **dimension existential** for the existential issue of freedom shows, that 42% (N=19) are obviously existential and 58% (N=27) are only fractionally or not existential at all.

Finally, the dimensioned analysis has shown, if the quality is high, and therefore the importance for the writer is high, then the letter is often dynamic and also very existential.

Table 7.

Descriptive statistics for the dimension frequency (quantity) within the existential issue freedom per letter

Dimension	<20%	N (20-40)	N (40-60)	N(>60%)
Quantity	30	6	4	5

Table 8.

Descriptive statistics for the dimension frequent (quality) existential within the existential issue freedom per letter

Dimension	N (very low)	N (low)	N (high)	N (very high)
Quality	17	10	7	11

4.2.3 Elaborated Analysis of Sample-Letters

In the following two different letters from the future are shown as a prototypical examples. This elaborated analysis contains primarily the existential issue of freedom while the other issues are not considered. The analysis for each existential issue can be found in the original data in AtlasTI.

Example 1:

The first letter is exemplary for letter from the future, which are especially concerned with the existential issue of freedom. First, the original letter is shown to the reader (PB:10 TB1_120, 2011) then a short description of the existential issues contained in the letter is given. Finally, the letter is analyzed on basis of the dimensions described in paragraph 3.4.

Hey Ik,(0)
Tof dat ik je zo even tref, 'k wil namelijk even zeggen dat ik erg trots op ons ben.(1) De manier waarop je nu taken, opdrachten en andere verantwoordelijkheden aanpakt en niet meer voor je uitschuift, vervult mij met een intens gevoel van liefde voor jou, en daarmee mijzelf.(2) Ik weet nog goed hoe moeilijk dat tien jaar geleden was, in het uitstellen van je verantwoordelijkheden was je bijzonder bekwaam.(3) 't Was handig voor je tijdelijke pleziertjes, maar het zou funest zijn voor je lange termijngeluk als je ermee was doorgedaan.(4)

Daarom, tof dat je bent geworden hoe ik wou zijn, dat hebben we toch even mooi geflikt!(5)

Groeten (ik doe maar geen kus, geen idee hoe men daar tegenwoordig naar kijkt, maar in 2011 is het nog een beetje vreemd om jezelf te zoenen),(0)

Jij(0)

Analysis 1:

In the frame of a reflective writing mode, the existential issue of freedom is the main topic of this letter from the future (1-5). The writer deals with the fact that he or she has succeeded to take responsibility for his or her duties.

In total, the letter exists of 5 sentences, salutation and farewell. Only 1 of these sentences (1) does not contain an existential issue. 2 sentences are labeled as autonomy (2;5), 1 sentence is labeled as dependency (3) and 1 further sentence contains thoughts about the existential issue of freedom itself (4).

This whole letter deals with the existential issue of freedom, especially with responsibility. The quantity of this existential issue is extremely high (80 percent) and the importance (quality) seems to be very high, too.

The writer describes a development within the category of freedom. His younger self was not able to take responsibility, while his future self has learned to take responsibility. Therefore, the letter can be labeled as dynamic. Finally, this letter seems to handle the topic freedom in an existential way. Thus, this letter could be labeled as high existential.

Example 2:

The second letter from the future deals with freedom as well, but in a different way. The issue is mentioned, but it is less important for the writer of the letter. First the letter is shown (PB:22 TB1_82, 2011), followed by a description of the letter and finally an analysis.

Berlijn, december 2025(0)

Lieve Mij,(0)

vanuit de toekomst schrijf ik deze brief aan jou omdat ik weet dat je er op dit moment veel baat bij kan hebben.(1) Je hebt al voor veel tegenslagen en moeilijke periodes gestaan en ik vertel je nu alvast dat er nog meer moeilijke periodes aankomen.(2) Maar je weet dat je onverwoestbaar bent en ik wil je laten weten dat dit is wat je sterk maakt en dat je mede hierdoor steeds weer die terror-depressies kan overwinnen en het geluk zal vinden.(3) Ik weet dit omdat ik nu vanuit mijn eigen appartementje in Berlijn deze brief naar jou schrijf.(4) Ik woon wellicht klein, maar midden in het centrum, boven een koffiewinkeltje.(5) En ik kan oprecht zeggen dat ik gelukkig ben.(6) Je zult op je weg hier naar toe de meest interessante mensen ontmoeten, maar dan moet je wel leren je open te stellen voor anderen.(7) En wees eens wat positiever, geniet van de kleine dingen, neem geen genoegen met minder en blijf altijd stevig in je schoenen staan.(8) Dit zal je helpen om je doelen te bereiken.(9) Want ook al zul je je soms hopeloos en zelfs wanhopig voelen, je weet wat je doel is en je zal dit bereiken.(10) Soms loop ik naar beneden en drink ik een latte machiatto in het koffiewinkeltje en denk ik terug aan het verleden, ik heb al zo veel leuke dingen gedaan.(11) Die wereldreis zal een enorme eyeopener voor je worden, want ik weet nu dat ik zelfs in mijn eentje de hele wereld aan kan.(12) Alles komt goed.(13)

Ik wens je veel succes met het verslaan van je demonen en vergeet niet te genieten van al het moois om je heen dat je tegen gaat komen.(14)

Liefs, jezelf vanuit de toekomst(0)

Analysis 2:

This letter deals with different existential issues: freedom and search for meaning. In contrast to the first letter, the writing mode changes between episodic (4-6) and reflective (1-3; 7-14). In the reflective part the clues for the existential issues are found. The letter consists of 14 sentences, plus salutation, farewell and the information of place and time. 6 sentences are without a clue for an existential issue. 7 sentences deal with the existential issue of meaning (hedonism and self actualization) and only one sentence deals with freedom (autonomy).

Thus, the frequency of the existential issue of freedom is low (21 percent). Therefore it seems that freedom is no dominant or important theme in his or her letter. Here, too the issue of freedom is labeled as dynamic. The writer wants to change the behavior of his current self to become more autonomous.

Furthermore, the sentences are not easy labeled as autonomy, because no keywords are given. Only through interpretation could the existential issue of freedom (autonomy) be found, and thus, the existential issue is labeled as indirect.

The existential issue of freedom, which is labeled as high existential, is part of this letter, while other existential issues (in this case meaning) are more important to the writer.

5. DISCUSSION

5.1 INTERPRETATION OF THE FINDINGS

5.1.1 Freedom

The topic of freedom (autonomy) is the most mentioned existential issue in the analyzed letters from the future. The elaborated analysis shows the importance of this topic to the particular writer. For almost half the writers, which write about freedom this topic has an existential relevance.

I suggest that this topic is especially important for Central European people, because we live in an individualistic culture. This involves both, an awareness of one's own preferences and the ability to act independently and each individual has great freedom (Veenhoven, 1999). It is shown that the development of autonomy within adolescents is an important development milestone in individualistic cultures (Allen et al. 1994; Noom et al. 2001; Steinberg & Silverberg 1986).

The question arises, if those findings are the same for collectivistic cultures. This question gives indication for further research and is deeper elaborated in paragraph 5.4

5.1.2 Death

Generally, the issue death and life is the least frequent of all existential issues. When the topic of death is mentioned, it is mostly mentioned in episodic text passages and then only as a sideline. A deeper elaboration of this topic is only found in one letter, which scores generally as very high in the dimension existential (PB13 TB1_62, 2011).

A direct hint for an ultimate rescuer was not found. In contrast, different suggestions for the coping mechanism specialness were found. Letters in which the writer has an outstanding lifespan and letters were medications for eternal (or outstanding long) life give an indication of this specialness. Further analysis must be done to allow further claims about the existential issue death.

5.1.3 Existential Isolation

In general the way of third-person-storytelling gives a strong indication for the subcategory isolation (connection). The writer features not his or her own life, but the life of a different person. This story mode provides a strong indication for the existential issue (connection).

One further possibility is that the writers using the third-person-storytelling just misunderstood the task. Mostly the parents of students did the task in this way. Perhaps the students of the University of Twente asked their parents to participate, but outlined the task in the wrong way. Further research must be done, to outline these suggestions.

5.1.4 Search for Meaning

Seen as a whole, the search for meaning was the existential issue which was most frequent, and some of the writers deal primarily with the question of search for meaning. Typically the search for meaning is not named as such in the letters from the future however dreams or goals are often mentioned. Furthermore, the difference between performing one's duty (for example work) and finding a meaning in his or her work is slight. Therefore, the further category others (work) and others (family&friends) are given as basis for further analysis.

DeVogler and Ebersole states, that family and friends are most important for meaning in life. In contrast to their findings, the analysis of the letters from the future give a strong indication, that both, loved persons and work seems to be equally important.

Besides, there are no indications found for religion as meaning in life while the subcategory self-actualization seems important for a lot of writers. Thus, it seems those findings support Irvin Yaloms statement, that religion does not give the human a meaning in life anymore.

5.1.5 Writing Mode

An important finding was that existential issues are mostly found in reflectively written texts. This does not mean that writers who primarily use the episodic writing mode do not think reflective in general. An episodically written letter from the future without any clues does not mean that the existential issues are not important to the writer, but rather that the episodic writing mode allows for less room for exploration of existential issues.

To encourage a more reflective way of writing, the participants who use episodic writing could be asked to think more elaborated and be encouraged to give an interpretation of the situation and describe their emotions in the different situations. Additionally this encouragement could bring up more existential issues.

5.2 SCIENTIFIC RELEVANCE OF THE FINDINGS

Those findings have both theoretical and practical relevance. Regarding **theoretical relevance**, this exploratory study demonstrates that it is possible to find existential issues in ‘letters from the future’. All four existential issues are found in the ‘letters from the future’, but death appeared less frequent. In addition the dimensioned analysis shows that already 50% of the writing has an existential basis. Thus, this study has shown that it is possible to find the existential issues through a qualitative research of writings – without giving a trigger to the writers to think about existential issues.

This finding also has **practical relevance**. In a therapeutic session for instance, writing like the letters from the future informs the therapist about the thoughts, fears and dreams of the client. Furthermore the writing mode shows how reflective the writer already is. Thus it is possible to use the idea of the ‘letters from the future’ in the therapeutic session and to get a preliminary indication about the client’s engagement with existential issues and his or her capacity for existential reflection.

In addition the letter exercise can serve as a starting point, close to experience and clients own words, to start in their exploration of existential issues. Therapists can thus use the content information to assist clients in where they want to move as much as it informs them on where they are existential are.

5.3 RESTRICTIONS OF THIS STUDY

The **reliability** is medium, because the development of the codes and the analyses are done by one person, but controlled and evaluated by two further researches. Through those control-persons the reliability was seriously increased. Furthermore, the analysis method based on the codes and dimensions is very specific and adjusted for the ‘letters from the future’.

The **validity** is also medium. The sample was taken from a western student age group (16-25). As already shown, a specific group (age, culture) took part in the actual ‘letters from the future’ research. For this reason is it not possible to generalize the findings. To increase the external validity, more participants, from different countries, social background and age must be chosen. A strength of this study is, that observer-effects do not exists, because an already existing dataset was used.

5.4 SUGGESTIONS FOR FURTHER RESEARCH

5.4.1 Follow-up of the Actual Study

The first and important step of further research is to finish this study. An elaborated analysis of the existential issue freedom is done, but the elaboration of death, existential isolation and search for meaning are missing.

The basis for this follow-up study is the analysis with AtlasTI. Furthermore, the actual dimensions could be used with little modification. The results and interpretation of those existential issues are a guide for the elaborated analysis.

I would advise to modify the dimension for the **existential issue search for meaning**. Here one dimension should be 'everyday meaning' and 'existential meaning', because they describe something different and confusions easily happen. Everyday meaning is referred to everyday activities which enhance life. Existential meaning describes the Great meaning in life. Furthermore, an elaborated analysis of "work" and "family", as mentioned in the interpretation should be done.

Within the existential issue of existential isolation the different forms of isolation (interpersonal, intrapersonal and existential) should receive special attention. Furthermore, the storytelling mode of "third-person-storytelling" should receive special attention here.

5.4.2 Suggestions for further studies

In his literature study Erin Martz (2002) has shown that the existential issues are found in the eastern literature. Now, I state the question, if the existential issues (especially freedom/autonomy) are found in a collectivistic culture just like it is found by a group of participants living in an individualistic culture.

Research of Feldman and Rosenthal (1991) has shown that difference exists. They compared 141 Chinese adolescents with 155 North American adolescents and 155 Australian adolescents. They found, that the Chinese adolescents had a later expectation of autonomy.

Thus, differences between collectivistic and individualistic cultures may exist. I would advise to repeat this study in a collectivistic culture. On the one hand, this research would research whether the existential writings are also found in the eastern culture. On the other hand, if the existential issues are found, it would show whether differences between the occurrence of the existential issues in individualistic and collectivistic culture exist.

5.5 FINAL REMARK

Despite its restrictions (mainly it's exploring character and the small sample size), this study demonstrated the potential of the letters from the future to give an insight about the existential thoughts of humans. The four existential issues – death, freedom, existential isolation and meaninglessness – stated by Irvin Yalom are found in numerous cases and seem to be an important part of life.

Based on this finding a practical relevance was shown, which could support the therapeutic sessions in an existential manner. To take up the quotation of Irvin Yalom once again, as given in the introduction: “*Every person, at some point in life ... has some traffic with existential ultimate concerns.*” I state that more research about the practical implementation of existential psychotherapy should be done.

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7. APPENDIX

ATTACHMENT 1 – INSTRUCTIONS FOR WRITING A LETTER FROM THE FUTURE

Aanwijzingen voor het schrijven van de brief

De volgende aanwijzingen zijn tips om u een idee te geven wat de bedoeling is van de brief en waar u aan kunt denken. Voel u vrij om vanuit deze aanwijzingen de brief op uw eigen wijze te schrijven. U mag uw eigen naam gebruiken, maar ook namen verzinnen voor u zelf en anderen in uw brief, mocht u liever niet herkenbaar zijn als briefschrijver.

Wanneer u graag een heel persoonlijke 'echte' brief met uw eigen (voor)naam schrijft, kunt u ervoor kiezen die brief alleen voor het onderzoek beschikbaar stellen en dus niet zichtbaar voor anderen. Nadat u alle gegevens heeft ingevuld, wordt u gevraagd een keuze te maken hoe u wilt dat uw brief gebruikt wordt.

Waar en wanneer

Stel je voor dat je in een tijdmachine stapt.

Stel je voor waar en wanneer je je bevindt als je in de toekomst bent aangekomen.

Wanneer: Het tijdstip in de toekomst bepaal je zelf, dit kan 1 uur, dag, een week, of jaren later zijn.

Waar: Voorbeelden van de plaats, plek of ruimte in de toekomst waar u aan kunt denken zijn Nederland, een ander land, de ruimte; in je eigen huis of tuin, buitenshuis, in de natuur, in de stad, op het water, in de lucht; een plek met veel andere mensen of juist een lege ruimte; een kleurrijke ruimte? Een lawaaierige ruimte of stille? etc.

Wat?

Stel je voor dat een aantal **positieve wensen, veranderingen en dromen** in je leven zijn uitgekomen.

Vertel jouw verhaal van **een concrete dag, een specifiek moment, of een concrete gebeurtenis** waarin duidelijk wordt hoe je een bepaald probleem hebt opgelost of een goede manier heeft gevonden om ermee om te gaan.

Vertel wat achteraf het meest heeft geholpen en hoe je (dan) op het leven van nu terugkijkt.

Gebruik volop je verbeeldingskracht: Bedenk dat het gaat om iets wat nog niet gebeurd is en dat het een kans is om te verzinnen **wat er zou kunnen gebeuren**.

Aan wie?

Bedenk aan wie je de brief wil schrijven.

- aan je huidige ik (je geeft dan een wijze, vrolijke, of andere positieve boodschap aan jezelf)

- aan iemand anders (bijvoorbeeld je kind of kleinkind, leeftijdgenoten, of de volgende generatie, etc.)

De brief is niet langer dan 400 woorden

ATTACHMENT 2 – THE CODE-TREE

Death	Death Itself
	Mortality
	Life
Freedom	Freedom Itself
	Autonomy
	Dependency
Existential Isolation	Isolation Itself
	Isolation
	Connection
Search for Meaning	Meaning Itself
	Work
	Family & Friends
	Altruism
	Hedonism
	Self-Actualization
Others	Non-Existential
	Work
	Family & Friends

ATTACHMENT 3 - THE CODES

1. Code-family: Death

DeathItself: The writer approaches the issues of death itself. An aware and distinct examination of the existential issue of death is given.

- **Codename:** Death (DeathItself)
- **Example:** “Tijdens ziektes in 2002 en 2005, jullie ouders waren nog jong, hebben wij de dood op bezoek gehad. Hij stond vlak voor ons huis. Ik zag hem, hij zag mij ook. Hij had door de deur naar binnen kunnen komen.” (PB13: TB1_62, 2011)

Mortality: The writer approaches the issues of mortality of death. Topics could be for example mortality or disease of an arbitrary person.

- **Codename:** Death (Mortality)
- **Keywords:** mortality, disease, unhealthy, death
- **Example:** “Ik schrijf deze brief omdat het binnenkort voor mij stopt. Het wordt ook wel tijd.” (PB13: TB1_62, 2011)

Life: The writer demonstrates that he or she focuses his or her thoughts on life. Characteristic is the mentioning of an extremely high age of a person (the writer himself, family or a friend) and the mentioning of his or her physical health.

- **Codename:** Death(Life)
- **Keywords:** healthy
- **Example:** “Jullie zijn midden vijftig. Natuurlijk zijn jullie gezond,...” (P15: TB1_65.rtf)

3.3.2 Code-family: Freedom

FreedomItself: The writer writes about the issue of freedom. He or she shows that he or she is thinking actively and possibly reflected about this topic.

- **Codename:** Freedom(FreedomItself)
- **Example:** “Ineens begon ik na te denken over de keuzes die ik in mijn leven heb gemaakt en die ervoor hebben gezorgd dat ik alles bereikt heb waar ik ooit als student nog maar van kon dromen.” (P2: TB1_102.rtf)

Autonomy: The participant approaches the issues of his or her own freedom and responsibility. He or she states that his or her own choices are important. The writer knows that he or she has the possibility to change situations and creates his or her own life.

- **Codename:** Freedom(Autonomy)
- **Keywords:** choose, choice, desicion
- **Example:** “als je goed naar je intuïtie luistert weet je al welke richting het op zou kunnen gaan, dus zet die stap, net zoals je die andere stappen in je leven hebt gezet die achteraf precies de juiste bleken te zijn.“ (P29: TB1_99.rtf)

Dependency: The writer declares that his or her decision depends mainly on the view of other people or that he or she has no influence on the situation

- **Codename:** Freedom(Dependency)
- **Example:** “ Zonder de steun van je ouders, zus en lieve vrienden had je niet de keuzes kunnen maken die je nu gemaakt hebt.“ (P:77: TB1_186.rtf)

3.3.3 Codefamily: Existential Isolation

IsolationItself: The writer deals directly with the topic of existential isolation.

- **Codename:** E.Isolation(IsolationItself)

Isolation: The writer shows, that he knows, that there is a natural gap between every human being.

- **Codename:** E.Isolation(Isolation)
- **Keywords:** alone
- **Example:** „Door deze ervaring, het midden in de natuur staan en het moeten vertrouwen op je eigen capaciteiten.“ (PB:48 TB1_166, 2011)

Connection: The writer shows, that he or she does not accept or see the normal gap between people

- **Codename:** E.Isolation(Connection)
- **Example:** “Ruim 1,5 jaar een relatie en dan krijg je opeens te horen dat je toch niet de ware bent..hoe gebruikt ik me toen voelde is niet uit te drukken.“ (PB:82 TB1_192, 2011)

3.3.4 Codefamily: Meaning

Meaning Itself: The writer writes about the issues of search for meaning in life itself. He or she thinks about, for example, what is important in life and what is not important at all.

- **Codename:** Meaning(Meaning Itself)
- **Example:** “waarom ik er voor koos om te blijven leven. Liefde. En dat kan van alles zijn, want liefde omvat alles...“ (PB:68 TB1_163, 2011)

Work: The writer himself reaches a special accomplishment in life (for example research, money, career)

- **Codename:** Meaning(Work)
- **Example:** “Zou wilde ik altijd al een eigen managementtheorie ontwikkelen om organisaties efficiënt te verbeteren. Na jaren onderzoek heb ik dat kunnen doen.” (PB34: Tb1_136, 2011)

Family&Friends: A spouse, child or a friend is an elementary part in the life of the writer.

- **Codename:** Meaning(Family)
- **Example:** “Bart en ik hebben een geweldig huwelijk en houden al jaren heel veel van elkaar ... mooi om je leven te kunnen delen met je zielsmaatje.” (PB:34 TB1_136, 2011)

Altruism: Self-abandonment of the writer in favour of other humans, the nature or charity.

- **Codename:** Meaning(Altruism)
- **Example:** “Weet je nog dat je altijd mensen wil helpen, motiveren en een dikke bijdrage leveren aan hun persoonlijke ontwikkeling? Vorige week vrijdag heb ik een kleine conferentie gehouden voor zelfrealisatie van man zijn...” (PB:51 TB1_169, 2011)

Hedonism: The writer wants to live an exciting and/or fulfilling life.

- **Codename:** Meaning(Hedonism)
- **Example:** “je motto is nog steeds 'GENIET VAN ALLE MOOIE MOMENTEN!’” (PB9: TB1_117, 2011)

Self-Actualisation: The personal growth is an elementary part in life for the writer. For example, suffering gives the possibility for personal growth.

- **Codename:** Meaning(SelfActualisation)
- **Examples:** “Maar hou er rekening mee, dat je niets bereikt zonder inspanning... talenten die je hebt, moeten ontwikkeld (getraind) worden wil je iets bereiken.” (PB23: TB1_83, 2011)

3.3.5 Codefamily: Others

Non-Existential: There is no indication for an existential issue.

- **Codename:** Others(Non-Existential)

Family&Friends: Here, the family or friends are the primary topic, but there is no indication for the existential issue of Meaning(Family&Friends)

- **Codename:** Others(Family&Friends)

- **Example:** “Ik ben getrouwd met mijn jeugdliefde Rick en samen hebben we 2 prachtige kinderen die inmiddels al in de pubertijd zitten.” (PB2: TB1_102, 2011)

Work: Here, the work or study are the primary topic, but there is no indication for the existential issue of Meaning(Work)

- **Codename:** Others(Work)
- **Example:** “Tegenwoordig werk ik in de klinische psychologie en geniet hier volop van.” (PB2: TB1_102, 2011)