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A Narrative Analysis of Moral Agency in Possible Selves

Exploring Strong Evaluation and Experience of Values in Letters from the Future

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Announcements

Psychologists of various schools abundantly emphasize the enormous influence that a social context can have on individuals. While on my way of becoming part of this profession, I want to follow their example and express my appreciation for all the support I enjoyed while writing my thesis.

First of all, Anneke Sools has been a fantastic supervisor. From the start she has carried me along with her enthusiasm for narrative research. Anneke provided the basic concept and guidance for my thesis, but she always encouraged me to develop own ideas as well. She let me benefit from her expertise and experience in the fields of narrative futuring and narrative analysis and brought in worthwhile ideas at all points of writing. The interplay of her confidence in my work, very qualified feedback and lots of insights and inspirations made me enjoy working with Anneke a lot.

Likewise, with Ernst Bohlmeijer I have been very happy to have an experienced researcher of narrative and positive psychology as a second supervisor. His advice has encouraged me to confront difficult questions that arose during the first half of writing. This has clearly helped me to enhance the theoretical reasoning and it has been a motivating moment in writing my thesis.

I want to express my thanks to Thijs Tromp as well, who spontaneously took over the role of a second supervisor. His inspiring advice, based on great expertise in Charles Taylor's philosophy as well as narrative futuring, has been an important support during the final phase of writing my thesis.

Personally, I have been very glad about the opportunity of writing my thesis in such a fascinating field of research. I was allowed to gain insight into narrative research, which has been a great pleasure by itself. Exploring morality from both psychological and philosophical viewpoints and in a societal context has moreover exactly met my interest. Looking back, and looking forward, this fulfilling work has inspired me not only intellectually; it inspired me to tell some new, vivid narratives about my own past and future as well.

Katharina Meyer

Summary

The individual freedoms which modernity has brought along can be seen both as boon and bane for the self. The philosopher Charles Taylor identified their burden with a fading *moral framework* in postmodern societies. Furthermore, he pictures the self as being on a search for individual *moral agency* in order to cope with the lack of moral guidance. The present study combined Taylor's philosophical and a narrative definition of moral agency, leading to two components: *Strong evaluation* and *experience of values*. While existing narrative research on moral agency directs towards the past, the present study argues that *narrative futuring* may be able to exceed that which can be learned from the past. Through narrative futuring people create *possible selves*, defined as vivid narrations of the self in the future. The present study aims to explore whether and in which way types of moral agency come to the fore in possible selves. To this end, narratives in the form of letters from the future were collected online from Dutch and German participants. Four letters with high variation in the degrees of strong evaluation and experience were purposively selected. These letters were then systematically examined by using storyline analysis. As a result, four types of moral agency were identified, which differ in regard to the components of moral agency: 1) *attempt towards moral agency*; 2) *adjusting strong evaluative moral agency*; 3) *experiencing the process towards moral agency*; 4) *fulfilled moral agency*. While types 1 and 2, which show low degrees of experience, may be interpreted as searching for moral agency, this is not the case regarding types with high degrees of experience. Furthermore, this searching character was not consistently related to the degree of strong evaluation. It has been concluded that narrative futuring appears to be a promising approach to moral agency, because the future narratives expressed values both explicitly through strong evaluation and implicitly through experience. Likewise, both components of moral agency seem to complement rather than oppose each other. Further research should explore the precise role of the two components and potential subvariables such as act- and being-related experience. Also, the use of including formal variables such as temporal orientation, coherence and development in the typology should be investigated. Replication and validation studies may potentially open the way for practical use within value oriented psychological interventions such as Acceptance and Commitment Therapy.

Samenvatting

De individuele vrijheden van de moderne tijd zijn zowel veelbelovend als bedreigend voor het zelf. De filosoof Charles Taylor identificeerde het vervagende *moral framework* in postmoderne maatschappijen als een dergelijke bedreiging. Hij stelt een zelf voor dat op zoek is naar individuele *moral agency* om met het gebrek aan morele leiding om te kunnen gaan. De huidige studie combineert Taylor's filosofische definitie met een narratieve definitie van moral agency. Dit leidt tot twee componenten: *strong evaluation* en *experience of values*. Terwijl het bestaande narratieve onderzoek naar moral agency op het verleden is gericht, beargumenteert het huidige onderzoek, dat *narratieve toekomstverbeelding* er nog iets aan kan toevoegen. Daarom is het onderzoek gericht op *possible selves*, gedefinieerd als levendige verhalen over het zelf in de toekomst. De huidige studie exploreert de vraag of en hoe types van moral agency in possible selves naar voren komen. Hiertoe werden toekomstbrieven online verzameld van Nederlandse en Duitse proefpersonen. Er zijn vier brieven geselecteerd met een grote variatie in de mate van strong evaluation en experience. Deze brieven werden systematisch onderzocht met behulp van een verhaallijnanalyse. Als resultaat werden vier typen moral agency geïdentificeerd, die verschillen m. b. t. de componenten van moral agency: 1) *attempt towards moral agency*; 2) *adjusting strong evaluative moral agency*; 3) *experiencing the process towards moral agency*; 4) *fulfilled moral agency*. Terwijl type 1 en 2, waarin lage maten van experience voorkwamen, gezien kunnen worden als zoekend naar moral agency, is dit niet het geval voor types met hoge maten experience. Bovendien was dit zoekende karakter niet consistent gerelateerd aan de mate van strong evaluation. Er werd geconcludeerd dat narratieve toekomstverbeelding een beloftevolle benadering van moral agency lijkt, omdat de toekomstverhalen waarden zowel expliciet d.m.v. strong evaluation als impliciet d.m.v. experience uitdrukten. De twee componenten lijken bovendien eerder in elkaars verlengde te liggen dan tegenover elkaar te staan. Vervolgonderzoek zou gedaan kunnen worden naar de precieze rol van de twee componenten en potentiële sub-variabelen zoals act- en being-related experience. Ook de toegevoegde waarde om vormvariabelen op te nemen, zoals temporele oriëntatie, coherentie en ontwikkeling, moet worden uitgewezen. Replicatie en validatie studies kunnen mogelijk de pad vrijmaken voor praktische toepassing binnen waarde georiënteerde psychologische interventies zoals Acceptance and Commitment Therapy.

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Introduction

The present study portrays Taylor's (1989) picture of a fading moral framework in modern and postmodern western societies. The decreased moral guidance seems to have made people's values less culturally determined and more strongly dependent on individual moral agency. Combining a philosophical with a narrative approach, the present study argues that moral agency has both an evaluative and an experiential component, which means that values need to be reflected upon and narrated. Future narratives are assumed to express types of moral agency in possible selves – representations of the self in the future. Using narrative analysis in an exploratory design, the present study identifies four types of moral agency, which may reflect the postmodern search for moral orientation.

Moral Agents in a Fading Moral Framework

The human being is called a *moral agent* by Taylor (1989): a being which identifies with and is guided by values. He defines values as qualitative distinctions between right and wrong or better and worse. They serve to judge human behaviour, cognition and emotions in terms of moral considerations. In this way, values work as a guideline, providing an orientation of how to act and how to live a life worth living. But they do not only determine what the "good life" is - they also determine who we are (Taylor, 1989). We identify with the values we hold high and judge our self in relation to our *moral framework* – the set of values that we carry. Therefore, values do not only guide us, they constitute our self, define our identity. This theory of the self as a moral agent has been coined by the philosopher Charles Taylor in one of his main works "Sources of the Self: The Making of Modern Identity" (1989), which will be one of the keystones of this thesis. It provides a philosophical approach to modern moral identity, which is to be tested empirically together with a narrative psychological approach in this thesis.

Taylor ascribes a hierarchy to moral frameworks. On the lowest level of the hierarchy, the distinct values of an individual find their place, such as justice or family life. The second level of the hierarchy is determined by the individual's own preference. If, for example, somebody judges the value of family life as more important than the value of justice, family

life is placed higher in his individual moral framework. It is then called a hypervalue. On the highest level of the hierarchy, a constitutive value¹ forms the underlying and connecting idea of a person's values and hypervalues. It is a moral idea, "the love of which empowers us to do and be good" (Taylor, 1989, p. 93). In Taylor's view, this love of or respect for the constitutive value is the motivating factor behind our single values.

Although constitutive values can be substantiated into different values for different individuals, the constitutive values themselves are the same for people in Western societies, according to Taylor. His explanation is that they are derived from the moral order of the societies, which is the same for individuals within those societies throughout epochs. Constitutive goods thus form a culturally transmitted moral order, which is the most basic moral source of our individual values.

Although the moral order is very stable, Taylor describes its weakening during the modern era. In pre-modern times, when enlightenment did not yet question religion, people in Western societies could rely on the moral order as it was provided by Christianity. Right and wrong were clearly defined and protected by authoritative education and nurture. However, as Taylor demonstrates, during the past three centuries the influence of religion and its institutions has waned and made space for a more secular and liberal society. This development brought many gains with it, since people have obtained freedom in many spheres of life – religion, career, politics and sexuality, to name just a few. The flipside is: These freedoms, as valuable as they are, are at the same time obligations. People are allowed to choose, but they are also required to do so. Bringing back Nietzsche's terms: since "God is dead" we carry both the freedom and the burden to become Nietzsche's "Übermensch", who is unrestricted by any existing cultural values and embodies agency in its highest form (Meyer, 1993, p. 137). While Taylor frames it less dramatically than Nietzsche, he derives similar conclusions from this development. Although the moral order still exists as an underlying moral source, it no longer provides us with a clear moral framework. It has become less clearly communicated and less determining. The individual's own responsibility in the process of developing an individual moral framework has grown, according to Taylor. At the same time, the need of a well-defined moral framework has risen, because people are

¹ For the sake of consistency in terms within this thesis, I use the terms value, hypervalue and constitutive value. Taylor (1989) originally spoke of life goods, hypergoods and constitutive goods.

confronted with more choices. This increased requirement to make reflective decisions based on one's values is what Taylor calls *moral agency*. He poses the thesis that postmodern individuals find themselves in an unconscious process of searching for moral agency.

Some proponents of narrative psychology similarly describe identity as culturally shaped by a societal development of a fading moral order. First of all, Hermans et al. (1992) picture values as central to the self and shaped by culture. In the Dialogical Self Theory they suggest that culture is an internal factor of individuals. They propose that the self contains imagined versions of cultural elements. Those can be individuals or groups, but Hermans et al. also mention cultural values. Within the self, the I-positions of the individual stand in dialogue with those cultural values and are therefore influenced by them. Also in agreement with Taylor, some narrative psychologists describe how a moral order is fading in modern and postmodern times. Bohlmeijer plausibly (2007) illustrates how the road to liberty has been continuously walked further since postmodernism. Industrialization, globalization, democratization and medialization all have provided mankind with new possibilities to choose: where to work, whom to vote for, what to consume et cetera. In accordance with Taylor, Bohlmeijer pictures how these freedoms can also be burdens, resulting in an increasing need for moral agency.

The Evaluative and Experiential Component of Moral Agency

Taylor (1989) also has a theory about how moral agency functions. In his view, we have two levels of desires: first order desires are automatic, non-reflective impulses. Second order desires, in comparison, are reflective desires that we consciously judge as important. In other words, second order desires are the values we carry, which for us make life worth living. Moral agency is exerted when persons recognize a conflict between the two orders and reflect on both when making a decision. Thus, moral agents do not simply follow their impulses; they rather explicitly evaluate a decision in terms of their values, recognize conflicts between values and impulses and build their decision upon this reflection. Taylor calls this process of value-reflected decision making *strong evaluation*. His understanding of moral agency thus is based on explicit evaluation of values.

In comparison, narrative psychology suggests that moral agency is expressed less during concrete decisions themselves, but rather through narratives about any kind of morally relevant event. Bohlmeijer (2007) for instance explains how storytelling fills the modern gap of moral guidance. Because values are not provided sufficiently by the society, people tell narratives in which they develop a meaningful value orientation (Bohlmeijer, 2007; Wong,

2011). They interpret and causally relate their past and future experiences, integrating them into a narrative about their life. In this way the self is built within narratives, it is a *narrative identity* (McAdams, 1993; McAdams, & McLean, 2013). Since an individual tells different narratives, the self can take on different forms. Narrative identity therefore is dynamic and multi-faceted (Hermans et al., 1992).

In order to describe what exactly moral agency is and how it functions from a narrative psychology point of view, I want to refer to Pasupathi and Wainryb's (2010) demonstration of how people are "developing moral agency through narrative[s]". Therein, they define moral agency "as people's understanding and experience of themselves (and others) as agents whose morally relevant actions are based in goals and beliefs." (p. 55). The emphasis here lies on the experience of being someone who acts according to his or her values. *Being* and *acting* thereby appear to be two aspects of the *experience* of moral agency. Concerning the functioning of moral agency, Pasupathi and Wainryb claim that moral agency is attained within narratives. Telling a story about oneself acting in accordance with one's values leads to the development of moral agency. From this point of view, moral agency is implicit in the narrated experiences of a person.

Because Taylor (1989) stresses the explicit evaluation of values, while proponents of narrative psychology picture values as implicit in narrated experiences (Bohlmeijer, 2007; Pasupathi and Wainryb, 2010), these two approaches may appear to be contrary. However, their different focus should not hide the fact that both views are not only compatible, but even imply each other. First of all, narrative psychology has a holistic viewpoint on moral agency: it is seen as important to be "narrating morally relevant experiences in terms of not just actions, but the reasons, desires, and emotional consequences associated with those actions" (Pasupathi & Wainryb, 2010). Besides experience, agency, desires, intentionality and emotions, narratives thus also contain reasoning, which may also be reasoning in Taylor's sense of strong evaluation. The other way around, Taylor is also mindful of the influence that narratives exert on the moral orientation of the self. He states that through narratives people can make meaning of their life in order to orient themselves with regard to values in concrete situations: "Making sense of my present action, when we are not dealing with such trivial questions as where I shall go in the next five minutes but with the issue of my place relative to the good, requires a narrative understanding of my life, a sense of what I have become which can only be given in a story." (p. 48).

Developing Moral Agency through Narrative Futuring

So far, research has concentrated on moral agency in narratives with a retrospective perspective towards the past. For example, Pasupathi and Wainryb (2010) examine how narrating about oneself in the past as doing harm to others can promote moral agency. Others have addressed the question how reflection about prosocial past behavior can foster moral agency (Hart, 2005; Youniss & Yates, 1997). In sum, the existing research proposes that both narration and reflection about the past behavior, be it moral or immoral, can be effective in developing moral agency. Thus, encountering moral agency via retrospective narratives about the past has been promising so far.

However, an orientation exclusively directed towards the past seems to be a one-sided approach to the self. Markus and Nurius (1986) stress the role of the future in narrative identity. As they put it, the interpretation of the self “depends on the surrounding context of possibility”. What we might become in the future - our *possible selves* - influences how we see ourselves in the present (the working self) or how we judge our past selves. Identity – in a narrative sense – contains multiple conceptions of past, present and possible selves. Following the work of Markus and Nurius, I therefore want to suggest that aspects of the self, such as moral agency, may be influenced by narratives about the past and about the future.

Sools, Tromp and Mooren (2014) also demonstrate the multi-temporal orientation of narrative identity. They define *narrative futuring* as the “capacity to imagine the future through stories” (Sools et al., 2014, p. 2). Furthermore, they map in detail the complexity of the temporal dimension in narrative futuring. According to them, future narratives can have a present-oriented, retrospective and prospective orientation in each two ways. First, the present and the futured present can be described. Second, a retrospective orientation towards the past and the futured past can be taken. Third, the future can be addressed prospectively by either intentions, hopes and wishes or by describing the path to the future. With this temporal mapping, Sools et al. demonstrate that narrative futuring allows for reflection and experience in more variable ways than purely retrospective narratives about the past.

I propose that this possibility to take several temporal perspectives in narratives may be a benefit which should be taken into consideration with regard to moral agency. Also, narrating about the future seems to have the advantage, that the future is less determined than the past. We can vary our interpretations of the past, but we can not change the experienced events on which we base them. In contrast, our fantasy knows few limits in making up events that might happen in the future. For example, we could tell a story about some possible future

event, in which we experience moral agency more strongly than we ever did in the past. Thereby, the moral agent in the story about the future could function as a role model (Markus & Nurius, 1986), which motivates us and shows us how to be a moral agent in such a situation. Furthermore, an agent imagined in the future may also provide moral orientation in a more reflective way. The temporal position of the futured present for example enables an overview of the past, present and future. The futured self can thereby evaluate values from a different and possibly more nuanced point of view than the present self. This reflection can again be filled with life by placing it into vividly narrated experiences. Thus, in the same way that narratives about the past can help us to learn from past experiences (Pasupathi & Wainryb, 2010), I suggest that narratives about the future might be able to help us to prepare for future experiences.

Markus and Nurius (1986) provide a concept of the agent who comes to the fore in future narratives. As has been described above, possible selves are those parts of narrative identity that concern the future. In 1986, Markus and Nurius first introduced their theory of possible selves and defined them as “representations of the self in the future”. They suggest, that everybody has several of these futured self-representations, since we have various ideas about what we could do or become in the future. These varying possible selves differ in their probability of becoming true. For instance, they can be based on very realistic anticipations but just as well on utopian dreams. Furthermore, possible selves have different emotional meanings: while people wish for some to become true, they fear others (Markus and Nurius, 1986).

Concerning their function, Markus and Nurius (1986) argue that possible selves work as role models and incentives and thereby can motivate actual behaviour in the present. For instance, a possible self can function as a role model when it shows the behaviour that the person aims for. Also, through possible selves it can be experienced how desired and feared future events would feel. According to Markus and Nurius, this works as an incentive and motivates the present self to take action in favour or against the imagined experiences.

Moreover, possible selves are influenced by culture. As Markus and Nurius (1986) put it, “an individual is free to create any variety of possible selves, yet the pool of possible selves derives from the categories made salient by the individual’s particular sociocultural and historical context and from the models, images, and symbols provided by the media and by the individual’s immediate social experiences.” (p. 954). This suggests that the concept of possible selves might be supportive of or at least compatible with Taylor’s theory, that a culturally transmitted moral framework influences identity.

While Markus and Nurius have first established the concept, Erikson (2007) deserves credit for developing a “more specific definition of possible selves”. In past research, according to him, possible selves have been conceptualized in both too broad and too narrow ways. Therefore, Erikson proposes that definitions of possible selves should include the following aspects. First, research should not be tacitly restricted to possible selves of a certain quality, such as particularly realistic, positive or redemptive possible selves. Similarly, possible selves do not need to become someone distinct from the present self. The focus can – as an example - just as well lie on doing something or being somewhere in the future. Second, possible selves need to be distinguished from broader concepts such as life tasks, goals or fears. People can think about goals and fears in an abstract way. When creating a possible self, by contrast, they experience how it would be to reach that goal or be in that feared situation. Thus, a possible self always is experienced as an “agent in the imagined future situation” (Erikson, 2007). Finally, Erikson has a narrative view on identity and speculates that possible selves by definition have a narrative form. However, it still has to be explored whether this is always the case.

Aim of the Study: Types of Moral Agency in Possible Selves

To sum up, in the previous sections I tried to show that moral agency may come to the fore in future narratives. Taylor (1989) argued that the lack of a reliable moral framework induces individuals in modern Western societies to develop moral agency. Combining Taylor’s evaluative and a narrative view, moral agency can now be defined as a collaboration of two components: Strong evaluation of values and experience of agency in those values. Building on Markus and Nurius (1986) and Erikson’s (2007) definitions of possible selves, and further on Sools et al.’s (2014) plea for research on narrative futuring, it has been suggested that narrative futuring may be a fruitful way of expressing and developing moral agency.

In order to empirically inspect this hypothesis, the aim in this study is to explore whether and how narratives about the future do indeed address the topic of moral agency. Specifically, it is examined to what extent moral agency comes to the fore through strong evaluation and experience of values in narrated possible selves. By discerning different degrees of these components between possible selves, the aim is to identify types of moral agency. Out of this, the research questions follow:

1. In which ways does moral agency come to the fore in narrated possible selves?
 - 1.1. To what extent do types of moral agency show a strong evaluation of values?

1.2. To what extent do types of moral agency show an experience of values?

In answering these questions, this study aims to explore the potential of narrative futuring for evaluating and experiencing values. In addition, it aims to contribute to theory-building by bringing forward the moral dimension of possible selves. Moreover, the study pursues the methodological aim of implementing Erikson's (2007) specific definition of possible selves. Finally, a contribution to the theory of moral agency is aimed for by exploring whether the combination of Taylor's reflective and the narrative experience-approach to moral agency appears to be useful.

Method

Design and Operationalization

This study is based on qualitative data which were collected online. Explorative, narrative data analysis has been applied in order to identify types of moral agency in possible selves.

Possible selves have been operationalized as the narrative identities which were created in letters from the future, a research instrument developed by Sools & Mooren (2012). The participant imagines being an agent in any desired future time and space and from this perspective he or she writes a letter to someone in the present or future. The storyline of this letter displays the possible self.

Moral agency of possible selves has been operationalized by the two factors of strong evaluation of values and their experience. *Strong evaluation* means, that a value is explicitly mentioned and reflected upon. The possible self shows awareness of the value and evaluates its importance for the storyline. *Experience* means, a value becomes vivid through the *actions* the possible self takes and through expressions about having *achieved* values or *being* a moral agent. Both strong evaluation and experience of values are relative instead of absolute measures.

Data Collection

The life-story lab of the University of Twente, founded by Ernst Bohlmeijer, Anneke Sools and Gerben Westerhof in 2012, engages in various researches in the area of narrative psychology and a positive psychology approach to well-being. The research area to which the present study belongs addresses narrative futuring and makes use of letters from the future as a research instrument. Specifically, this study is based on an existing data set of 592 letters

from the future that have been collected online via the website of the life-story lab 2011 and 2012 through convenience and snowball sampling.

Participation in the research took place via the website of the life-story lab and contained four steps (Sools & Mooren, 2012). It was optional for the participants which steps to follow. At first, participants were asked to imagine themselves at a self-chosen place and time in the future. They should try to visualize that situation vividly. From that position, they should write a letter of maximum 400 words to a freely chosen recipient. The letter should contain specific and positive information about the situation. After uploading the letter from the future, the second and third step consist of answering open questions and a positive mental health questionnaire (Lamers, Westerhof, Bohlmeijer, ten Klooster, & Keyes, 2011), which are not used in the current study. Finally, participants were asked to provide demographic information and informed consent.

Out of these 491 letters finally four were chosen to be analysed in this study. The selection process contained the steps of purposive sampling, categorization and prototypical sampling. Initially, the first 100 letters of the data set were purposively selected, because they contained the greatest demographic diversity. Secondly, the chosen 100 letters were categorized according to their relative degree (low, medium or high) of strong evaluation and

Figure 1. *Coding scheme of categories of strong evaluation and experience, used for selection of cases*

Strong evaluation	Experience
Weak: Values are no topic of the letter or come to the fore only minimally and implicitly.	Weak: Most parts of the letter are about the present or past, for example a description of, judgment of or advice for the present situation. Only short and abstract information about the future self is provided.
Medium: At least one value comes to the fore. Either it is mentioned rather implicitly but seems to have some importance for the actor, or it is mentioned explicitly without much further reflection.	Medium: The future is described in some length, but in rather abstract terms or in terms of hopes, will, wishes.
Strong: At least one value is explicitly named. It is described to be of central importance and it is reflected upon.	Strong: An agent comes vividly to life in a situation in the futured past or futured present. The situation is described in some detail, for example about actions, feelings or the setting.

experience. Combining each of the three categories of strong evaluation with each of those of experience, a total of 9 categories was formed. See figure 1 for the coding scheme and table 1 for the distribution of the purposive sample. Because strong evaluation and experience are relative measures, the categories do not reflect actual sharp borders. They simply form a tool to allow the last step of prototypical sampling. In this step, prototypical letters from the four most extreme categories were chosen for analysis. The aim was to attain the highest possible diversity in degree of moral agency while staying within the scope of the study, which did not allow for analysis of more letters. See table 2 for the distribution of the prototypical sample. The four letters which are included in the final sample are accessible in the appendix in their original, Dutch language. Quotes are translated into English and all names are changed for anonymity purposes.

Participants of the full sample (N=592) were mainly female (63%; *See table 3*). The Netherlands was the most frequent country of origin (66%), followed by Germany (29%) and small percentages of other birth countries (5%). The biggest age group was 16 to 25 (59%), while hardly people above the age of 65 took part (1%). The educational level was relatively high, with 75% having completed the Dutch high school (MBO) or having attained a higher degree. The four participants who were included in the final sample were all Dutch and highly educated. Two women at the age of 16-25 wrote the letters number 84 and 163. Letter number 61 was written by a man between 26 and 35 and a 46-55 years old man wrote number 62.

Table 1. *Distribution of the letters from the future across the categories of strong evaluation and experience in the purposive sample*

Strong evaluation	Experience		
	Low	Medium	High
Low	N=3	N=5	N=6
Medium	N=6	N=13	N=13
High	N=9	N=19	N=26

N = amount

Table 1. *Distribution of the letters from the future across the categories of strong evaluation and experience in the final sample*

Strong evaluation	Experience		
	Low	Medium	High
Low	Type1	-	Type3
Medium	-	-	-
High	Type 2	-	Type4

Data Analysis

The narrative analysis of moral agency in the letters from the future is based on Kenneth Burke's "Grammar of Motives" (1969). Burke compares human life to a drama. Just as a theatre play, a situation in human life contains some elements, which build a whole together. The *agent* is the main character of the play and finds himself in a *setting*, which can be for example the physical, psychological or historical characteristics of the scene. The *act* is everything what happens. The *means*² describes the way in which agents act, or the means they use in order to reach the *purpose*, which is the goal of the story. Moreover, every play contains a *breach*³, which is the imbalance or contradiction of two of the elements. For example, if the act consists of events which work against the purpose, there is a breach between the act and the purpose. The breach is the motivating factor of a story, as the storyline is built around it in order to restore a balance between the elements.

While Burke's method has originally been used for literary and historical texts,

Table 3. *Demographics of the full sample and the final sample*

		Full sample (N=592)	Final Sample (N=4)
		Amount(Percentage)	Amount(Percentage)
Gender	Male	213 (36)	2 (50)
	Female	370 (63)	2 (50)
	Unspecified	9 (1.5)	-
Age	16-25	347 (59)	2 (50)
	26-35	68 (12)	1 (25)
	36-45	22 (4)	-
	46-55	97 (16)	1 (25)
	56-65	41 (7)	-
	66-75	4 (1)	-
	75 and higher	4 (1)	-
	Unspecified	9 (2)	-
Degree	VMBO or lower	100 (17)	-
	MBO or higher education	443 (75)	4 (100)
Country of birth	The Netherlands	390 (66)	4 (100)
	Germany	173 (29)	-
	Other	29 (5)	-

Murray and Sools (2014) have applied it in clinical and health psychology. Based on Burke's *dramatism*, they developed the method of *storyline analysis* for application on everyday narratives. The idea of storyline analysis is that the meaningful whole which is characteristic for the narrative can be identified systematically by analysing its elements and how these cohere. Additionally, the breach between two of the elements is identified in order to gain insight into the motivating factor of the story. By taking into account both the content, form and structure, the essence of a story can be summarized without leaving out essential parts.

The present study applies an extended storyline analysis of each letter from the future. Each analysis starts with a narrative summary of the letter. Because moral agency has been defined in terms of strong evaluation and experience of values, these factors are integrated into storyline analysis. Hereby, the initial analysis of each element is followed by a second step of identifying a value which is expressed within that element. Murray and Sools (2014) first demonstrated this means, yet without further identifying moral agency. Thirdly, *strong evaluation* of the value will be examined. Explicit expressions of a value as well as expressions that suggest awareness of and reflection upon the value are interpreted as indicating a high degree of strong evaluation. Fourthly, *experience* of the value is analysed. in two respects: A vivid agent who is visualized as acting according to the value is interpreted as having *act-related experience*. In contrast, an agent who is said to have achieved a value, resulting in expressions of being a moral agent is interpreted as having *being-related experience*. Finally, grounded on this extended storyline analysis, the type of moral agency of each letter will be defined.

Results

Type 1. Attempt towards Moral Agency

Narrative Summary. Hi today's myself

Why are you worrying! The future will bring what you need anyway. Just, you do have to dare choosing. I have chosen, to get up, to study, to enjoy. If you choose, everything will be easier, while what you chose doesn't matter so much.

Life sometimes appears so difficult, cluttered. But life is nice, if you make it nice.

You are namely the one who spreads the tartlets yourself. Bear up! You will see: as long as you climb out your bed and do things, everything turns out well.

With a big greeting from your future myself

Agent. A future agent writing the letter is clearly distinguishable from a present agent, to which the letter is addressed. The future self writes to the present self as to another person,

using the second person form “you”, while also acknowledging that they belong to the same person by naming them “today’s myself” and “future myself”. The present self is indecisive (“you now have the tendency not to choose”). Because it is important nonetheless that she takes decisions (“otherwise you don’t come further”), she seems to be sad about her inability to do so (“bear up!”). The future self shows valuing (“With a big greeting”) for the present self. She is less indecisive (“I have chosen”) but communicates understanding for the present self’s difficulty of making choices (“Life sometime appears so difficult, cluttered”).

The agent shows the value of responsibility. Worried about the future, the present agent would rather make no decision at all than one that bears the risk of bad consequences. This responsibility to avoid any mistakes places a high burden on her, because she perceives the world as too complex to know how to choose right. In a way, the future self amplifies this pressure, by pointing out that it is her own responsibility to “do your best” in order to have a joyful life.

The value is not explicitly named as responsibility, but still it is described clearly: The future self seems to be very aware, that the present self tries so strongly to be responsible, since she describes her situation in an emphatic way. Because the value is so determining for the present self and, as will be shown, for her act, it is also of central importance to the storyline.

One could say that the present self is strongly agentic in responsibility because she truly does nothing wrong. However, according to the future self, responsibility does not simply mean preventing all risks. Responsibility lies in taking responsible actions and choices. In this way, the present self does not show much responsibility, since she avoids decisions.

Act. The present self worries about the future and therefore fails to make decisions. The future self has made many choices, for example “chosen to get up, to study, to succeed, to enjoy.” She explains the paralyzing effect of the present self’s indecision and tries to motivate the present self to choose: “Just, you do have to dare choosing, otherwise you don’t come further.”

Thereby, courage to choose is presented as a value.

She explicitly stresses the importance of this value; it even is a necessary condition for the present self to progress. This value is strongly reflected upon: She does not only describe the positive consequences of choice, but also evaluates the risks that the present self sees in

choosing. The courage to choose is addressed all throughout the letter and therefore highly central to the storyline.

The present agent is presented as having a lack of this value (“now you have the tendency not to choose”). When talking about the future, the possible self enlists several choices she has made. On the one hand, this implies being an actor in the future. On the other hand, the actor is not further made visible, because she does not give any more specific information. The reader for example gets to know that she chose to study and what to eat tonight, but nothing about the situation in which the choice was taken, the evaluation which led to the choice or the feelings during or after making the choice. Therefore, the possible self may be described as being on her way to reaching this value: While the agent is said to have already achieved her value, the act of choice is not fully experienced yet.

Setting. The present self seems to perceive the setting as complicated, but the future self admits, that this perception is wrong: “Life sometime appears so difficult, cluttered. That’s not at all how it is”. She thinks that “the future is going to come and bring what you are found to need” and “all choices are fine”. Thus, the setting plays a paradoxical role: While the future self presents the setting as well-disposed and manageable, in which choices cannot be wrong or fatal, it seems daunting and confusing to the present self.

The future self tries to convince the present self, that the setting is favourable towards her. Thereby she takes some of the responsibility away from the present self by arguing: Because the setting is favourable, as long as she does anything, she can’t do something wrong, because the setting will work it out for her. This shows the value of trust into the future.

The value of trust into the future is rather explicit in the future self’s description of the setting: “Because the future is going to come and bring what you are found to need”. Although not naming the value directly, the writer seems to be conscious about it, since she criticizes the value’s opposite: “worrying about the future makes no”

Experience of trust into the future seems to be restricted to the future self. Her attempt to convince her former self of the future’s favourable nature seems to imply, that she herself has already developed such trust, in contrast to the present self. But even the future self seems to experience only limited trust into the future, since she does not describe in any detail *how* she experiences that trust.

Purpose. The purpose of the story line is that “life is nice”. For example, a nice life seems to preclude worries about the future. Furthermore, a feast is pictured to describe a

joyful life: “You are the one yourself who fills the pit with juice, blows up the balloons, spreads the tartlets and blows the bells out of the window towards unknowing passers-by.”

This purpose suggests the value of pleasure. Life appears to become more valuable, if the present self starts celebrating and enjoying it free of worries.

The value of pleasure is implicit. The future self appears to pre-assume, that striving towards a “nice life” is a goal and that such a life contains celebration rather than worries. Because she does not explicitly reflect on this value, it seems to be the result of an unquestioned impulse rather than of strong evaluation.

Whether the picture of a feast reflects experience of the value is disputable. On the one hand, it invites the present self to visualize herself as an agent inside of a pleasurable life. On the other hand, it may be read as a metaphor instead as an actual future event. In this way, pleasure seems to be experienced in the form of a daydream rather than inside a real future situation.

Means. According to the future self, the present self carries the responsibility to make life nice: “The life is nice, if you make it nice” Hereby, choices and activities are necessary means: “as long as you climb out of your bed everything turns out well.” The picture of life as a feast also expresses that the present self has to care for the nice things in life to happen himself.

This means expresses the value of agency. It is not important, what is done and the agent should not even care about the effects of which is done, as long as she just acts in any way at all: “When you choose everything becomes easier, while what you choose does not actually make such a big difference.”

As the quotes show, the value of agency is explicitly and very clearly expressed. The future self also seems aware that agency is the necessary means to reach the purpose of a pleasurable life. Besides the act’s value of choice, agency appears to be the value which is most strongly evaluated, because it is an explicit topic throughout the letter.

Experience of agency is very low for the present self, who is said to do almost nothing, but somewhat higher for the future self. The latter apparently is agentic by making choices, although this is not experienced in much detail. Again, the value seems to be experienced most intensely through the form of a daydream about life as a feast.

Breach. The two values of agency and responsibility, belonging to the elements means and agent, are incompatible: The way in which the present agent tries to be responsible by not risking any mistakes actually paralyzes her, undermining her agency. The following

lack of agency means, that the present agent is unable to reach the goal of a pleasurable life. Although the breach lies between the agent and the means, it also depends on the setting. The present self finds it difficult to act, because she perceives the setting as complicated, so that risks are difficult to avoid. The future self seems to be aware of the breach and the role of the setting. She attempts to resolve it by picturing the setting as benign and promoting its value of trust into the future. Particular for the breach in this letter is that it is situated within the present, while the future agent takes up the role of resolving it.

Conclusion about moral agency. This letter is characterized by quite strong evaluation of moral values through the future self. Although she does not mention most of her values explicitly as such, she appears to be aware of them and brings them forward implicitly quite clearly. The value of the act and the means are even described explicitly in clear words. She reflects on them and stresses their importance, making them the central topics of the letter. Strong evaluation appears to be directed towards the present self and seems to have the function of convincing her of the values.

Experience of the values differs strongly between the present and the future self. The present self is vividly described as experiencing a lack of moral agency. The future self however is said to have achieved at least some of the values. However, this information is not made more vivid by any details about the experience. The values come to life most strongly through sort of a daydream, which the future self pictures for the present self. In sum, the lack of moral agency in the present appears to be experienced more intensely than the achieved moral agency in the future. The possible self of the letter seems to daydream about being a moral agent without experiencing moral agency intensely within the future reality. In addition, she experiences the present lack of moral agency and describes her future self as a moral agent, but she does not experience the process of acting as a moral agent and how this feels.

The letter evokes the impression of functioning as a self-support from the future to the present self. The present self is presented as having a total lack of moral agency, being incapable of both strong evaluation and experience of values. The future self presents herself as more morally mature. She shows quite strong evaluation and limited experience. In order to advise and motivate her present counterpart to become more morally agentic, she uses strong evaluation, stressing the importance and feasibility of her values. She also uses experience by shaping a daydream-like picture. In sum, this type of a possible moral agent develops limited moral agency, by strongly evaluating some of her values and through limited experience of

being a moral agent and acting as a moral agent. The development takes place through self-support from the future for the present self.

Type 2. Adjusting Strong Evaluative Moral Agency

Narrative Summary. To everybody who looks gloomily into the future
What do you do when you get trapped inside your problems and by one thought
you get driven into madness so that even love makes room for hate. But then, are
we not the causers of our own thoughts and problems ourselves? Or is it the case
that if everything had turned out differently, I had never gotten into a depression?
Life for me is still a big mystery.
Yet I managed it, and right because I let everything go. I found out that vainly
searching for clarification leads to suffocating, that lets you lose control above
yourself.
I write this to remind everybody why I chose to go on living.
Love.
Love encloses everything, but you do have to want to see this. Thereby don't
forget that it starts with yourself. Discover and keep in mind who you are and
accept things the way they come and go.
Don't run away, since luck is nearby.

Love, Nina

Agent. The letter is addressed towards “everybody who looks gloomily into the future”. The agent Nina, who writes the letter from the future, seems to count herself (at least her present self) to this group, when she speaks of “we”. She addresses towards the reader with “you” and this reader belongs to the group as well. Nina moves through streams of thought that she assumes to share with this group. Thereby she expresses helplessness (“Life is [...] a big jumble of mysteries and questions wherein hold is not always discoverable.”) and missing agency (“How should you cope with an idea that enables you to do things where you eventually lose power of.”). But besides these negative feelings, Nina also thinks that everyone is able to find love (“I think that you know it best by yourself [how you can find love]”). The stream of thought in the first half of the letter seems to represent the thoughts of the present self, while the second half of the letter is written from the future self's point of view.

The value of the agent is communion. It seems to be important for Nina not to be alone in her sombreness. This comes forth already in the addressee: By writing towards “everybody

who looks gloomily into the future”, she implies, that other people might share this feeling. Further, in writing her thoughts she mainly uses the pronouns “you” and “we”, thereby stating, that the addressees recognize themselves in them. Finally, she seems to want to help those others with the letter: By describing how she found out of her depression, she appears to picture herself as a role model for others, opening the path for them to follow her example.

In this way, Nina writes the letter as if it were read by others, to whom she is connected through her (former) sombreness and to whom she offers advices. The value of communion thus is mainly implicit in her way of writing. She does not evaluate it explicitly in the first half of the letter. In the second half however, she gives her advice in such detail, that there is reason to assume that this act is based on conscious, strong evaluation. When read in the context of the advice given, the following sentence also seems to explicitly hint at her intention to support others: “I write this to remind everybody why I chose for staying alive.”

Experience of communion is two-sided in this case. On the one hand, Nina shows that she does feel connected to others by taking her sombre addressees for granted. Her way of writing may be interpreted in the way that she actually is a moral agent in communion, because she actively talks about their shared thoughts and feelings and advises the reader. It may also be interpreted as a try to become connected. On the other hand, being connected in common sense might involve not only mental but also actual, interpersonal events. But Nina does not mention any shared experiences with others or feelings of connectedness to specific people. Therefore, her moral agency exists on an abstract level of thinking and feeling, not of deeds.

Setting. The setting for Nina is incalculable: “The life for me still is a big mystery.” She places herself in a world of thought, which offers not enough to hold on to and is not fully understood: “a big jumble of mysteries and questions wherein hold is not always discoverable” This lack of “hold” comes forth in her writing style, when she asks a lot of questions, some of which contradicting each other, without providing answers. Thus, her stream of thought, the setting, seems to be accompanied by negative affect. At the same time the (missing) answers seem important, because they could help her coping with her problems and lend meaning to her depression. Later Nina points out that the setting also bears a positive aspect; love is accessible for everyone who wants to find it: “Love encloses everything. Love expresses itself in the smallest things, but you do have to want to see this.”

As a consequence to the “big jumble of mysteries and questions”, the need to solve the riddle of life seems to arise. The questions appear to be the try to reach clarification by

consciously reflecting on life. Nina thus uses her reason as a value in order to achieve insight into the confusing setting.

Nina identifies reason as a value when telling the negative effect of that value: “I found out that vainly searching for clarification leads to suffocating.” Although she thus stepped away from this value, she implies that reasoning was her preferred approach towards life before. This indicates strong evaluation: She consciously decides whether or not to use reason as a value.

Nina obviously experiences her value of reasoning intensely during the first half of the letter. Her complex and abstract questions suggest that she really is an agent of these thoughts, because they are difficult to follow without really immersing into them. On the other hand, she admits that her reason does not suffice to solve the riddle of life. Therefore she experiences reason, but without achieving the desired effect.

Act. At first, Nina gets lost in a stream of abstract thought, asking a lot of philosophical-appearing questions as “However good or bad it is, does not everything come down to the same in the end?”, without providing answers. She seems to experience “suffocating in your own thoughts”. She indicates to have gotten a depression and considered suicide. Then she tells that she found a way out through love and “not because I tried to disentangle everything, but right because I let everything go”. Finally, she gives some advices to the reader.

The value in this act is to let go. Nina explains her recovery by achievement of this value. She let go her obsession with thinking, her demand to understand everything.

She explicitly names this value: “Yet I managed it [...], because I let everything go.” She also evaluates it by telling why this was so important and that it helped her.

The first half of the letter, in which she seems no agent at all in standing back from her thoughts, appears to work as a demonstration why the value is so important. Then she proves to have become a moral agent in letting go: she explicitly says that she managed to let go, and also how she came to that point; because “I found out that vainly searching for clarification leads to suffocating.”

Purpose. Nina’s purpose of the storyline is to regain control about her life. The most crucial aspect of this is to “go on living” at all. Furthermore, control is the topic that all of her questions turn around in one way or the other. The first couple of questions ask what to do when losing control over your own feelings and deeds. The later questions concern the problem whether “we” as agents can make a difference at all, if “we” are “the causers of our

own thoughts and ideas [...and] problems ourselves”. It leads to the question whether her depression could have been prevented (controlled).

The value of the setting is agency. Agency here means being in control of her life and acting the way she wants to act. Reaching the purpose of control over her life implies this value: Agency is needed in order to be able to control life.

Since the whole first half of the letter consists of conscious reflection on agency, strong evaluation of this value can be rated extraordinarily high. For example, the question “Don’t we trust too much into others in the hope that everything turns out well?” proposes that agency is important, while “Does not everything come down to the same in the end?” questions the influence agency can have.

All throughout her letter, Nina seems to attempt to reach agency, trying two different ways: First by reflecting on agency in order to find out whether agency is possible at all (value of the setting) and how to become more agentic: “How should you cope with an idea that enables you to do things where you eventually lose power of.”. This way is characterized by strong experience of a lack of agency. Using reason only “leads to suffocating”. Second, Nina trusts in her feelings, lets reason behind and thereby becomes more agentic. She develops enough agency to make the choice of staying alive. At once she seems to know how to live life clearly enough, to even give advises about it to others, instead of posing questions. In this way, she seems to experience moral agency. Still, it has to be admitted, that this experience takes place on an abstract level, not inside specific events. Although she presents herself as agentic, she proves to experience agency only by reflecting on it, not through behaviour outside her mind.

Means. The means by which Nina achieves control over her life is love: “I write this to remind everybody why I chose to go on living. Love.” Thus, love is the reason why she found the agency to go on with her life. Furthermore, love is everywhere en “encloses everything”, “but you do have to want to see this”. Therefore this means is by nature accessible to her as well, but only if she stands open to accepting it in her life.

The value of acceptance is hidden in her advices, which are guidelines of how to live. Guidelines as “discover and keep in mind who you are”, “accept the things the way they come and go” and “don’t run away” encourage the reader to know and accept oneself, accept what happens and accept even suffering, instead of running away from it. In the same way, only when Nina accepts that she cannot solve the riddle of life, she starts feeling agency and control in life.

Nina explicitly talks about acceptance; she gives examples of acts that involve acceptance and phrases those as advices, implying that it is of moral value living in this way. This reflects a strong evaluation of this value.

According to herself, Nina achieved moral agency in acceptance: “Yet I managed it, [...] because I let everything go”. Letting go here may be interpreted as accepting that life is inscrutable. She thus seems to experience acceptance. On the other hand, all her guidelines, again, are quite abstract. She does not experience acceptance in a concrete situation. Therefore it appears, as if she rationally realized the value of acceptance and emotionally feels it, but this takes place inside her head and it is not visualized how it expresses itself in reality.

Breach. The storyline breaches between setting and purpose. The agent finds herself inside an intimidating, chaotic stream of thoughts which produces the need of deep, rational understanding of those questions she examines. Thereby she gets occupied in a spiral of negative thoughts, being unable to solve the riddle of life. Thus, by the setting’s value of reason, she is unable to reach the purpose’s value of agency. Only when she breaks out of the setting, starts emphasizing her feelings over her reason and invites love into her life through the value of acceptance, this means seems to be able to resolve the breach.

Conclusion about Moral Agency. Overall, the agent shows extraordinarily strong evaluation of her values. She reflects upon them on a high level of abstraction, making them the central topic of her storyline. Moreover, she does not only evaluate her values, but also explicitly addresses the problem of lacking moral agency: “Love makes room for hate”, “an idea that enables you to do things where you eventually lose power of”. While in the second part of the letter evaluation seems to contribute to moral agency, it appears to be so intense in the first part that it actually leads to confusion.

Experience of values develops within the letter, with the future self being presented as experiencing more moral agency than the present self. However, also for the future self, no specific situations are visualized that would show experience of moral agency. Within the storyline, the possible self has cognitive and emotional experience of moral agency, but she does not manifest it within actual events.

This type presents an agent who is explicitly struggling to become a moral agent. A one sided and very intense reliance on the evaluative part of moral agency leads to awareness about a lack of moral agency. Only when strong evaluation becomes less abstract and is joined by experience of values, the possible self expresses feelings of being a moral agent. However, her values are not experienced through actions within specific situations but rather

on an abstract cognitive and perhaps emotional level, in the world of thought. They are experienced through a state of mind rather than through behaviour. In sum, this possible self develops towards moral agency by adding limited experience to a high degree of strong evaluation.

Type 3. Experiencing the Process towards Moral Agency

Narrative Summary. Finally the time has come.

We move back to the Netherlands after 6 unbelievable years. We made the company grow to 500 employees and are part of a multinational now. We came close to the objective of 100 million. Anne already went home earlier. We would like an old luxurious house in Emnes/Laren. It were hard years, but what are we doing well together. We have decided to go on more calmly, maybe think about marrying once or maybe children.

I have already begun with the planning of our world travel underhand, Anne she doesn't really want yet but wait till she sees the boat! We're going to see everything.

Anne also is part of this success!!!!

Agent. The writer and main agent of this letter seems to strongly identify via his relation to "Anne". He repeatedly describes their shared plans and explicitly stresses that "Anne also is part of this success!!!!" But besides their strong relation, he also mentions disagreements: "I have already begun with the planning of our world travel underhand, Anne she doesn't really want yet". Also concerning his work, he uses the pronoun of "we" a lot, referring to the people with whom together he successfully expanded a company. In favour of that company, he and Anne have lived abroad for 6 years, which, together with his plans of a world trip indicates an interest in experiencing many of the world's places. At the same time, he is looking forward to moving back to the Netherlands. His tone of writing is enthusiast, for example in the beginning exclamation "finally the time has come".

The writer's use of "we" makes him appear as being melted together with Anne into one agent. Despite of many differences (Anne already went back to the Netherlands, doesn't want to do a world trip, etc.), it seems important to the writer, that he and Anne have shared success, plans and future. In short, they seem to have a shared identity, which expresses itself in the value of communion. Communion in this case means to share an identity and to have concern and appreciation for each other.

The agent does not explicitly evaluate this value by speaking about it in abstract terms. All his expressions of it are of direct nature, which means that he expresses the value directly without reflecting on it. For example, “maybe think about marrying once or maybe children” directly expresses the desire to foster the relationship, but it does not name that desire more abstractly. Nevertheless, the high amount of such expressions indicate, that he is aware that communion is important for him.

The agent experiences communion by writing about the things shared with others. He also is a moral agent in the way that he has concern for Anne’s opinion as well, for example when he takes into account Anne’s reluctance against staying on a boat for too long. This also shows, that achieving communion for him does not mean that disagreements ought not exist. Although there seem to be some tensions, the shared plans of him and Anne indicate, that they are moral agents in preserving their communion against those.

Act. With six years of hard work, the agent has strongly expanded a company, which he now sold to a “multinational”: “It turned out well for the two of us”. He will follow Anne, who already went back to the Netherlands. There they plan to have a calmer and luxurious life. He is also busy with planning a travel around the world.

Although “We have decided to go on more calmly”, the writer expresses his appreciation of a fulfilled life. The reduction of working amount, as his plans show, will not inevitably result in less activity, but simply in a more leisure-time activity – as his plan of a world trip shows. The value of fulfilment thus stands both for quantity and quality of activity.

Again, the writer does not explicitly mention this value. It rather comes forth implicitly in his act of making plans for the time back in the Netherlands.

The agent seems to have experienced fulfilment intensely through his work abroad: “It were 6 unbelievable years”. Now that he wants to change the quality of fulfilment by reducing working time, he still experiences moral agency of this value, because he actively plans a world trip. However, fulfilment is threatened by the disagreement of Anne concerning the plans. But he shows that he still feels able to achieve the value by making compromises: “we’re going to see everything but we probably do it in steps since Anne doesn’t want to stay on a boat for too long.”

Setting. The setting in which the actor sees himself is favourable, in that it enables him to be very successful in economic, financial and relational terms. He has been confronted by no dramatic obstacles. However, he didn’t receive the success as a gift, but had to work hard and live abroad: “It were hard years”. Still, the positive nature of the setting allowed this

to enter in great financial earnings, so that he and Anne can now search for a big, old, luxurious house. In the moment of writing, the agent finds himself in between these two settings; the first asking for hard work and the second allowing luxury.

The line of argument which can be found inside the setting is that if the agent works hard enough, he will be rewarded. Good work will lead to success and success will pay out – in his case in the ability to work less, buy a fantastic house and do a world trip. This reasoning clearly shows the value of justice: What he deserves is what he gets and there is no external factor in the setting which withholds what he earns.

This value also comes forth implicitly through the logic of the story line. Statements as “It were hard years but what are we doing well together” slightly suggest that rewards go together with hard work, but the value only achieves clearness in the broader context in which a phase of endeavour is followed by well-deserved prosperity. This value of justice thus is not strongly evaluated.

Justice is experienced in the way that the agent tells in detail what he did to deserve his earnings and how he is going to spend them. He exists as an actor within this storyline. “It turned out well for the two of us” also suggests the experience of positive feelings, although those are not expressed more directly. Furthermore, that he seems to be an agent within a setting of justice, is to be differentiated from being a moral agent of justice oneself. It is the difference between receiving justice and acting justly. The latter is experienced when he does justice towards Anne by valuing her contribution to the success.

Purpose. The purpose of the storyline lies in the success of the agent with his company. He already achieved his goal of expansion: “it came off for us we have let the company grow and we are known in various countries”. Part of the purpose is also the prosperity he earns through selling the company: “we have gotten good money for it.”

The value behind the purpose of success is a pleasurable life. The wealth allows the agent to buy a big, old, luxurious house. Also it enables him to reduce his required working hours and to undertake a travel around the world. All this shows the value of enjoying a pleasurable life.

The writer makes this value explicit with examples of what kind of nice things he plans to do now that he achieved success. Statements as “We have decided to go on more calmly” show that he is aware of aim to enjoy life. Nevertheless, he does not speak abstractly about this value, which would indicate reflection on and strong evaluation of it.

As has been said, the agent finds himself between the former setting of hard work and the coming setting of a luxurious life in the Netherlands. Experience of this tension is expressed within the letter: “It were hard years but what are we doing well together.” The agent thus seems to experience pleasure already. Moreover, he and Anne experience moral agency in the way that they already take steps to realize their plans. But at the same time, the writer’s ideal of how their life in pleasure should be like is still to be fulfilled and he experiences joyful anticipation of that ideal rather than in its realization.

Means. The means to achieve success is all what the agent does in effort to expand the company. Most obviously, it includes to work hard for six years and to live abroad. More implicitly, it might have included prioritizing work above family and relationship, because he seems to consider this only after the period of work: “Maybe think about marrying once or maybe children”. Furthermore, “Anne also is part of this success”, although it does not become clear whether she contributed to the company directly or indirectly, for example through emotional support.

The value of the means is ambition. To sustain during six years of a lot of work and of cutting back private desires as family presupposes endurance and motivation.

Ambition comes forth within the storyline, when he writes that “It were hard years” against the background that he strived and managed to succeed anyway. He does not explicitly name his value of ambition, but examples as this one suggest awareness of it.

Although it is rather implicit, the agent seems to experience ambition quite a lot. It lies within his logic of how he achieved success with the company. For example, “The objective of 100 million” sounds rather ambitious. He also shows ambition in planning to convince Anne of the world trip: “Anne she doesn’t really want yet but wait till she sees the boat with which we cross the world.”

Breach. There is a breach between the purpose of success and the means of taking strong effort. The joyful life he strives for through success includes little work, but family plans, living in the Netherland, luxury and travelling. This stands in contrast to the exhausting life full of work, ambitious objectives and living abroad. Summarized, in order to reach a joyful life later, the agent and his wife first have to live a work-intensive life with little joy, which facilitates and contradicts the purpose at the same time.

Conclusion about Moral Agency. The agent seems to have values which are of central importance to him. They come to the fore implicitly through the storyline, where they are realized within specific situations. This elicits the impression, that he might be aware of

those values. However, this is not made explicit through reflection and therefore strong evaluation of his values appears to be rather weak.

In contrast, overall experience of values appears high. The agent becomes visible within specific situations in which he acts morally and expresses corresponding feelings. Although he is confronted by some minor obstacles in living according to his values, these do not form serious threats. Yet, he has not reached his full ideal of his values. Nevertheless, he sees himself as able to do so and makes specific plans of situations in which he would come even closer to his values.

Concluding, this letter from the future creates a clearly visible agent who is confidently on his way towards full experience of unreflective values. This type of a moral agent finds himself within the process of experiencing moral agency by *acting* according to his values. He does not step back from this process in order to *evaluate* his values. While on his way, he still has a way to go in order to fully achieve his value and more strongly experience *being* a moral agent. Despite his low degree of strong evaluation, he does not show any sign of perceiving his moral agency as one-sided or lacking something.

Type 4. Fulfilled Moral Agency

Narrative Summary. Dear grandchildren

I'm writing this letter because after 94 years of life it finally stops for me soon.

How did we get through the years 20 en 30 without getting carried away in the aggression and greed of that time?

Luck is one reason but the essence lies in earlier life experiences of sickness in 2002. We had the death on visit. He pottered around a bit and then went away.

But since then we always knew that every moment he could step in.

It made us differentiate between the important and the less important explicitly.

Care for our family was our leading motive.

After the big inflation, the plundering and the fights began. We had to go to Krakow. We withdrew from the fights but had to defend ourselves sometimes.

Terrible. The loss of your fathers is still painful. But we never really started a fight, have always kept our dignity.

I have outlived Nienke and your parents. And when I go, what do you inherit then? No property, to my regret. Yet, I can look into the mirror. I have kept my dignity. This is what I leave behind for you.

Martijn

Agent. Martijn is the 94-years old writer of the letter. His person emerges in the time of the letter (1954) and in the course of his life. Although he appears in the past, the futured past and the futured present, his selves are integrated into one single agent. His family seems to be very important to him, which is shown when he speaks of “we” instead of the first person sometimes. “We” seemingly stands for Martijn en Nienke, who appears to be Martijn’s wife, and in some cases includes their children. Identification thus partly finds place in relation to others.

The value of the character is expressed in the statement “we never really started a fight, have always kept our dignity”. Using violence (apart from self-defence) is judged as an immoral act which would make them loose their “dignity”. The value thus is to avoid immoral acts or, formulated positively, to have moral agency.

Martijn explicitly speaks about this value several times. He uses clear words to describe it and therefore is very aware of it. He does not say directly, that this value is important, but the storyline suggests that it is crucial to him anyway: It is the one important value that he was able to keep and to bequeath to his grandchildren.

The possible self strongly experiences this value. Firstly, he clearly says that he as a person as well as “we” as his family has fulfilled the value. Secondly, he vividly describes the circumstances in which moral agency was threatened through fights and how it was kept by never starting a fight. Thirdly, the experience of having kept moral agency all throughout his life seems also vivid during writing the letter: “I can look into the mirror. I have kept my dignity. That’s what I leave behind for you.”

Act. At the time of the letter he thinks “it stops for me soon”. Therefore he tells his grandchildren in the letter about his life and what he leaves behind for them. One major act of his life is sickness of himself or Nienke in 2002 and 2005. Confronted by death, they define care as their “leading motive”. The other main act begins with inflation and looting and results in civil war-like circumstances. “The agents and the soldiers used the weapons fort their own goals, we had to leave our house and moved out of the cities with your parents where it all was happening.” The family sought refuge in Poland, but nevertheless lost their sons during self-defence.

Martijn mentions that Nienke’s and his “leading motive” was to “care well for our parents, care for each other and care for our children”. Those are the “three things that really are of relevance”. This shows a central value of care for his family. Moreover, it can be

assumed, that the value of care also expands to other people. Care might be the motive, why they tried to avoid fights and never start them.

Evaluation of this value is strong. Especially the value of care for family is made explicit unequivocally. Furthermore By naming it their “leading motive”, he evaluates it as his clear priority. In comparison, care for people in general does not seem to be that central to him. It is implicit in his rejection of acts that harm others, such as stealing or fighting.

Martijn seems to experience care as positive affection and a strive to support others, yet without being always able to reach the hoped-for effect. For example, although he might have had the best intentions, his letter does not show any active care for people besides his family. In a world full of violence, not harming others might have been the closest he could come towards care. Another way to care would be to leave something material for his grandchildren, but he’s not able to do so. Yet the fact, that he regrets this (“I find that bad, I see that you miss this.”) shows, that he does experience care as a feeling and an intention. By finding a non-material good to leave for them instead, his “dignity”, he finally proves that, within his opportunities, he is a moral agent in fact.

Setting. There are three settings inside the letter: 2002 and 2005 are characterized by sickness and nearness of a personalized death. The death visited Martijn en Nienke, saw them and was seen and later could come back every minute. He’s characterized as an ever-being threat.

Second, there is the setting of “aggression and greed of the years 20 and 30”. Those decades include inflation, depredation, weapons and violence. It’s a setting that obliged the family to leave their home, made it difficult to live a moral life without stealing, urged them to defend themselves and even takes the lives of Martijn’s sons or sons in law. But the setting also includes personal luck that prevented the family from being carried away in the greed and aggression.

Third, the setting of writing the letter in 2054 is seemingly free of aggression and greed. Instead, it includes grief and possibly feelings of guilt about the death of his children and wife while “I should have had gone first” and about his inability to leave property to his grandchildren. The setting thus shows sparse possibilities to care for one’s family.

The settings all are characterized by mainly negative characteristics, as threat of death, threat of violence, greed and care-undermining circumstances. Two things have “prevented that we were carried away in the aggression and greed of that time”: One is luck, “Yet, the essence lies in earlier life experiences”. Since luck is purely accidental, it cannot be a value to

strive for. The value of the setting therefore is to learn from experiences in order to become more resilient against later threats.

Martijn very clearly says that earlier life experiences helped him within the negative settings. He also thoroughly describes the experience that helped him and explains what he learned from it, namely to distinguish “the important from the less important”. This indicates a quite strong evaluation.

Martijn can be seen as a moral agent in learning from experiences, because he describes how this happened once. But although he is quite specific about the situation from which he learned, and also says what he learned, he does not describe the experience of learning as such. Also, the values that he actually learned take a much more central position in the letter than the value of learning. Those are the values of the act and the means. In comparison to them, the value of the setting is less strongly evaluated and experienced.

Purpose. Martijn derives his purpose from the threatening setting. The first big threat of sickness and death leads to the aim of doing that what’s important, which is care for family: “It has been our leading motive. Everything else is vanity.” Implicitly he seems to express the value not to capitulate in the face of death. The second big threat of violence and greed leads him to defending himself, but thereby keeping “dignity” to have something to pass on to his grandchildren. In both cases, the purpose lies in the refusal to let him get carried away by a big threat, be it by anxiety of death, threat of cruelty or scarcity of goods.

The value of the purpose is to perpetuate his character, his moral agency in a world which facilitates violence and selfishness. It means resisting the dictate of an immoral situation, remembering one’s own values and living according to them.

The value comes forth most strongly in the question “What has prevented that we were carried away in the aggression and greed of that time?”. It implicates that it is a goal not to become what the time suggests. Also the statement “I have kept my dignity” implies that he finds it very important to keep his moral agency.

The quote also states, that Martijn has fulfilled his value of keeping his character upright. Since statements like these appear all over the letter, including detailed information about situations in which he kept his character in spite of threats, the experience of being a moral agent seems to be very high. To be added, all threats that endanger this purpose arise outside him, from the setting. Thus, even acts that might seem immoral at first sight (as taking part in a fight) cannot lead to the conclusion of an immoral character, because it was the

setting which forced the character to act in this way (“We withdrew from the fights but had to defend ourselves sometimes. Terrible”).

Means. The means in which helped Martijn to perpetuate his character is that which he learned from being confronted with death: “It made us try to differentiate the important from the less important.”

To distinguish the important from the less important is also the value of this element. It comprises the strive to identify one’s true values within all one could, intends to or ought to do. Thereby, this value, in the way Martijn himself formulated it, is almost a definition of moral agency: making qualitative distinctions and acting according to it.

The clear words in which he formulates this value indicate strong evaluation. He even mentions himself, that he made this value explicit: “It made us try to differentiate the important from the less important. Nienke and I have formulated this explicitly.”

Martijn also says, what it was that Nienke and he identified as the most important motive, namely care for the family. This shows that they achieved this value. The evaluation “Everything else is vanity” furthermore displays that he feels convinced of this motive and thereby reveals experience within the situation. In the further course of the letter, he repeatedly seems to experience moral agency in determining what is important. For example he seems to implicate that it is more important not to steal than to have more than “the minimum of food”.

Breach. On the one side of the breach stands the agent who defines himself in relation to his family for whom he wants to care and whose value further is to have a clean consciousness (being able to look into the mirror). In short, being a moral agent is of central importance to him. On the other side is the setting in which the agent lives during the years of the 20s and 30s. This setting is characterized by violence and greed. The fights lead to the need of fleeing and defending oneself and a scarcity of food almost leads to the need to steal. Thus the setting urges the agent to use violence (in defence), which contradicts his character. This threatening setting defines his purpose as a reaction, which is to resist in the face of an immoral setting and to preserve his moral agency. He finds a way to cope with the conflict by his acts, in that he tries to evade the fights and never starts them.

Conclusion about Moral agency. Evaluation of the agent’s values is eminently strong in this storyline. The agent formulates most of his values very clearly. He expresses their importance for him and even explicitly creates sort of a hierarchy of values by marking one of them as his “leading motive”.

Experience of his values is high as well. Against some obstacles, the agent has achieved his values almost without compromises. The possible self describes this by telling about different phases of his life in which he acted morally. Experience thus comes forth through these specific events, but also on an emotional level: He experiences how it feels like to have preserved his values throughout his life. This appears as satisfaction about having fulfilled moral agency in general and thereby exceeds the experience of moral agency within single situations.

Concluding, this type of a moral agent has reached almost full moral agency. The possible self is characterized by high achievement of the agent's values. In a part of the storyline, he describes the process of how he has held up his values all throughout his life and looks back to specific experiences of acting morally. In another part, he stays purely in the time of writing the letter, in which his identity is characterized by being a moral agent. He experiences how it feels like to be in this state. In addition, he reflects on his values through strong evaluation through all of the storyline. Summarized, this type reaches the state of being a moral agent through reflecting on the values that he preserved by acting morally within specific, experienced situations.

Conclusion: Locating Types of Moral Agency in Possible Selves

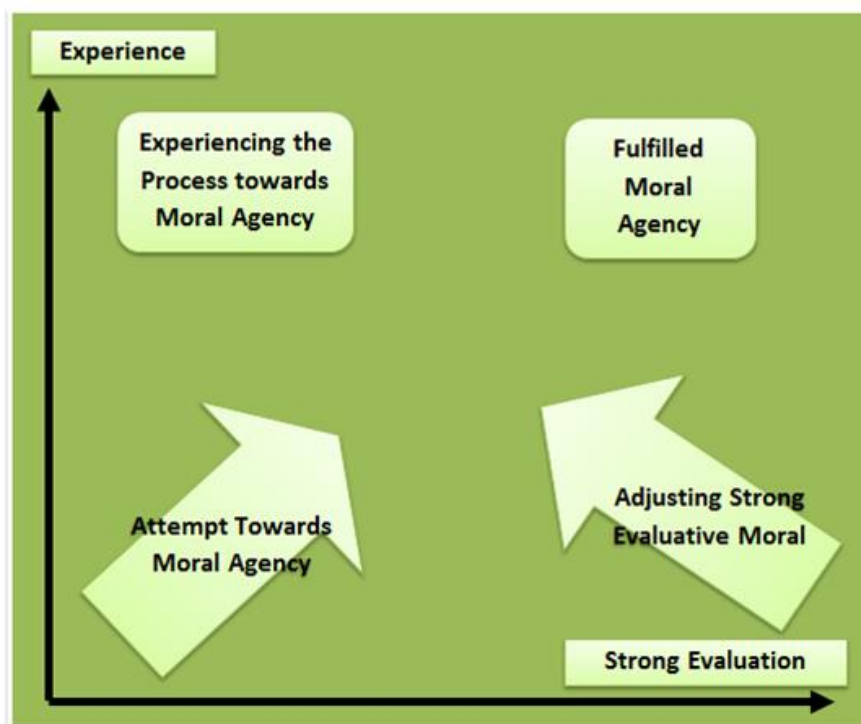
In exploring the research question through storyline analysis of letters from the future, I identified four types of moral agency in possible selves. These types differ with respect to their degree of meeting Taylor's strong evaluative and the narrative experience concept of moral agency. Although possible selves of all types showed both components at least in some of their values, they came to the fore to different degrees. Type 1 (*attempt towards moral agency*) shows relatively low degrees of both components. Type 2 (*adjusting strong evaluative moral agency*) has high strong evaluation and low experience. In contrast, type 3 (*experiencing the process towards moral agency*) exerts high degrees of experience but little strong evaluation. Finally, type 4 (*fulfilled moral agency*) shows high degrees of both components. While the types 1 and 2, which are low in experience, express a need for moral agency, those with high degrees of experience (types 3 and 4) indicate no such need. In both cases, this seems to be independent of the degree of strong evaluation. See figure 2 for an overview of the types of moral agency, which will be described in more detail in the following.

Type 1. Attempt towards Moral Agency. This type contains two agents, who are situated in the present and futured present. While the present agent shows neither strong

evaluation nor experience, the future agent strongly evaluates some values. She also has an experience of being a moral agent, although this experience is limited and not act-related. While the future agent is presented as morally mature, she has not reached full moral agency according to this study's definition. Neither Taylor's nor the narrative concept of moral agency is fully met. Also, the possible self expresses suffering from a lack of moral agency. It appears as if the future agent does not use strong evaluation and experience for its own sake, but in order to self-support the present agent in attempting to achieve more moral agency. It might be speculated whether this retrospective orientation prevents full experience. Making the connection to Taylor's theory of a search for moral agency, this type has a need for moral agency and attempts coming closer to it.

Type 2. Adjusting Strong Evaluative Moral Agency. This type contains one agent, who echoes thoughts of his former self and the addressee but is also situated herself in the futured present. The echoed thinker engages in an abundance of very abstract strong evaluation, which is accompanied by expressions of lacking moral agency. Within the futured present, strong evaluation has been adjusted. It is still present, but less abstract and accompanied by being-related experience, while experienced action is absent. This possible self therefore fulfils Taylor's but not the narrative account of moral agency. According to the

Figure 2. *Positioning types of moral agency on the dimensions of experience and strong evaluation of values*



present study's definition, she has incomplete moral agency. This type explicitly and intensely feels the lack of guidance through a moral framework. Total helplessness is experienced in front of an overwhelming need to be more morally agentic without knowing how. While one-sided, intensive strong evaluation appears to amplify the problem, reducing it and adding limited experience seems to promote more complete moral agency. A need for moral agency is central in this possible self, who makes an effort of becoming more morally agentic.

Type 3. Experiencing the Process towards Moral Agency. This type contains one agent who is situated in the futured present and from there also looks back to the futured past and plans the futured future. Despite high act-related experience, he has not achieved his ideal of some values yet, resulting in medium being-related experience. Therefore, he seems to find himself in the process of becoming a moral agent. Further, strong evaluation is relatively low. Type 3 thus meets the narrative, but not Taylor's concept of moral agency. Although his moral agency thus is incomplete according to the present study's definition, this possible self expresses no lack of moral agency. He seems self-confident about reaching his ideals and shows no need for moral orientation. He appears not to be searching moral agency.

Type 4. Fulfilled Moral Agency. This type contains one agent who is situated in the futured present and mainly looks back to the past and futured past. He has high degrees of strong evaluation and experience, in both the act- and being-related way. Consequently, he has full moral agency according to the present study's definition, in the sense of both Taylor's and the narrative view on moral agency. This possible self appears able to meet moral challenges by acting according to clearly defined values, resulting in a future agent who experiences being a moral agent. Therefore, this type neither does engage in a search for moral agency, nor does he express any need for such a search.

Discussion

Discussion of Moral Agency

Following Taylor's (1989) claim that values are part of the self and the assumption that this would also come forth in narrative futuring, the present study aimed to explore the moral dimension of possible selves. The future narratives that were examined contain many value-related expressions. Not only do the possible selves implicitly and explicitly express values. Some of the storylines even turn around the question of moral agency, by containing moral agency as an explicit value (letter 4) or expressing the lack of (moral) agency through the breach (letters 1, 2 and 4). Possible selves appear to evaluate and/or experience their

agent, act, setting, purpose, means and breach in the context of their values. As a first conclusion, I carefully interpret these findings as supporting Taylor's (1989) assumption that values are part of the self. As a second conclusion, I want to suggest, that values might be central also to narrative future identity. Future research should therefore take into account the moral dimension when analysing possible selves.

It may be discussed whether the expressed need for more moral agency by some of the types mirrors what Taylor (1989) pictured as a fading moral framework. May they feel a lack of moral agency because society provides less guidance in making morally relevant decisions today than before the onset of enlightenment? Clearly, this is a speculative question, which could hardly be answered by empirical psychological research. It's answering might have to be left for philosophers. However, it can be stated that the need for moral agency which is expressed by type 1 and 2 appears to mirror a search for moral agency. They seem to be striving towards moral agency, making efforts of adjusting their levels of strong evaluation and experience. Type 3 and 4 on the other hand do not seem to express such a search. Whether this is an incidence or a pattern may be explored by following research.

The present study further aimed to contribute to developing the concept of moral agency by exploring whether Taylor's reflective and the narrative experience-approach to moral agency appear to be useful in combination. The findings suggest that neither Taylor's nor the narrative approach is sufficient on itself to examine moral agency in future narratives. Rather, they complement each other: On the one hand, strong evaluation needs experience, because moral agents are assumed to strongly evaluate their values in the context of experienced events. A possible self who evaluates values without experiencing them may be a moral theorist, but not a moral agent. On the other hand, experience needs strong evaluation in order to be a sign for moral agency: acting according to a value by chance does not indicate moral agency as defined by Taylor. Rather, the act needs to be done with the aim of meeting a value, which has been strongly evaluated as important for the actor before in order to reach complete moral agency.

Type 4 is a moral agent in this way. The finding that he does not search for moral agency is consistent with the study's assumption, that moral agency is fulfilled when both strong evaluation and experience of values are present. It indicates that the two components are sufficient conditions for moral agency to be met. However, this does not prove both components to be necessary for having moral agency. Indeed, type 3 poses question marks about this. This type shows no sign of searching for moral agency, although he hardly engages in any strong evaluation. Similarly, the two types which are low in experience are

both found searching for moral agency, although they engage in different degrees of strong evaluation. In fact, the very abstract and intensive strong evaluation of type 2 is even accompanied by particular strong expressions of a lack of moral agency. Taken together, this challenges the assumption that strong evaluation really is a central way in which people deal with the fading moral framework. Seemingly, it at least does not appear to determine whether possible selves are on a search for moral agency or not. However, replication studies with bigger samples are needed in order to further explore whether this is a coincidental finding or a recurring phenomenon.

The present study is just a first exploration of moral agency in possible selves and might neither have identified all types nor the full complexity of the types. A first limit lies in the small amount of letters from the future which were analysed. The four types were found within letters that displayed relatively extreme degrees of strong evaluation and experience in the initial categorization during the selection process. Due to the restricted scope of this study, letters with medium degrees of the components were left out and a total of only 4 letters was analysed. Therefore, the present study should not be seen as exhaustive, because more types of moral agency might exist than were found. Here again, replication studies with a bigger sample are needed in order to find more types.

Moreover, the types might be more complex than my descriptions suggest. A limit which was encountered during data analysis concerns the way in which experience has been operationalized. Acting according to values on the one hand and being someone who has achieved values on the other hand have both been categorized under the title of experience. During storyline analysis however, the distinct quality of both sorts of experience became obvious. Even more striking, the two did seldom appear together. Types 1, 2 and 3 show mainly one of the aspects, while type 4 shows both. I want to suggest that although both act- and being-related experience are related to experience, they may actually be two different phenomena. Act-related experience may include experience of acting in concrete morally relevant situations. It should be determined independently of the agent's success in acting *in accordance* with the value. Being-related experience may address the agent's fulfilment of values and whether he pictures himself as having achieved moral agency. Because of this potential difference, I want to suggest that handling act- and being-related experience as two variables instead of aspects of one variable may allow for a more specific definition of types of moral agency. Replication studies should therefore also examine the role of act- and being-related experience in order to validate the types as they are defined now or develop a more specific definition, if this is found to be useful.

Another way in which types of moral agency might be more complex than assessed so far is the form of the future narrative. More specifically, the form differs with regard to the temporal orientation, coherence and development of the possible self. All types contain several temporal orientations, narrating about the past, present, futured past, futured present and even the futured future at different points of the letter. Type 3 and 4 nevertheless contain one rather coherent agent: the selves of the different times seem to integrate into one agent. In contrast, type 1 and 2 make a sharp distinction between the self in the present and futured present. Although they belong to the same person, they appear as two distinct agents, who moreover differ strongly with regard to moral agency. In spite of that, they were ascribed to only one type of moral agency, with the reason that both agents belong to the same possible self. The result is that type 1 and 2 by definition contain a development from less to more moral agency. From this the question arises, whether the coherence, development and temporal orientation of the possible self are simply questions of the form through which moral agency is expressed. In this case, they would not determine the type of moral agency and should be excluded from the definitions. I want to argue, however, that they are necessary variables in a typology of moral agency, if one aims to do justice to the narrative nature of moral agency (Pasupathi & Wainryb, 2010) and possible selves (Erikson, 2007). As narrative identity is dynamic and multifaceted, it is logical that this is expressed in future narratives and found back in single possible selves and their type of moral agency as well. Therefore I propose that types of moral agency in possible selves might differ by definition not only in strong evaluation and experience, but also in development, coherence and temporal orientation. To investigate this suggestion, future research should examine whether these variables appear in patterns in relation with particular types.

Implications

A methodological aim with regard to possible selves was to implement Erikson's (2007) specific definition of that concept. Both data collection through letters from the future and data analysis through storyline analysis allowed for this aim to be met. Firstly, they are narrative means and therefore do justice to the narrative nature of possible selves, which Erikson suggested. For example, extended storyline analyses allowed examining moral agency within the logic of the narrative. It was investigated how the narrator presents his moral agency rather than how a third party would judge it from her own moral framework. Secondly, they promoted experience of the possible selves. For instance, the instruction of letters from the future asks to "vividly imagine a particular situation" (Sools & Mooren,

2012). Furthermore, storyline analysis is a holistic approach that regards all the elements which the possible self experiences within the narrative. Therefore, storyline analysis is also not restricted to a certain quality of the possible self, which is a third demand of Erikson (2007). Letters from the future allow for all kinds of possible selves, as well, with the only restriction, that the future situation should be positively evaluated. Although this may have practical use, it weakens the external validity of this study, because its findings cannot readily be generalized to possible selves with potential negative evaluation.

Another limit of the instrument of letters from the future concerns internal validity. Since the letters are limited to 400 words, the possible self which the narrator has in mind may be much more complex than the one he is expected to write down. For instance, the participant may write down less strong evaluation and experience of values than he actually would like to. As a consequence, the letter may display the narrative incompletely, leading to invalid conclusions about moral agency.

Furthermore, the study has limited reliability. Although former studies demonstrated that deriving types from letters from the future can reach high inter-rater reliability (Leussink, 2013; Sools, Tromp, & Mooren, 2014), inter-rater reliability was not measured within this study. However, a high transparency is reached through displaying the data analysis in detail and providing the analysed letters, which allows for replication of the study.

Besides the presented theoretical and methodological gains and limits, the present study also has a potential use for psychotherapeutic practice. It made an explorative starting point of investigating the relation between moral agency and narrative futuring. Within Acceptance and Commitment Therapy (ACT) Hayes, Luoma, Bond, Masuda and Lillis (2006) identified the two components of having a clear moral framework and living according to it as psychological processes that influence psychological functioning and wellbeing. These components seem to match strong evaluation and experience of values. If future research should support the present finding that letters from the future contain both components, the letters may be considered of use within ACT. To inspect this possibility, future research may for instance investigate whether specific instructions of letters from the future that promote writing about evaluation and experience of values promote psychological functioning.

Final Remarks

As the moral framework of western societies faded, the need for moral agency rose. While hindsight narratives are part of moral development, the present study demonstrates, that narrative futuring is another promising way of expressing moral agency and the lack thereof.

MORAL AGENCY IN POSSIBLE SELVES

Full moral agency seems to contain both strong evaluation and experience of values. However, questions remain about the precise role of strong evaluation and the form that narratives are given. It is a long way to go, yet proceeding research of the moral dimension in future narratives may finally even open the doors not only to identifying moral agency, but even to reduce the search for moral agency through narrative futuring.

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Appendix

Letter from the future: Example type 1

Thuis - in mijn huidige kamer, in 2013

Hoi huidige mezelf

Wat maak je je toch druk! Natuurlijk kun je niet altijd goed in je vel zitten, maar je zorgen maken over de toekomst heeft geen zin. Weet je waarom niet? Omdat de toekomst toch wel komt en brengt wat je nodig blijkt te hebben. Er zijn zo veel keuzes dat je nu de neiging hebt om niets te kiezen. Geloof mij: alle keuzes zijn mooi. Je moet alleen wel durven kiezen, anders kom je niet verder. Ik heb gekozen. Misschien achteraf voor de logische weg, de makkelijke weg, maar ik heb gekozen. Gekozen om op te staan, om te leren, om te presteren, om te genieten. Ik heb vakantiebestemmingen gekozen, gekozen wat we gingen eten vanavond en wat we dit weekend gaan doen. Wanneer je kiest wordt alles veel makkelijker, terwijl wàt je kiest eigenlijk niet zoveel uit maakt.

Het leven lijkt soms zo moeilijk, onoverzichtelijk. Dat is helemaal niet zo - omdat je het zelf tot een chaos maakt lijkt het maar zo. Het leven is leuk, wanneer je zorgt dat het leuk is. Je bent namelijk zelf degene die het kuiltje vult met jus, die de ballonnen opblaast, die tompoucen uitdeelt en die bellen blaast uit het raam naar onwetende voorbijgangers. Kop op en doe je best - het leven is zo moeilijk niet! Je zult zien: zolang je je bed uitklimt en dingen doet komt alles goed.

Met een grote groet van je toekomstige mezelf

Letter from the future: Example type 2

9-12-2021 op een idyllisch stukje platteland in Nederland

Aan iedereen die de toekomst somber inziet

Wat doe je als je verstrikt raakt in je problemen en je door één gedachte zo tot waanzin wordt gedreven dat zelfs liefde plaats maakt voor haat? Hoe moet je om gaan met een idee dat je in staat maakt dingen te doen waar je zelf uiteindelijk de macht over verliest. Dingen die je drijven tot het uiterste en als je dat bereikt hebt, zelfs die grens laten overgaan. Ik ontken niet dat er dingen zijn die ons onbekend lijken van onszelf en waar we geen invloed op uit kunnen oefenen.

Maar zijn we dan niet zelf de veroorzakers van onze eigen gedachten en ideeën? Zijn we niet zelf de veroorzakers van onze eigen problemen? Vertrouwen we niet te veel op anderen in de hoop dat het goed komt? Kan je daarmee wel aan je lot ontkomen? Hoe goed of hoe kwaad het ook is, komt alles niet uiteindelijk op hetzelfde neer? Of is het zo dat wanneer alles anders was gelopen ik nooit in een depressie was geraakt?

Het leven is voor mij nog steeds één groot raadsel. Eén grote wirwar van geheimen en vragen waar niet altijd een houvast in is te vinden.

Toch ben ik er uitgekomen. Niet omdat ik alles probeerde te ontwarren, maar juist omdat ik alles los liet. Ik vond uit dat tevergeefs zoeken naar verheldering zorgt voor verstikking. Verstikking in je eigen gedachten, die je tot waanzin drijven en je de controle over jezelf laten verliezen.

Ik schrijf dit om iedereen eraan te herinneren waarom ik er voor koos om te blijven leven.

Liefde.

En dat kan van alles zijn, want liefde omvat alles. Liefde uit zich in de kleinste dingen, maar dat moet je wel willen zien. Ik hoef niemand van jullie te vertellen hoe je het kan vinden. Ik denk dat je dat zelf het beste weet. Maar vergeet daarbij niet dat het bij jezelf begint. Ontdek en onthoud wie je bent. Sta open voor alles wat er op je af komt en accepteer de dingen zoals ze komen en gaan.

Maar blijf vooral eerlijk. Eerlijk, zowel tegenover jezelf als tegenover anderen. Loop niet weg, want het geluk is dichtbij.

Liefs, Nina

Letter from the future: Example type 3

Het is zover

Eindelijk het is zo ver. We gaan weer terug naar Nederland. Het waren een 6 ongelovelijke jaren. De dag dat ik begon te werken bij dit bedrijf tot aan nu. Maar het is ons gelukt we hebben het bedrijf laten groeien en we zijn bekend in verschillende landen. Ik heb samen met mijn collega's het bedrijf laten groeien van 200 medewerkers naar 500 medewerkers. We hebben het twee weken geleden verkocht en we zijn nu onderdeel van een multinational. We hebben er goed geld voor gekregen. De doelstelling van 100 miljoen hebben niet gehaald maar we zijn wel heel dicht bij gekomen. Ik heb mijn opties laten uitbetalen. Anne is al eerder naar huis gegaan en is al druk op zoek naar een nieuwe woningen voor ons. We willen graag in de buurt van Eemnes/Laren wonen. We zouden graag een oud huis willen met veel ruimte maar wel eentje die alle luxe heeft. We hebben besloten om het wat rustiger aan te gaan doen. Het zijn zware jaren geweest maar wat hebben we het goed voor elkaar. Wellicht maar eens denken om te gaan trouwen of misschien wel kinderen. Maar een ding is zeker ik ga niet meer zo veel werken als ik al die jaren heb gedaan.

Ik ben stiekem al begonnen met het plannen van onze wereldreis, Anne die wil nog niet echt maar wacht maar tot ze de boot ziet waarmee we de wereld over varen, we gaan alles zien maar we doen het waarschijnlijk wel in etappes want Anne wil niet te lang op een boot blijven.

Anne is ook onderdeel van dit succes!!!!

Letter from the future: Example type 4

Krakau, 25 november 2054

Lieve kleinkinderen,

Ik schrijf deze brief omdat het binnenkort voor mij stopt. Het wordt ook wel tijd. In deze brief vertel ik jullie wat het leven me in deze 94 jaar gebracht heeft én wat ik jullie nalaat.

Hoe zijn we de jaren 20 en 30 doorgekomen? Wat heeft voorkomen dat we zijn meegesleurd in de agressie en hebzucht van die tijd?

Er zijn verschillende redenen: geluk is er in ieder geval één van. We konden net steeds het minimum aan voedsel vinden om in leven te blijven. De noodzaak om tot roven over te gaan bleef ons bespaard. De essentie echter ligt in eerdere levenservaringen. 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. Maar dat deed hij niet, hij scharrelde wat rond en liep weg. We hebben daarna altijd geweten dat hij op ieder moment van de dag binnen kon stappen, tijdens alles wat we deden. Het maakte dat we het belangrijke van het minder belangrijke hebben geprobeerd te scheiden. Nienke en ik hebben dat expliciet geformuleerd.

Er zijn drie dingen die er echt toe doen: goed voor onze ouders zorgen, goed voor elkaar zorgen en goed voor onze kinderen zorgen.

Het is ons leidmotief geweest. Al het andere is ijdelheid.

Na de grote geldontwaarding begon het plunderen. De agenten en de militairen gebruikten de wapens voor eigen doelen, we moesten ons huis verlaten en trokken met jullie ouders uit de steden waar het allemaal gebeurde. Uiteindelijk zijn we in Krakau, Polen, jullie geboorteland terecht gekomen. We hebben ons onttrokken aan de gevechten maar moesten ons soms verdedigen. Verschrikkelijk. Het kostte het leven van jullie vaders. Die pijn is er altijd nog. Maar we zijn nooit echt zelf losgeslagen, hebben altijd onze waardigheid behouden. Dat hebben we nooit echt verloren.

Ik heb Nienke en jullie ouders overleefd. Terwijl ik het eerst had moeten gaan, ben ik de laatste! En als ik ga, wat erven jullie dan? Helaas geen geld of ander bezit, ik vind dat erg, ik zie dat jullie dat missen. Echter, ik kan in de spiegel kijken. Ik heb mijn waardigheid behouden. Dat is wat ik jullie nalaat.

Martijn