Analysis of the Functions and Experienced Effects of Narrative Futuring

Analyse van de Functies en Ervaren Effecten van Narratieve Futuring

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Abstract

The present explorative study approaches the qualitative analysis of the functions and the experienced effects of narrative futuring (i.e. imagining the future through storytelling). So far, a decisive definition of narrative futuring and an insight into the psychological processes underlying narrative futuring and its effects still lack. The scrutinised data-set consists of 203 letters which are written by the participants from an imagined positive future and the answer to an open question regarding how the participants experienced writing the letter. The participants are mostly Dutch and German students of the University of Twente, Enschede. First, the functions that characterise the letters from the future are analysed on the basis of an already established list of functions which is refined. These functions help to realise the nature of the letters. Then the answers to an open question which show the experienced effects of the letters are analysed and a list of categories is established. The examination of these answers is crucial because they reveal how the participants themselves experience narrative futuring and which effect the letters have on the participants. Finally, a comparison of the functions and the experienced effects is drawn. The comparison of the functions and the effects is based on four main categories in psychology: thought, action, will and emotion. In total, 23 psychological functions could be established. The results highlight the central role of the functions "imagine" and "recall past events" and thus reflect the rational cognitive character of the letters. Generally the participants seem to experience the writing as positive. For the major part the letters were experienced as great and/or difficult. In comparison, the letters mostly deal with rational cognitive processes, while the effects mentioned by the participants can be situated in the realm of emotions. Despite limitations such as the sample size and the used unit of analysis the study depicts a starting point in the analysis of narrative futuring and several new insights could be gained.

Contents

I. Introduction

The ability to ponder the future is a characteristic of human imagination (Abraham, Schubotz, & Von Cramon, 2008) and can be seen as an essential component of human cognition (Atance & O'Neill, 2001). Atance and O'Neill (2001) state that although all healthy adults have the ability to think about the future, people appear to differ in their propensity to do so. One possible way of thinking about the future is in the form of a narrative. Ricoeur (1984) even argued that narratives seem to be the only way of describing one's own live.

Narrative psychology is one approach to understand how and why humans use their imagination to construct narratives in order to give sense to their lives. As Riessman (2008) states, the field of narrative psychology was ever since its beginnings in the mid-1980s, concerned with how content, structure and form of narratives are composed and what they reveal about the human being. According to Sarbin, a pioneer in this field, narrative psychology is a viewpoint within psychology which is concerned with the storied nature of human conduct (Sarbin, 1986). Further, narrative psychology considers storytelling as being capable of constructing identity in the face of problems (Polkinghorne 1988; Bohlmeijer 2007) and thereby giving meaning to life (Bruner, 1990). Narrative psychology thus deals with how human beings handle personal experiences by listening to and constructing stories.

In order to contribute to the field of narrative psychology the life-story lab was founded at Twente University in January 2012 by psychologists Ernst Bohlmeijer, Gerben Westerhof and Anneke Sools. The life-story lab can be described as expert centre in the area of narrative psychology and aims at examining the relationship between narratives and psychological well-being (Sools & Mooren, 2012) (see www.levensverhalenlab.nl).

One of the projects in the lab is the "letters from the future". The aim of the study is to gain insight into the functions of letters which are written from an imagined future concerning psychological well-being. Although well-being is a rather broad term (see Jayawickreme, Forgeard & Seligman, 2012) in this context psychological well-being is defined as a good or satisfactory condition of existence, which is characterised by happiness and mental health. The focus of the project lies on if and how these letters can be used to promote health and resilience. The idea of promoting resilience was

developed as reaction to deficiency models in health care (Bohlmeijer, 2012; Westerhof & Bohlmeijer 2011; Westerhof & Keyes, 2008; Sools 2010). According to Sools and Mooren (2012) people need to be resilient in order to be able to anticipate and deal with possible problems in live. This probably can be achieved by „imagining the future through storytelling, in terms of its capacity to address the question of becoming resilient to anticipate crisis and change" (Sools & Mooren, 2012, p. 205).

When searching current literature on 'narrative futuring', it becomes apparent that it indeed has only recently been established by the founders of the live-story lab and a decisive definition is still lacking. That is why this study is based on an operational definition for 'narrative futuring', which is given by Wahle (2012, p. 9). She states that 'narrative futuring' can be described as: "the creative process by which one uses imagination and draws upon the knowledge and experience from the past and present, in order to construct a narrative about how the future could possibly be like." The imagination of the future thus helps to stimulate a reflection on ones own life. The goal of narrative futuring in the long run might be to help improving psychological well-being and quality of life. The discussion about the conceptualisation of imagining the future, its utility and benefits however is not yet settled (Wahle, 2012).

The concept of imagining the future in general has been examined by different researchers. To begin with, Melges (1982, p.38) describes futuring as a way of imagining future possibilities through "the process of visualizing future images". Suddendorf and Corballis (1997, p. 299) describe the mentioned concept as "mental time travel" and refer to the "faculty that allows humans to mentally project themselves backwards in time to re-live, or forwards to pre-live, events". In a dynamic world, they state, the cognitive function of being able to predict future situations can provide a major advantage. This advantage is located in the human brain. The most flexible memory system is the episodic memory, which allows humans to foresee, plan, and mould virtually any future event (Suddendorf and Corballis, 1997). They also declare that there is growing evidence that the utmost evolutionary advantage of the human brain must lie with its capacity to access the future. According to Lombardo (2006) an increased capacity to imagine the future makes us mentally flexible. Mental flexibility again is regarded as being one of the main criteria for psychological well-being (Bohlmeijer 2012). Furthermore, imagining the future is considered to have various

positive psychological effects. Among these are increasing optimism, psychological well-being, happiness and motivation (see Wahle, 2012).

Besides, Heerey, Matveeva and Gold (2011) indicate that many people with schizophrenia show deficits in behaviour oriented toward long-term rewards and shorten future time perspectives relative to healthy individuals. This again relates the ability to imagining the future with mental health.

When exploring the effects of imagining the future, the cycle of 'anticipatory control', which is proposed by Melges (1982), should be mentioned. He states that the process of imagining the futuring stimulates a cycle of emotion-regulation processes which is controlled by feedback (corrections of deviations from goal) and feedforward (corrections in advance). The lack of anticipatory control can lead to psychopathological spirals. If people are thus not able to plan future goals in advance this may lead to mental illness.

According to Melges (1972) a therapy that concentrates on the future can help patients to develop an effective plan of action to figure out what the next step in life should be. So far, a therapeutic approach oriented on the future has been relatively neglected (Melges, 1972; Sools & Mooren, 2012). The importance of the letters from the future project further becomes clear by considering the increasing number of studies that demonstrate that writing about emotional experiences stimulates significant physical and mental health improvements (Pennebaker, 1997).

Another concept that needs to be mentioned in the context of narrative futuring is the concept of possible selves. The term was first mentioned by Markus and Nurius (1986). They defined possible selves as conceptions of our selves in future states. Recently the definition of possible selves was revised by Erikson (2007). He likewise states that possible selves are conceptions of ourselves in the future and that they additionally include, at least to some degree, "an experience of being an agent in a future situation" (p.356). Erikson (2007) further suggests that possible selves can be seen as narratives, he thus emphasises that a possible self consists of a story we tell about our selves in a hypothetical future. According to Bruner (1995), narratives in this sense provide interpretations about what we see as feasible in our own future.

This definition of possible selves can logically be linked to narrative futuring and the letters from the future. The letters may help to explore possible future situations

and thus may help to better be able to anticipate the future and realise what one's own future should be like.

The previous analysis of the letters from the future showed that "imagining the future seems to have an all-over organising and motivating effect" (Sools & Mooren, 2012, p. 219). Pennebaker (1997) illustrates that an increasing number of studies have demonstrated that when individuals write about emotional experiences, significant physical and mental health improvements follow. According to Suddendorf and Corballis (2007, p. 299) the "mental construction of potential future episodes has only very recently begun to draw attention" and thus needs further research. The letters from the future project can thus be called a new as well as a meaningful one.

What makes the letters from the future special is the fact that they are written from a point of view in the respondents' personal future. The participants were asked to imagine positive changes and fulfilled dreams they have reached at some point in their future lives. By now more than 600 letters have been collected. So far the respondents are mostly Dutch and German; however the lab is working on receiving letters from other nations as well. The mixed-method approach, which is used, consists of four parts: first the participants are asked to write the letter, secondly they have the option to answer three open questions. After this the participants are requested to fill in a questionnaire about psychological well-being and finally demographic characteristics are checked.

The present study examines and compares the functions and effects of narrative futuring. The functions help to realise the nature of the letters and show how the letters work. The study of the effects of narrative futuring must be considered as relevant, because it enables us to learn how the participants themselves experience writing a letter from the future. Further, the study shows if the appraisal of the participants can be found in the answers to the open question. The comparison of functions and effects of narrative futuring is crucial because it allows to draw conclusions about their relationship.

So far, narrative psychology has used life story interviews or questionnaires as the main data collection and intervention method; the letters from the future therefore offer an interesting new method for research (Sools & Mooren, 2012).

II. Research questions

The present study is concerned with three research questions which are given in the following. First the letters are analysed, then the answers to the open question are examined and finally both are compared with each other in order to examine the relationship between the functions and the effects of narrative futuring.

1. **Which psychological functions characterise the letters from the future? (functions of the letters)**
2. **Which answers are mentioned by the participants concerning the experience of writing a letter from the future? (experienced effects of the letters)**
3. **What is the relationship between functions and effects of narrative futuring? (comparison of functions and effects)**

III. Method

III.1 Participants

The participants were predominantly approached via snowball sampling, done at the University of Twente, most often within the scope of a psychology course. That is why the participants are mostly first year students of the University. The age of the participants ranges from 16 years of age up to 75 years of age and older. However, the major part (64.7%; N=131), of the participants is between 16 and 25 years of age. Furthermore, 70% (N=142) of the participants were born in the Netherlands, 29% (N=59) in Germany and 1% (N=2) in other countries. The majority of the sample is female (62.15%; N=126).

III.2 Procedure

The data that are used for the present study were collected via the website of the live-story-lab. For the current study the letters and the appertaining answers to an open question are analysed.

When visiting the website www.levensverhalenlab.nl the prospective respondents are invited to take part in the study. The website describes the purpose of

the study and what the respondents precisely need to do to take part. The respondents have also the possibility to read letters written by the researchers and other participants and to get some advice on how to write a letter from the future.

When a participant decides to take part in the study their first task is to donate a letter, which is meant to be written with a maximum of 400 words. Further, the participants are asked to imagine a place and a date where and when the letter from the future is written as well as the person the letter is directed to. In the second step the participants are asked to answer three open questions. The questions deal with how the participants perceive the sensation of writing a letter from the future, what it needs to let become true what was written in the letter and what makes worth the effort of writing the letter. For the current study only the first open question is relevant.

In the third step the participants are invited to answer 14 questions about the feelings they had during the last month. These questions are however not subject of this study. Finally, biographical data, as for example age and nationality, are required and the respondents are asked if they want their letter to be shown online or only to be used for the study.

III.3 Materials

Due to limited time not all of the 491 letters from the future, which have been collected until September 2012, were analysed in the scope of the study. The used data originates from a sample of 230 participants. The number of data-sets that could be used for the present study is N=203, the other data-sets proved to be unusable. The analysed letters show a great variety with respect to form and content. The majority of letters is addressed to the bygone self of the authors, which gives them the character of diary entries; others are directed at descendants or friends. Generally, the letters are written in a personal, intimate fashion. Most of the letters begin with a description of the situation the authors imagine themselves to be in. The topics that are treated in the letters are as different as their authors. The issues range from fulfilled careers and family dreams to descriptions of the environmental situation. Most of the letters are written in a rather serious way, some are actually sad and a few are written in an ironic and cheerful style. Virtually every letter contains some kind of advice or suggestion and concludes with good wishes.

The answers to the question how the participants experienced writing a letter from the future can be described as varying as well. The given answers differed both in content and length. Some answers consist of several sentences, other of headwords and a few of only a single word.

III.4 Analysis

The qualitative analysis consists of three steps. First, the letters are coded according to two variables: the psychological functions and the time perspective. The letters are analysed with the qualitative analysis software atlas.ti. The software allows to select each sentence separately in order to tag it with one or more of the psychological functions and one or two time-perspectives. The unit of analysis is each sentence at a time.

The psychological functions of a letter can be described as the underlying intention of the statement. The 23 psychological functions which are used in the present study are shown in table 1. A number of psychological functions have already been proven to be existent and were described in former studies (in table 1 marked with "*") or found by Wahle (2012) (in table 1 not marked at all) (see Wahle, 2012). As the majority of the letters already are coded by Wahle (2012) this was done again in order to increase the interrater reliability and to check if the functions found by Wahle (2012) can be confirmed or need to be adapted. Additionally, 50 of the 230 analysed letters were also coded by co-researchers, again in order to improve the interrater reliability. The calculation of the interrater reliability delivered a reasonably good Cronbach's alpha. For the 50 analysed letters the alpha proved to be 0.825.

The items marked with "[1]" in table 1 are the psychological functions which were found in the course of the present study in cooperation with two co-researchers. Five additional psychological functions could be found. These complementary functions are "conclude/realise", "express satisfaction/gratefulness", "let a dream come true", "regret" and "wish/hope". The five additional codes were added to the existing code-system because they showed to be relevant while coding the letters. The new codes have been discussed with the two co-researchers and the definitions were agreed on. All psychological functions are given in the form of a verb to underline the fact that they describe what the participants imagined. If no psychological function was detected in a

sentence, the sentence was coded with the category "other". The item „Motivate" was difficult to code because it most often could not be found in a single sentence but throughout the whole letter. Out of reasons that concern the analysis the function nevertheless was coded per sentence. Beyond the 23 codes mentioned in table 1 for most of the functions shown table 1 exists the option to itemise them with the adjective "implicit" (see results).

Table 1:
Code-system for the analysis of the psychological functions, their definitions and text examples

Psychological Function	Definition
Catastrophise	Increasing and extending negative aspects of a story/event (e.g.: "Surely I could tell you about the rise of the sea-level and the bursting of dikes, and that the shift of Dutch coastlines, so that you can prepare yourself for suchlike, but what would it help.")
Characterise oneself*	Description of one's own positive and negative characteristics (e.g.: "I am and was always a rather modest person.")
Conclude/realise[1]	Reference to an insight or knowledge one has gained on the basis of one's own experiences (e.g. "Those people you like are important to help you reach your goals.")
Confess/blame oneself*	Uncover a secret or express guilt – mostly associated with preceding description of negative actions and attributes these to oneself (e.g.: "That is something I have never told you before.")
Explore options	Enumeration and description of different options (e.g.: "What if I had never figured out my passion, how would I manage life today?")
Express satisfaction/ gratefulness[1]	Being glad or obliged that something came out in a certain manner (e.g. "I am really glad all came out that well.")
Express worldly wisdom	Expression of 'worldly wisdom' (idioms, sayings, and prayers, which convey beliefs, religious or philosophical opinions) in differing dimensions of concreteness and abstraction (e.g. "Life is what happens while you are busy making plans- like John Lennon once sang!")
Give emotional support/empathy*	To point to emotional content and the expression of emotions, support and understanding (e.g.: "You were so afraid to fail.")
Give existential advice	Predominantly written in 'imperative'; Refers to special actions (which concern self-contents, leisure time, and collective issues), which need to be implemented (e.g.: "So, don't be afraid and defend your own choices!")

Give practical advice	Predominantly written in 'imperative'; Refers to special task-oriented, self-guiding future goals and tasks that need to be implemented (e.g.: "I advice you strongly to move to the suburbs or to a nice countryside, buy a house and a piece of land, where you can grow your own food and where you can keep your sheep and chickens.")
Imagine/experience through imagination*	Detailed description of a future situation, so that the reader can experience it (e.g.: "It is just starting so snow outside, but here – inside – it is comfortably warm .")
Induce Hope*	To try to take sorrow and worries away and strengthen belief in better times and good outcomes (e.g.: "But you will see that many dreams have come true .")
Let a dream come true[1]	Description of the fulfillment of a dream or wish (e.g. "To be a manager had always been my dream")
Motivate	Explanation of reasons to pursuit one's goals with regards to one goal that can be achieved by taking action (e.g.: "Because, if you keep on doing your very best, you will therefore be rewarded generously in the future.")
Other	All psychological functions that do not correspond to the above mentioned descriptions
Plan steps	Description and enumeration of exact actions to be undertaken (e.g.: "First of all, I joined the international Red Cross, in order to gain more knowledge and experience, as well as to show later on, that I really was eager to help the African residents.")
Praise oneself	To emphasize positive actions, performances and deeds of oneself (e.g.: "The first thing that pops up in my mind is that I am really proud of myself.")
Reinterpret events in a positive way	Description of a negative event, then assigning positive value to it or accepting it (e.g.: "These negative events can also be described as possibilities that effectively shaped my personality to the human being I am today.")
Regret[1]	Expression of sorrow about an event (e.g. "Sometimes I am really upset about the fact that I am not able to see my parents regularly")
Recall past events	Retrieving and telling memories about earlier events.
Set oneself a goal (existential)*	Description of future events, tasks, instances and actions on which the author has influence upon and which concern self-contents, leisure time, and collective issues (e.g.: "It was always my dream to one day be able to say: Yes, I live in the USA!")
Set oneself a goal (prospective life course)*	Description of task-oriented, self-guiding future goals and tasks of which the author has a concrete idea of (e.g.: "Today, you are working as a clinical psychologist and you run your own office.")
Wish/hope[1]	Expression of hopes and dreams about the future (e.g. "Once my studies are done i hope to be able to stay in Amsterdam for years.")

Note: *= already established psychological function in the context of other writing genres, found in scientific literature
 [1]= psychological function found in the course of this study

Simultaneously the sentences were coded according to four different time-perspectives: "past", "future past", "future present", "prospective future" and a time which could not be defined. The four time perspectives are defined as follows:

1. **Past:** The time perspective past contains those events that had already happened before the time the letter actually was written. These events belong to the past and are completed. The verb of the sentence and the context need to be in past tense (e.g. "All the while I wanted to go and live somewhere else.").

2. **Future past:** Here the verb is as well written in past tense. The context again needs to clarify that a point in time is meant which lies between the moment the letter actually is written and the imagined moment the letter is written. This time perspective thus is located between the present and the imagined future (e.g. "This was short after the discovery that Einsteins theory of relativity does not add up.").

3. **Future present:** To code this time perspective the verb of the sentence needs to be in the present tense. This time perspective defines the imagined future time from where the letter is written (e.g. "In this regard the year 2026 is not that different from the year 201.").

4. **Prospective future:** The prospective future time perspective also is scaled according to the tense of the verb. The verb needs to be in the present tense and additionally a wish needs to be stated or an intention given (e.g."I hope to get a long-term visa some day.").

In the second step of the analysis, the answers to the open question were coded by hand. By analysing the answers to the open question it was examined how the participants themselves experienced writing a letter from the future and if they perceived narrative futuring as positive and enhancing psychological well-being. To analyse the answers to the open question all given answers were examined and summarised to 22 answer-options.

Finally the psychological functions found in the letters were compared with the answers to the open question. By comparing the underlying content of the letters with how the participants themselves perceived writing a letter the relation between the functions and experienced effects of the letters from the future is examined. They proved to be not comparable in a direct way. In order to still be able to compare the

psychological functions with the answers to the open question, a code-system that allows to compare them with each other was necessary. The system that was used for the present study was built on four essential categories of human beings' make up that must be considered as fundamental within the field of psychology. These four items are "thought", "action", "will" and "emotion". They can be found throughout virtually any field of psychology. For example, the cognitive psychology deals with thought, action is treated in the context of behaviourism, will can be found in the psychoanalysis, and emotion can actually be found in any area that deals with human beings. To reach the final results of the third research question a synthesis step was necessary. While ascribing the psychological functions and the answers to the open question to one of the four categories mentioned above there appeared to be a pattern of co-occurrences both in the letters and the answers to the open question. Based on these co-occurrences eleven subtypes were established (see appendix, table A).

IV. Results

IV.1 Functions that characterise the letters from the future

Because the study is explorative only 203 data-sets were examined. In total 23 psychological functions, that characterise the letters from the future, were found. The main psychological functions are given in table 1 (pp. 11-12). Beyond them exists for most of the functions the option to distinguish them with the adjective "implicit". This distinction was found in the course of the present study in cooperation with two co-researchers and exists for all items except "conclude/realize", "imagine", "motivate", "other", "recall past events" and "wish/hope". If a sentence is coded "implicit" for a given psychological function this means that the function can be found in the sentence but is not as obvious as in other cases. An example is given in the following: The sentence "As an advice: don´t worry; live goes in the right direction itself", is defined as "*give existential advice*", the sentence "We accept and respect everybody and judge others as sparse as possible", however is coded with "*give existential advice implicit*". Those two sentences show the difference between "explicit" and "implicit" very clearly. If a sentence is coded as "explicit" the function is given literally in the sentence. If a sentence is coded "implicit" the function can be found in the statement but is not given

as obvious as the explicit function. Table 2 gives the frequencies of all explicit and implicit psychological functions that are used for the current study.

Table 2:
Frequencies of the psychological functions (N= 5837 functions)

Psychological function	Frequencies	
	explicit	implicit
Imagine/experience through imagination	28% (1620)	
Recall past events	19.5% (1137)	
Conclude/realise	9.5% (553)	
Other	9% (521)	
Express satisfaction/gratefulness	6.5% (371)	0.6% (34)
Give existential advice	5% (294)	1.7% (100)
Induce hope	4% (246)	1% (67)
Regret	1.8% (104)	0.8% (46)
Wish/hope	1.3% (76)	
Let a dream come true	1.3% (73)	0.09% (5)
Catastrophise	1% (54)	0.2% (11)
Praise oneself	0.9% (50)	2% (110)
Characterise oneself	0.8% (47)	0.2% (11)
Express wordly wisdom	0.8% (44)	0.05% (3)
Give emotional support/empathy	0.7% (42)	0.4% (22)
Set oneself a goal (prospective life course)	0.7% (41)	0.05% (3)
Motivate	0.5% (28)	
Plan steps	0.5% (26)	0.02% (1)
Give practical advice	0.3% (18)	0.1% (6)
Confess/blame oneself	0.3% (15)	0.4% (24)
Reinterpret events in a positive way	0.2% (13)	0.07% (4)
Set oneself a goal (existential)	0.2% (10)	0.05% (3)
Explore options	0.07% (4)	0

Note: the percentages were rounded, the number in brackets gives the total amount

In total 5837 psychological functions were allocated to the 203 letters. This means that

an average of 29 psychological functions could be ascribed to each letter. As the table shows the functions "Imagine/experience through imagination" and "Recall past events" were coded most often. Not only by their high frequency but also by what they express, those two functions clearly play a significant role in the concept of narrative futuring. They seem to build the frame into which all the other functions can be placed. The functions "Conclude/realise", "Express satisfaction/gratefulness", "Give existential advice" and "Induce hope" were as well coded relatively frequent. As already mentioned, five new functions were established in the course of the present study. These five functions are an enrichment for the existing code-system. Particularly the functions "conclude/realize" and "express satisfaction/gratefulness" proved to be essential in characterising the letters from the future.

Generally, the implicit functions are coded much less frequent than the explicit ones. However, "Give existential advice" and "Praise oneself" are coded relatively often. Remarkable is the fact that "Praise oneself" is the only function that is coded explicitly less often than implicitly.

IV.2 Experienced effects that are mentioned by the writers

The second research question deals with how the participants experienced writing a letter from the future. The answers can be described as the effects the letters had on the participants. Because the participants are individuals with individual experiences most of the given answers differed in the choice of words but actually tried to describe similar experiences. For the sake of being able to analyse the frequencies, the answers were summarised to 22 experiences. In order to make clear that the named experience has sometimes a broader meaning than the word itself the definitions were added. Table 3 gives the functions which are mentioned by the participants in answering the open question and the definitions that go with them. Some participants named two of the answer options (i.e they experienced writing the letter as nice and interesting or as difficult and confronting), others answered with a single word. All given answers were counted separatly, this explains a total of 275 given answers. The experiences are given as adjectives because they describe how the participants feel in respect to writing a letter from the future. The answers were translated from Dutch to English and are given in descending order of frequency.

Table 3:

Answer-options to the open question, the appertaining definitions and frequencies
(N of participants=203; N of given answers=275)

Experience	Definition	Frequencies
great (positive)	**Gave a feeling of warmth, made happy and was easy to do**	40 % (110)
difficult (neutral)	**The task was experienced as not easy and needed effort to do**	18.6 % (51)
Got one thinking (neutral)	**The task was described as stirring the participants' thoughts**	6.6 % (18)
unfamiliar/challenging (neutral)	**The participant experienced the task as a challenge because they never did something like this before**	5.8 % (16)
motivating (positive)	**Writing is experienced as motivation to reach goals in the future**	3.6 % (10)
interesting (positive)	**The task attracted the participants attention**	3 % (8)
reassuring (positive)	**Gave a feeling of confidence and confirmation**	3 % (8)
clarifying (positive)	**The participant experienced the task as enlightening**	2.6 % (7)
dreamlike (positive)	**The task made the participant feel as if they actually experience the future**	2.6 % (7)
wish prompting (positive)	**Task was seen as helpful to bring unconscious wishes to the mind**	2.2 % (6)
emotional (neutral)	**The task is seen as an emotional experience**	1.8% (5)
frightening (negative)	**Experience made afraid of thinking about the future**	1.8% (5)
therapeutical (positive)	**Writing the letter is described as helping to cope with their feelings**	1.8% (5)
insightful (positive)	**Gave insight that one is able to guide ones own future**	1.5 % (4)
tackling the present (neutral)	**The task was experienced as helping to deal with the present**	1.5 % (4)
opportunity to explore options (positive)	**Helped to imagine a possible future**	0,7 % (2)
confronting (neutral)	**The task was experienced as a confrontation with their feelings**	0.7 % (2)
made enthusiastic (positive)	**The task made the participant feel enthusiastic about the future**	0.7% (2)
inspiring (positive)	**The task was experienced as**	0.7% (2)

	encouraging to reach goal in the future	
absurd (negative)	The task was experienced as not logical	0.4 % (1)
made curious (positive)	Writing the letter made curious about the future	0.4 % (1)
proud (positive)	Writing the letter made the participant feel proud	0.4 % (1)

Note: the percentages were rounded, the number in brackets gives the total amount

The various answers show that the participants experienced the task of writing a letter very differently. 40 % of the given answers express that the writing was experienced as great and made happy. About 20 % of the answers contain the notion that writing the letter was experienced as difficult. This however does not necessarily mean that the participants did not like writing the letter. Most of the participants who stated that the task was a difficult one also stated that it was worth the effort and that it became more and more easy while writing. In the first place "difficult" seems to be a negative adjective. In table 3 it is characterised as neutral because especially in the context of dealing with personal problems or executing an unfamiliar task it is only natural that the task is experienced as difficult. Exactly this conscious effort is what makes the task rewarding. Actually 30% of all those participants who stated that the task was difficult also stated that it was great. Only a few participants answered that the experience of writing the letter was frightening or absurd (i.e. 1.7% and 0.5%).

By taking the three categories "positive", "negative" and "neutral" into consideration it becomes obvious that more than 60% of the participants perceived the task of writing the letter as positive. About 38% of the answers to how the writing of the letters was experienced are neutral and only about 2% of the answers reveal that the participant experienced the task as negative.

As the table shows, the answers to the open question contain no time-perspective. That is why the time perspectives are neglected in the analysis.

IV.3 Comparison of functions and experienced effects

The final task of the present study is to compare the content of the letters from the future with the answers to the question how the participants experienced writing such a letter. That is why a code-system was needed that comprises both the content of the

letters and the answer-possibilities to the open question. This code system answers the need of labelling the psychological functions and the effects found in the given answers with the same codes. Table 4 shows the four items "thought", "action", "will" and "emotion", which proved to be capable of categorising both the functions and the effects. Table 4 further shows how the psychological functions and the answer-possibilities given by the participants could be categorised according to the four items. Evidently only for the category "emotion" both positive and negative functions and effects exist.

Table 4:

Code-System for the comparison of the letters and the answers

Code	Psychological functions in letters		Effects found in the answers	
1. Thought	characterise onself conclude/realise imagine reinterpret events in a positive way recall past events express wordly wisdom		clarifying confronting curious dreamlike inspiring interesting insightful got one thinking tackling the present unfamiliar/challenging	
2. Action	give existential advice explore options give practical advice		opportunity to explore options	
3. Will	motivate plan steps set existential goal set prospective goal wish/hope		motivating wishes prompting	
4. Emotion	**positive** give emotional support/empathy induce hope let a dream come true praise onself express satisfaction/ gratefulness	**negative** catastrophise confess/blame regret	**positive** emotional made enthusiastic great reassurring therapeutical proud	**negative** difficult frightening absurd

Note: This table does not contain the function "Other" and the 5 time-perspectives

To ascribe each letter to one of the items, the 3 psychological functions that occurred most often in a letter were identified and attributed according to the scheme in table 4. Each answer to the open question likewise was coded according to the items shown in table 4. In most of the letters and answers not only one of the four items could be detected. While ascribing the functions and effects to the four items shown in table 4 there appeared to be a pattern of co-occurences. This means that sometimes in both the letters and the answers two of the four items mentioned above were found. The co-occurences build eleven subtypes of functions and effects. These subtypes are given in table A (see appendix). Table A must be considered as synthesis-stap and thus is not given here. Based on the co-occurences five different types of letters and effects were established. These five types are given in table 5.

Table 5:
5 types of letters and effects and their frequencies

Type	Subtypes with their frequencies in letters and effects	Frequency in letters	Frequency in effects
1. Emotion	positive emotion - in letters: 1% (N=2); in effects: 34% (N=94)	1% (N=2)	66.5% (N=182)
	negative emotion - in letters: 0%; in effects: 19% (N=51)		
	positive and negative emotion - in letters: 0%; in effects: 13.5% (N=37)		
2. Emotion and Thought	positive emotion and thought - in letters: 37% (N=75); in effects 10% (N=28)	43% (N=87)	11.5% (N=28)
	negative emotion and thought - in letters: 6% (N=12); in effects 1.5% (N=4)		
3. Emotion and Action, Emotion and Will	positive emotion and action - in letters: 1% (N=2); in effects 3.6% (N=10)	1% (N=2)	8% (N=22)
	positive emotion and will - in letters: 0%; in effects 4.5% (N=12)		
4. Thought, Thought and Action, Thought and Will	Thought - in letters: 37% (N=75); in effects 11% (N=30)	55% (N=111)	12.5 % (N=34)
	thought and action - in letters: 14% (N=28); in effects 0%		

	thought and will (in letters: 4% (N=8); in effects 1,5% (N=4)		
5. Will	will (in letters: 0,5% (N=1); in effects 2% (N=5)	0,5% (N=1)	2% (N=5)

Note: the percentages were rounded, the number in brackets gives the total amount

The five types of letters and answers shown in table 5 were established to give an clearer structure of the results. The first type consists of pure "emotion"-items. This type deals exclusively with "emotional" functions and effects. The second type contains the items "emotion" and "thought". The third type summarises all letters and answers that deal with "emotion and action" or "emotion and will". The fourth type consists of all letters and answers that predominantly deal with "thought", "thought and action" or "thought and will". The fifth type contains all functions and effects that exclusively deal with "will".

Remarkable is the fact that the quality "thought" is represented in 98% (i.e. types 2 and 4) of the letters among the top three codes. That means that virtually every letter deals principally with functions that could be categorised into the item "thought". Similar appears to be true for the effects: on average the quality "emotion" is represented in 86% (i.e. types 1,2 and 3) of the given answers. 66.5% of the given answers even exclusively contain answers which were attributed to the item "emotion". Answers that do not contain "emotional" experienced effects at all are represented with 14.5%.

In general, the results show that the functions of the letters seem to strongly refer to the item "thought" while the effects named by the participants can most often be assigned to the item "emotion".

The analysis of the 203 usable data-sets further shows that about 7% (N=15) of the functions found in the letters and effects described by the participants match completely (i.e. the letter is coded with "thought" and "will" and the answer is coded with "thought" and "will"), that more than 44% (N=90) match half (i.e. the letter is coded with "positive emotion" and "negative emotion" and the answer is coded with "positive emotion" and "thought") and about 48% (N=98) do not match at all. These results show that only about half of the letters seem to allow to draw a conclusion on how the participants experienced writing the letter.

Besides, the relationship of the psychological functions and the experienced

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effects was analysed. For that each data-set was examined separately in respect to which effect follows on which function. The frequencies are given in table 6.

Table 6:
Frequencies of the relationship between functions and effects

Code in letter	Code in answer	frequency
Thought and positive emotion	Positive emotion	16.3 % (N=33)
Thought	Positive emotion	10.8 % (N=22)
Thought	Negative emotion	7.9 % (N=16)
Thought and positive emotion	Positive and negative emotion	6 % (N=12)
Thought and positive emotion	Negative emotion	6 % (N=12)
Thought	Thought	5.4 % (N=11)
Thought	Thought and positive emotion	5.4 % (N=11)
Thought and action	Positive emotion	4.4 % (N=9)
Thought and positive emotion	Thought and positive emotion	3 % (N=6)
Thought	Positive and negative emotion	2.5 % (N=5)
Thought and positive emotion	Thought	2.5 % (N=5)

Note: the percentages were rounded, several relations are not given, because they were present in less than 2% of the data-sets
*   the number in brackets gives the total amount*

Table 6 shows which letter-type is followed by answer-type. It becomes distinct that most often the relation "thought and positive emotion" in letters followed by "positive emotion" in the effects was found. In the present study a decisive relationship between the functions found in the letters and the experienced effect was not found out.

V. Discussion

The purpose of the present study was to give insights into the letters from the future. Fot that three research questions were treated. The three questions deal with different aspects of narrative futuring. Narrative futuring is a new field within the narrative psychology. The lifestory-lab which itself was established in January 2012 introduced the term very recently. That is why there still are aspects of this new area which need to be examined. The purpose of the first research question is to give an overview of the functions that characterise the letters from the future. An overview of the functions that

are embodied in the letters is crucial for any further examination of the letters. Remarkable about the used method of executing the letters is the fact that there are no prefabricated answer-categories; the letters are constructed very individually and the categories (i.e. functions) by which they are analysed are given by the participants themselves. In total 23 psychological functions characterise the letters from the future. The study succeeded in adapting the already existing code system invented by Wahle (2012). The following five psychological functions are assumed to be likewise characteristic for the letters from the future and were added to the existing code-system. The first and most important new function is "conclude/realise". This item refers to an insight or knowledge the writer has gained on the basis of their own experiences. This insight was gained in the episode that lies between the point of time when the letter is actually written and the imagined future, sometimes the conclusion even was reached while writing the letter. The other added functions are "express satisfaction", which points out that the writer is glad that something came out in a certain manner, "let a dream come true", which describes the fulfillment of a dream or wish, "regret", an expression of sorrow about an event and "wish/hope", which expresses hopes and dreams about the future.

  As already mentioned the functions "imagine/experience through imagination" and "recall past events" differ from the other psychological functions by frequency and purpose. All other functions express some kind of advice, warning, conlusion or confession. „Imagine/experience through imagination" and „Recall past events" however have a different task. Probably those functions occur most frequently because they build kind of a scaffold for each letter. The frequency of those two functions proves that the participants truly used both their imagination and their memory of past events to construct a letter from the future and thus seem to confirm the definition of narrative futuring which is given by Whale (2012). The writing of the letter really seems to be a process by which the writer uses their imagination and draws upon the knowledge and experience from the past (recall past events) and present (imagine/experience through imagination) in order to stimulate a reflection on their current life.

  Two other functions that play some kind of individual roles are on the one hand „Other" which contains all those expressions that could not be coded with one of the other functions. On the other hand the function „Motivate" stands out against the other

functions. The item „Motivate" was difficult to code because it most often could not be found in only one sentence but throughout the whole letter. Out of reasons that concern the analysis the function nevertheless was coded per sentence. It may be the task of further studies to examine how the functions „imagine/experience through imagination", "recall past events" and "motivate" can be treated to convey their special position in the context of narrative futuring.

The second research question deals with the answers that are mentioned by the writers when describing the experience of writing a letter from the future, thus with the effects the letters had on the participants. Here again is remarkable that there are no prefabricated answer-categories; the answers to the open question are created solely by the participants. It emerged that the writing was perceived as quite diverse. The given answers could be summarised to 22 experiences. Although the given answers were highly individual this aggregation was necessary in order to be able to analyse and compare the data. The two experiences that proved to be most important are "great" and "difficult". If the task was experienced as "great" the participant wanted to express that writing the letter gave a feeling of warmth, made happy and was easy to do. Those letters that were experienced as "difficult" required some effort to write. As already mentioned "difficult" not necessarily needs to be understood in a negative way.

The analysis further shows that more than 60% of the participants perceived the task of writing the letter as positive. About 38% of the answers can be described as neutral and only about 2% of the answers reveal that the participant experienced the task as negative. As the results show, the answers to the open question contain no time-perspective and it thus was neglected in the analysis. The time-perspective still proved to be an important aspect of narrative futuring because it helps to distinguish narrative futuring from writing in general.

The third and probably most significant question examined the relationship between functions and effects of narrative futuring. In order to compare the content of the letters with the given answers to the open question, both the psychological functions and the answer-options were fitted into a code-system which allows to compare them with each other. This method of comparison must be considered as first draft and probably will be adjusted in further studies. The results show that it is not feasible to conclude the effects on the participant from the functions found in the letters

trustworthy. Only half of the letters allowed to draw a conclusion about how the participants experienced writing the letter. Nevertheless the writing of the letters and the description of the experience can be described as two steps of one process. The writing of a letter from the future fulfills a specific function and the effect of that function can be seen in the given answers.

Five different types of letters and answers were established. Those five types are 1. "Emotion", 2. "Emotion and Thought", "Emotion and Action" and "Emotion and Will", 3. "Thought", "Thought and Action" and "Thought and Will" and 5. "Will". The letters principally were assigned to types two and four. The answers to the open question were most often assinged to type one. In general, the results show that the functions found in the letters seem to strongly deal with aspects that can be categorised as rational cognitive processes, while the effects mentioned by the participants can be situated in the realm of emotions. The five letter- and answer types thus give an overview of the functions and effects of the letters from the future.

When examining the five letter-types it is noticeable that the item "Will" occurred in only one of the letters. On the basis of the literature it could have been expected that "Will" plays a predominantly role in the functions of the letters. The large frequency can probably be explained by assuming that "Will" can be found in the two functions "imagine/experience through imagination" and "recall past events". By using those two functions the participants imagined what they already have reached. To use functions that are assigned to "Will" (i.e. "motivate", "plan steps", "set goal" and "wish/hope") thus was not necessary.

Further, it was examined which function is followed by which effect. The results show that most often "thought and positive emotion" in letters is followed "positive emotion" in the effects. If this relation however is typical for the letters from the future or if it can be explained by the high frequencies of the items "thought" and "emotion" in the letters and "emotion" in the effects needs to be further researched.

In conclusion can be stated that the letters in most of the analysed data-sets were experienced as rewarding. The present study, however, allows not to decide if the letters can be used as a therapeutic instrument. The task of writing a letter from the future does not seem to be harmful; how valuable the task is in the context of psychological well-being or therapy however still needs to be analysed.

As stated in the introduction a therapeutic approach that is oriented on the future has so far been relatively neglected. It is not clear yet how narrative futuring works and if it can be seen as capable of enhancing well-being. This study analysed the psychological functions which can be found in the letters from the future in order to be able to conclude how the letters work. The next step was thus to examine which effects the letters have on the participants themselves. 22 different effects of the letters were detected. The used method of analysis did not achieve to establish a definite system that allows to deduce the effects from the functions. However, what is remarkable about the letters from the future and thus narrative futuring in general seems to be the fact that the functions that could be detected evidently deal with aspects in the realm of „thought" while the detected effects in the largest part are concerned with „emotional" aspects.

Two mentioned concepts proved to be connected with narrative futuring. The cycle of "anticipatory control" can be detected in the letters from the future. The previous analysis of the letters from the future showed that "imagining the future seems to have an all-over organising and motivating effect (Sools & Mooren, 2012). In the context of "anticipatory control" this effect can be described as "feedforward". The participants managed to give feedback in advance by writing down how they want their future to be like. In this sense the letters from the future must be considered as useful. The existence of "anticipatory control" in the letters from the future helps to prevent psychopathological spirals. If people are thus able to plan future goals in advance by writing a letter from the future this may help to remain mentally healthy. This effect was likewise described by the participants themselves. The task was for example described as "therapeutical" or "inspiring".

The concept of possible selves also can logically be linked to narrative futuring and the letters from the future. Possible selves are conceptions of ourselves in the future and include, at least to some degree, "an experience of being an agent in a future situation". The letters thus may help to explore possible future situations and to anticipate the future and realise what one's own future should be like.

From a methodological point of view the sample should have been a larger one for the present study, but due to the limited time only 203 data-sets were analysed. Another limitation depicts the fact that as a consequence of the mode of recruitment most of the participants were students from the University of Twente, in a large part

even students from the faculty of psychology.

Drawbacks of the analysis itself are the used unit of analysis. The fact that the letters are coded per sentence may cause the problem that an all-encompassing content is lost. This proved to be true for the function "Motivate". Further, the updated code-system is probably still not final and is likely to be adapted by other researchers. The same must be said about the established answer-categories. Another problem can be seen in the fact that the given answers were translated from Dutch to English. Not for all Dutch expressions exits an english word that exactly means the same, thus this again was a question of interpretation.

The given systems of categorising the functions and the effects of the letters from the future and their relationship is a first draft and partly may be adapted. This also can be considered as a task for further research in the context of narrative futuring. Besides this, the task of analysing the relationship between (negative) functions and effects and state the of well-being, which is examined by the questionnaire, seems to be both interesting and promising.

Both while analysing the letters and the given answers I always was inclined to examine the statements in a way that even stronger keeps in mind their individual character. This however, was not possible in the course of the present study. This study (only) gives an overview of the functions and the effects of the letters from the future and their relationship.

The method of using a letter from the future is a relatively new one. Although this method seems to be promising other methods should not be neglected completely. Other methods that could be interesting for further research are for example role plays, illustrations or the miracle exercise.

Despite limitations such as the sample size and the used unit of analysis the study depicts a starting point in the analysis of narrative futuring and several new insights could be gained.

VI. Appendix

As already mentioned there appeared to be a pattern of co-occurences while ascribing the psychological functions and the answers to the open question to one of the four categories "thought", "action", "will" and "emotion". Based on these co-occurrences eleven subtypes could be established (see table A). The final results were reached with the help of this synthesis step. These subtypes not only summarise the functions and effects but also simplify their comparison. Table A shows the subtypes and the frequencies of the subtypes for the functions and the effects of the letters. The results are given in order of the frequencies of the effects.

Table A:

11 subtypes based on co-occurences in psychological functions and experienced effects
(N of functions=203, N of effects=275)

Subtypes	Codes in letters and answers	Functions in letters	Experienced effects
1	**Emotion (positive)**	**1% (2)**	**34% (94)**
2	**Emotion (negative)**	**0% (0)**	**19% (51)**
3	**Emotion (positive and negative)**	**0% (0)**	**13.5% (37)**
4	**Thought**	**37% (75)**	**11% (30)**
5	**Emotion (positive) and Thought**	**37% (75)**	**10% (28)**
6	**Emotion (positive) and Will**	**0% (0)**	**4.5% (12)**
7	**Emotion (positive) and Action**	**1% (2)**	**3.6% (10)**
8	**Will**	**0.5% (1)**	**2% (5)**
9	**Emotion (negative) and Thought**	**6% (12)**	**1.5% (4)**
10	**Thought and Will**	**4% (8)**	**1.5% (4)**
11	**Thought and Action**	**14% (28)**	**0% (0)**

Note: the percentages were rounded, the number in brackets gives the total amount

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