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THE EXISTENTIAL DIMENSION OF NARRATIVE FUTURING

- A Replication and Expansion of Velthuis' Typology of Letters from the Future

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ABSTRACT

Aim: The purpose of this study was to do further research on the types of future narration in the letters from the future, based on Grete Velthuis' study '*Assessing the Existential Dimension in Narrative futuring: Development of a Working Model'*. Narrative futuring is described as the ability to create a future based on life stories (Sools et al, 2013). The existential dimension therein establishes a major foundation for our sense of being human and deals with themes like death, freedom, and meaning as well as responsibility. It is expected that the reflective process from writing a narrative will possibly provoke existential questions about the future. Different types of future letters are indicative of the presence of existential themes. The present study aims to validate the classification of letter types.

Method: First, 50 letters from the future (a letter based on an imagined situation in the future to oneself or others originating from that future point in time) were analyzed by two independent researchers, based on the six types of letters (Continuous Idealistic Future, Discontinuous Idealistic Future, Choice and Consequences, Problem and Solution, New Start and Advice). Then the inter-rater-reliability was measured with the statistical program SPSS. Afterwards, the code system for letter types was modified to remove possible redundancies and extended to cover different types of letters. Finally, based on the new code system, a second analysis, now using a larger sample of 293 letters, was conducted.

Results: The *inter-rater-analysis* shows that Cohen's Kappa has a value of 0,463 ($p<0.0001$), indicating a moderate correlation and possibility for improvement in the coding scheme. Three problems were encountered. First, Velthuis' description of two types of letters causes possible redundancy and is not sufficiently exact. Second, two further types of letters were found and described in this sample. Third, more than one type of letter was sometimes found within the same letter. Therefore, the dominant letter type as well as other types fitting the individual letters were taken into account and documented. The analysis of the validation sample has shown that the distribution of types is different from Velthuis' findings. About 1/3 of the letters (33,4%) contain more than one type of letter. Moreover, the type of letter 'Advice' was often found within another type of letter (61 times), but rarely as the dominant type (33 times). The new letter types were not often found (2,0% and 2,4%).

Conclusion*:* The main conclusion that can be drawn from the present study is that the letter types that are related to existential themes can be found in the letters from the future. The code system given by Velthuis is an important basic work. This study, however, has

revealed some overlap between letter types as well as two further letter types. Furthermore, by categorizing a letter by only the dominant type, a lot of existential information is lost. Further research should clarify whether the letter types indeed reveal indications of existential questions. For therapy in particular, writing a letter from the future may make existential themes discussable.

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1. INTRODUCTION

Stories have always played a crucial role in society. Well known stories can be found in myth, religion and philosophy. Even before antiquity, stories have always been used to transport, to teach and to conserve any kind of knowledge. Experience that is passed on via stories does not have to be re-experienced by every generation. Through stories, younger generations can learn from the experience of older generations. Different examples, such as the Odyssey by Homer, are well known. Yet also, religious examples such as the Bible contain stories conveying important spiritual and moral messages. Their meaning changes from epoch to epoch and from culture to culture. Nonetheless some stories have survived thousands of years and are still well known today. Generations not only learn through large, old stories such as the Odyssey, but also small, personal stories, conveying personal experience.

Within the present study further research is done on the types of narration within narrative futuring, based on Grete Velthuis' study '*Assessing the Existential Dimension in Narrative futuring: Development of a Working Model'*. Narrative futuring is described as the ability to create a future based on life stories (Sools et al, 2013). The existential themes establish a major foundation for our sense of being human and deal with themes like death, freedom and meaning as well as responsibility.

1.1 Goal of the Present Study

During the last decades, narratives have received growing attention in science, especially within sociology, history and philosophy (Bohlmeijer, Mies and Westerhof, 2007). Within psychological science, the field of narrative psychology covers psychological aspects of both stories and storytelling as a possibility to gain insights into how people attribute meaning to their lives. In addition, Yalom demonstrates within his textbook "Existential Psychotherapy" (1980) the importance of the existential themes for every human. Within existential psychology the existence of the human being based on themes like fear, death and freedom as

well as responsibility is researched. Yet asking directly for existential topics could provoke fears and thus resistance (Yalom, 1980).

The narrative approach gives the possibility to study the existential dimension without asking directly. Researching the existential dimension within narrative futuring, creating a future based on life stories, seems proper to access the existential dimension without asking directly. Thus, narrative futuring and its existential dimension are an important frontier for modern psychological research.

McAdams (2011) indicates that narratives feature different aspects of human identity. That most likely also includes existential dimension as an important part shaping a person's identity and personal values. Sugiman et al. (2008) demonstrate the importance of the narrative approach when they state that every adequate study of humans must include the narrative approach. The individual narratives acquired from narrative futuring might offer a suitable way of researching existential dimension and provide the opportunity to gain insights on existential themes.

Narrative futuring using letters from the future may be an important tool in researching fundamental psychological topics such as resilience, identity or existential concerns. Narrative futuring has documented relations both with resilience and general psychological wellbeing (Velthuis, 2014; Chiu, 2012; King, 2001). A negative imagination of the future seems to be associated with depression (Melges, 1982). It is possible that those relations can be explained by a shift towards a more existential, "ontogenetic" view on life.

Knowledge on the presence of existential topics within narrative futuring is also relevant on a clinical level. McLeod (1997, p.52) discusses the relevance of narratives in psychotherapy. He states:

> It can be seen that, through the medium of this story, the therapist is being offered a great deal of information about the client. […] It is, in my view, one of the central tasks of therapy to *retrieve* the meaning implicit in the stories that clients (usually) and therapists (sometimes) tell.

Confrontation with existential issues can often represent an important turning point in therapy. Yet, asking directly for existential topics could provoke fears and thus resistance (Yalom, 1980). Therefore, different ways of approaching the existential dimension are required. Narrative themes that are closely linked to an existential mindset might be useful in

a therapeutic setting in order to provide a continuous sense of identity and assist in putting mundane issues aside and focus on the existential perspective, thereby enabling personal growth.

It is therefore essential to thoroughly research the types of future narration that might be indicative for the presence of existential issues in narrative futuring using letters from the future.

Up to now little research has been conducted on the existential dimension within narrative futuring. Grete Velthuis has done some basic research on the existential dimension within narrative futuring in her study *'Assessing the Existential Dimension in Narrative Futuring: Development of a Working Model'*. Velthuis developed a working model to narrative futuring within the letters from the future, a specific form of narration. Furthermore, in this working model, narrative futuring becomes linked with the four existential concerns – death, freedom, isolation and meaninglessness – as stated by Irvin Yalom (1980). Based on those findings further research is done within the present study on the existential dimension of narrative futuring.

1.2 Narrative Psychology and Narrative Futuring

Narrative psychology is a specific stance within modern psychology that is concerned with the storied nature of human conduct (Sabrin, 1986). Since the 1980s, narrative psychology has shifted increasingly towards a more scientific focus (Sools, 2010). In contrast to cognitive and behavioral psychology it has adopted different artistic elements, especially from literature. Narrative psychology focuses on the use of stories to create sense and meaning in people's lives.

Sense and meaning are created by the realization of individual experience. This is achieved through personal narration, thereby providing a continuous sense of self. Therefore, biographical narration is not only the mere reiteration of life events, but also the attempt of the narrator to create a coherent story in the present. In those narratives cultural norms and images, metaphors, and themes (McAdams, 2011) out of the social life are found that are also present within the many narratives they encounter in daily social life.

Varied research on narrative psychology has been conducted to date. Research has shown that different types of people create different types of narration. People scoring high on the trait neuroticism tend to construct life stories with a negative emotional tone. In contrast, people scoring high on agreeableness construct life stories that express themes of communion in their life narratives (McAdams et al., 2004; Raggatt, 2006a).

One possibility to look at how people create narratives is narrative futuring, which means to imagine the future and making this future explicit in a narrative way. Sools et al. (2013) describe **narrative futuring** as the ability to create a future based on stories. Wahle (2012) states that narrative futuring is a creative process which helps the participant to stimulate a reflection on his or her own life, thereby providing a narrative about how the future could possibly be like. Life stories help the participant to understand the world and give meaning to life (Sools et al., 2013). Sools et al. (2013) have shown four characteristics of narratives:

- Connect different events to a meaningful whole unit
- Articulate an experience in the frame of a bigger cultural story
- Give a description listeners can identify with
- Incite people's imagination and creativity

The ability to see oneself in future dimensions and situations is an integral part of psychological wellbeing and functioning (Sools et al, 2013). Other research has shown various positive relations of narrative futuring to psychological wellbeing and quality of life (Wahle 2012), healthiness (Sools et al, 2013), and optimism (Meevissen, Peters, & Alberts, 2011). An especially important fact is that narrative futuring and wellbeing are connected (Wahle, 2012). Furthermore, Bohlmeijer et al (2003) has shown that life reviews reduce depressive symptoms with older people. Research has shown a strong connection between meaning in life and emotional wellbeing (King et. al., 2006; Pinquart, 2002; Westerhof, Dittmann-Kohli and Thissen, 2001; Westerhof et. al., 2006; Zika and Chamberlain, 1992). However, further research is needed in order to validate these results for specific forms of future narration (Sools & Mooren, 2013).

The reflective process from the future self to now will possibly demonstrate one's mortality. Thus, it seems possible, that existential questions could be provoked through narrative futuring. Those existential questions could be: What is the meaning of my (future) life? Will I die? The following paragraph will give an introduction into this existential dimension, based on the famous existential psychiatrist and author Irvin Yalom.

1.3 Existential Dimension

Within existential psychology, the fundamental existence of human beings and thus themes like fear, death, freedom and responsibility are examined. The existential dimension establishes a major foundation for our sense of being human: Who am I? What is my purpose in life? Where is my existence directed to? What have I achieved in life so far? What is the meaning of others? Existential concerns can become an important focus of treatment (Yalom, 1980; Breitbart, 2002; Griffith and Gaby, 2005).

1.3.1 Yalom's Existential Concerns

Irvin Yalom analyzed the existence of human beings in his famous textbook ‚Existential Psychotherapy' (1980). He draws connections between the patients' symptoms and existential concerns. Yalom (1980) describes these existential concerns to be at the base of human existence. He identifies four primary existential concerns: death, freedom, isolation and meaninglessness.

Death is described as one of the most important facets of human existence – every human will encounter this issue. While the reality of death destroys us physically, the idea of death may save us, giving our life value and forcing us to face fundamental existential challenges that make living worthwhile. Yalom describes freedom as the absence of given and imposed structures on our inner realities, making it the personal responsibility of every human – everyone has to make his or her own decisions. The third existential concern, existential isolation, is described as an insurmountable gap between our inner life and the outside world – rendering us fundamentally alone. Meaninglessness – the fourth existential concern – describes the search for meaning in human life.

Yalom (1980) states that existential issues are generally found in combination, thus the issue of death is connected with the issue of life. Furthermore, May and Yalom (2000) indicate that a confrontation with these existential issues evokes intense anxiety and, in response, a defense mechanism is activated. If defense mechanisms arise by a direct question about existential issues it seems a good possibility to research the existential issues indirectly.

1.3.2 Introduction to Velthuis' Study - Outlining a Working Model on Existential Dimension

The explorative study '*Assessing the Existential Dimension in Narrative Futuring: Development of a Working Model*' by Grete Velthuis (2014) contributes to the narrative research program of the University of Twente by exploring the relation between narrative futuring and the existential concerns stated by Irvin Yalom. She explored whether the four existential concerns defined by Irvin Yalom (1980) could be found in the letters from the future. In order to do so, Velthuis developed a working model to differentiate types of narration within the letters from the future. Velthuis (2014, p.73) states, that "narrative futuring can indeed be used as an instrument to assess the existential dimension and to make existential themes discussable". She argues that "narratives are helpful in addressing meaning to life, they could function as 'carriers' of (bits of) existential information, and so support the process of finding existential meaning" (Velthuis, 2014, p.73). Velthuis states that the writing instructions of the letters from the future (see also appendix A) activate a reflective process. Thus, the participant starts to think about his or her past and future life. Within this process the participant is confronted with existential concerns. Velthuis states that this confrontation is written down in the letters from the future and thus could be scientifically investigated.

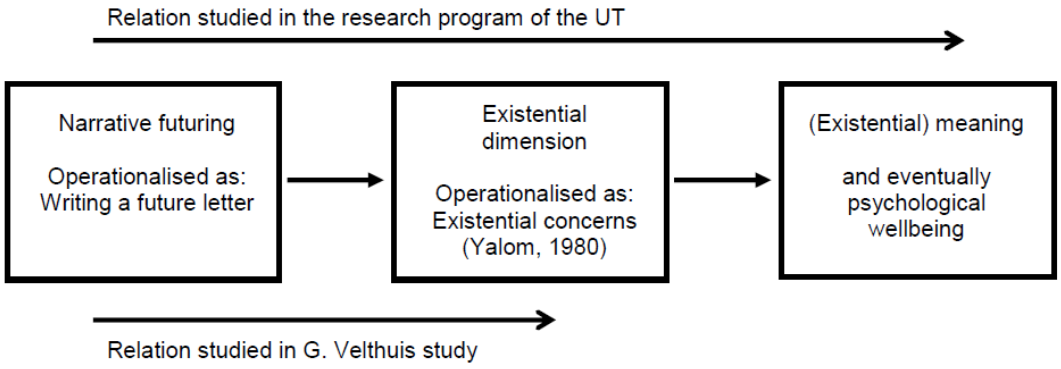

Figure 1: Model of relationship between central constructs and relations studied in the research program of the UT and in the present study (Velthuis, 2014).

To study the existential dimension within narrative futuring she developed a working model to the existential dimension of narrative futuring within the letters from the future (a specific form of narration). In the context of this working model, narrative futuring becomes linked with the four existential concerns stated by Irvin Yalom (1980). Thus, the relation between narrative futuring and existential meaning, as well as psychological wellbeing, could be analyzed (Figure 1).

To gain more knowledge about the existential concerns in narrative futuring, Velthuis developed two main-criteria, 'Presence of a Problem' and 'Position on a Time Dimension', with predictive value for finding existential concerns in the letters from the future. The 'Presence of a Problem' is described by Velthuis (2014, p.16) as "something of a struggle should be reflected in the letter because the concerns are essentially big problems of life that people have to deal with" and indicates the starting point for searching for existential concerns. The second criterion is 'Position on a Time Dimension'. The detected problem was marked on a time dimension based on the 'Scheme of time perspectives'. This scale shows the actuality of a given problem. When a problem is present and the time dimension indicates that it is an actual problem, Velthuis took this as an indication that an existential theme was present. She further compared every "promising problem" with the four existential concerns stated by Irvin Yalom to indicate 'Traces of Existential Concerns'. Independent from this procedure, Velthuis identified 'Six different Types of Letters' based on researching 100 letters from the future.

Type 1: Continuous Idealistic Future: The first type of letter, 'Continuous Idealistic Future', describes an individualistic future imagination of the writer. The main focus of the writer is his or her aims in life. The description between the actual present and imagined future is mostly superficial; problems and barriers are not mentioned. If barriers are mentioned, they are described superficially or as already solved in the meantime. Thus, a description of how these aims in life are achieved is generally not given. Existential issues, such as death or isolation, are rarely mentioned.

Type 2: Discontinuous Idealistic Future: The type of letter 'Discontinuous Idealistic Future' looks similar to letter type 1. While in letters of type 1 the writer describes his or her individualistic future on a personal level, the future in letters of type 2 is described for the world. Thus, this letter type describes a big change in the world. In this new, fictional world

only positive aspects are mentioned. A big change from the actual to the fictional world took place, possibly to evade a confrontation with existential issues in the present.

Type 3: Choice and Consequences: The letter type 'Choice and Consequences' mainly consists of a choice the writer of the letter has taken in his or her life. This choice is the main theme of this letter type. Often this choice describes a point of change in the life of the writer. The writer describes all elements of his choice (underlying issue, choice and consequence) in detail, feelings like fear are mostly also elaborated upon.

Type 4: Problem and Solution: The type of letter 'Problem and Solution' elaborates one specific issue that may have been solved in the time between the present and the letter or remains unsolved. This could be a present issue the writer has to deal with. It has a high relevance in the (current) life of the writer. Mostly, this issue is elaborated in depth: The writer's feelings are described. Furthermore, the given problem is solved in the letter.

Type 5: New Start: The type of letter called 'New Start' elaborates an event the writer often has little influence on, and describes the writer starting a new chapter in his or her life. This event takes place and the writer must handle the consequences.

Type 6: Advice: 'Advice' consists primarily of counseling from the imaginary future self to the actual self. Mostly, an issue from the actual present is elaborated and different advice is given. Often the imaginary future self tells the actual self that his or her choice is good, and motivates to go on.

Velthuis found a connection between the types of letters and the presence of an existential problem. The connection between the existential dimension and the types of letters is described as the following: Especially the types of letters 'Problem and Solution', 'New Start' and 'Advice' are associated with the presence of an existential concern. By contrast the types of letters 'Continuous Future', 'Discontinuous Future' and 'Choice and Consequence' do not often show the presence of an existential problem.

The main conclusion Velthuis draws from her study is that the results indicate a relation between the six types of letters and the presence of existential themes. These letter types thus give an indirect indication that an existential problem is present. This finding is important, because as already described asking directly for existential themes may provoke fears and thus in response defence mechanisms arise.

1.4 Research Questions

Grete Velthuis has done some exploratory research on the existential dimension within narrative futuring in her study *'Assessing the Existential Dimension in Narrative Futuring: Development of a Working Model'*. She showed that the letter types are an indirect indication of the presence of existential themes. However, beyond that, little research has been conducted on the existential dimension within narrative futuring.

Grete Velthuis' study is promising research providing a framework for those investigations, yet there are several limitations. However, up until now only one rater has reviewed the available material. It is therefore necessary to validate Velthuis' model of letter types by reviewing the letters from the future used in Velthuis' study and determining the inter-rater-reliability. Furthermore, it is important to study the validity of the distinctions between the letter types in a new sample.

The main goal of this paper is to research the different letter types, operationalized by the letters from the future and thereby to build on Grete Velthuis study '*Assessing the Existential Dimension in Narrative Futuring: Development of a Working Model,'* which provides the groundwork for this paper. The **research questions** of this study are:

Question 1: *What is the inter-rater-reliability of the coding scheme for the six different letter types?*

Question 2: *What problems are encountered in coding the letters?*

Question 3: *Can the letter types be validated in a new and larger sample?*

2. METHOD

The aim of this study was to validate Velthuis‘ code system and working model for types of letters that might be indicative for existential themes and further investigate the letter types in one specific form of narrative futuring, namely ‘letters from the future’. Originally the code system within the study ‘*Assessing the Existential Dimension in Narrative Futuring: Development of a Working Model*’ was constructed by one single rater. To study the reliability, more than one single rater has to apply a code system (McAdams, 2001b). Thus, within this study the original code system constructed by Grete Velthuis shall be used by a second observer on the same data. In order to do so, first 50 letters previously analyzed by Velthuis were reviewed and re-categorized using Velthuis’ code system. The problems encountered in the inter-rater-reliability test will be used to revise and improve the code system. Afterwards, in a qualitative iterative design, the code system will be further applied and improved using 250 new letters.

2.1 Data collection

2.1.1 Letters from the Future

This thesis is part of a broader ongoing **letters from the future** project, which started 2011 and where more than 600 letters are already collected online (www.utwente.nl/lifestorylab). During this project, participants recruited via the project’s website were asked to imagine a situation in the future and write a letter to themselves or others originating from that future point in time. Those letters were acquired via the project’s website. The participants were encouraged via advertisements on websites and in journals, and, for students at the University of Twente, credit points to write a future letter.

First, participants are asked to imagine a positive situation in the future and to provide some details on that situation. This is done in order to motivate participants to write a personal and emotional life story instead of an abstract recollection of facts when subsequently writing their letter from the future.

A '*letter from the future'* consists of three parts: 'Where and When', 'What' and 'To Whom'. The participants are asked to imagine themselves in the future (Where/When). After that they are asked to imagine that a few positive wishes, changes and dreams became true and to write a letter about this (What). This letter could be directed to the actual self or another person (To Whom). The complete instructions are shown in appendix A.

Afterwards, some information regarding their motivation for participating is collected. Lastly, participants answer a questionnaire on mental health (Mental Health Continuum Short Form, MHC-SF). The MHC-SF is a standardized and validated questionnaire for positive mental health including psychological, emotional and social dimensions. It takes into account the presence of positive feelings such as mental wellbeing and general psychological functioning (Lamers, Westerhof, Bohlmeijer, ten Klooster & Keyes, 2011). Participants are also asked for some sociodemographic information in order to better describe the study sample and evaluate the external validity of the research.

The letters from the future were used "to gain insight into the function of one particular narrative medium […] by studying the relationship between the content, the structure, form and audience of these letters with psychological well-being" (Sools and Mooren, 2012).

2.1.2 Participants

For this study, two datasets were used: The first dataset included the first 50 letters; 1 out of those 50 had missing demographic information. The second data set included these letters as well as the following 251 letters collected. Out of the 251 new letters, 8 letters were excluded, because they were double submissions, thus finally 293 letters were analyzed. 14 letters had missing demographic information. In *table 1* the two datasets are compared to show possible differences in participant's demographics.

Table 1.
Descriptive statistics for the first and second research sample

Descriptive	**First sample n=50**	**Second Sample n=293**
Sex		
Male	10 (20,4%)	89 (31,9%)
Female	39 (79,6%)	188 (67,4%)
No answer	0 (0%)	2 (0,7%)
Missing Value	1	14
Age in Years		
16-25	36 (73,5%)	173 (62%)
26-35	6 (12,3%)	25 (9,0%)
36-45	1 (2,0%)	6 (2,2%)
46-55	5 (10,2%)	47 (16,8%)
56-65	1 (2,0%)	22 (7,9%)
66-75	0 (0%)	4 (1,4%)
75 and older	0 (0%)	0 (0%)
No answer	0 (0%)	2 (0,7%)
Missing Value	1	14
Country of Birth		
Netherlands	33 (67,3%)	187 (67,0%)
Germany	16 (32,7%)	88 (31,5%)
Other	0 (0%)	3 (1,1%)
No Answer	0 (0%)	1 (0,4%)
Missing Value	1	14

A comparison of the two sample shows that in both studies most of the participants were Dutch and German females between 16 and 25 years. Within the second sample (N=293) more men and persons from 46 to 55 years have participated.

2.2 Analysis of the Letters from the Future

2.2.1 Comparing the Two Independent Ratings

First, the different types of letters stated by Grete Velthuis were read carefully. Then a summary of the different criteria per letter type was given in order to gain more detailed insight into the rating process. Afterwards, the first 50 letters were analyzed based on the given types of letters in a top-down process by an independent rater to analyze the inter-rater-reliability. To get a comparable result, all criteria for analyzing the letters given by Grete Velthuis were considered while rating the letters. The rating system and the description of the letters given in Grete Velthuis Study '*Assessing the Existential Dimension in Narrative Futuring: Development of a Working Model'* were used as a foundation.

First, every letter was read carefully and important content was outlined within two or three sentences. Those brief summaries were used to get more insight into the important themes of every letter. Second, the letter was analyzed regarding the criteria for every given type of letter. The relevant passages were marked and the type of letter was specified. Third, the dominant type of letter was outlined and the whole letter was labeled with this type of letter.

To analyze the inter-rater-reliability the statistic program IBM SPSS Statistics, short SPSS, was used. SPSS is a modular constructed toolkit to analyze statistic data. The method used for analysis was crosstabs with Cohens Kappa.

2.2.2 Coding Problems Encountered in Coding the Letters

After analyzing the inter-rater reliability a second important step is to evaluate the code system stated by Velthuis. Originally the code system was developed by only one person, thus it seems important to examine the code system by a second observer. Two different methods were used to indicate problems within the given code system by Velthuis. First, 50 letters were analyzed based on the given criteria. Second, a larger sample with 293 letters was analyzed. Based on the problems encountered a revised coding scheme was developed.

2.2.3 Analysis of a Larger Sample

Based on the revised code system the first 50 letters and 250 further letters were analyzed. Based on the iterative study design the revised coding scheme was used for the 293 letters to validate the coding scheme in a large sample.

3. RESULTS

3.1 Inter-rater Reliability

Table 2.

Descriptive statistics for the distribution of the different types of letter within the first sample as identified by two independent observers

Type of letter	**First Observer**	**Second Observer**
Type 1: Continuous Idealistic Future	24 (48%)	20 (40%)
Type 2: Discontinuous Idealistic Future	6 (12%)	6 (12%)
Type 3: Choice and Consequence	5 (10%)	6 (12%)
Type 4: Problem	6 (12%)	6 (12%)
Type 5: New Start	4 (8%)	3 (6%)
Type 6: Advice	5 (10%)	9 (18%)

The analysis of the first sample of 50 letters from the future previously analyzed by Velthuis showed that in fact all six types of letters described in Velthuis' code system were also found by the second observer within the sample (see *table 2*). The distribution of the letters across the categories was rather similar although type 1 (continuous idealistic future) was found somewhat less and type 6 (advice) somewhat more by the second observer.

To determine the inter-rater-reliability, the coding of the two observers were cross-tabulated (*table 3*). The analysis has shown an agreement within 30 letters. Thus, the first rater and the second rater rated 30 letters as belonging to the same type of letter (60% agreement). Again, code 6 (Advice) proved to be most problematic as it caused most deviations between both coders: 8 out of the 20 disagreements were the result of disagreements about code 6 (Advice).

Table 3.

Descriptive statistics Crosstab Analysis of the inter-rater-reliability – matching ratings are marked in bold

			Second Observer			
First Observer	**Type 1**	**Type 2**	**Type 3**	**Type 4**	**Type 5**	**Type 6**
Type 1	**17**	1	2	1	0	3
Type 2	0	**5**	1	0	0	0
Type 3	1	0	**2**	0	2	0
Type 4	0	0	1	**3**	1	1
Type 5	1	0	0	1	**0**	2
Type 6	1	0	0	1	0	**3**

In order to determine the inter-rater-reliability in a more detailed way, Cohens Kappa was determined. Cohens Kappa is a way of measuring conformity between two value sets taking into account the possibility of conformation by chance. Due to the reasonably small sample size (N=50) and the limited set of values (six different types of letters), this allows a deeper and more critical way of analyzing the inter-rater-reliability. Cohens Kappa has a value of 0,463 ($p<0.0001$), indicating a statistically significant result. According to Landis (1977), this value indicates a moderate degree of correlation between the two raters, further validating Velthuis' working model.

Based on these results, the **research question 1** could be answered: both raters found all letter types in the same sample with a rather comparable distribution. However, the intercoderreliability was only moderate. Code 6 (Advice) showed a difference in the distribution as well as a lack of agreement between both observers.

3.2 Coding Problems

When coding the first 50 letters, the second observer encountered a number of problems while applying the coding scheme. First, by analyzing the six different types of letters it was found that, all types are found within the large sample. Besides, the description of every type of letter is fitting and the described types of letters are based on distinct and reproducible characteristics found within the sample. A third problem was found by analyzing Continuous Idealistic Future and Discontinuous Idealistic Future. It was found that the names of both

categories are misleading. Continuous Idealistic Future is described as a „future in which goals are achieved and dreams have come true“ (Velthuis, 2014, p.21). In contrast to that, Discontinuous Idealistic Future is described to „outline a life in a world that is different from life in the present world” (Velthuis, 2014, p.22). Velthuis (2014) describes the difference as follows: “[…] letters in this [Discontinuous Idealistic Future] category outline a life in a world that is different from life in the present world. […] Often the atmosphere of these letters is somewhat fairy tale or science fiction-like.” Thus, within the description of the letters no hint for “continuous” or “discontinuous” was found and the names seem to be misleading.

Then, the term idealistic was analyzed. Grete Velthuis (2014) describes Continuous Idealistic Future as “…Typically the writer has succeeded in life: a study has successfully been finished, the writer found a satisfying job and lives with a loving husband and healthy kids in a beautiful home, etc. But also a specific success can be central in the letters like passing an examination.” This description directs toward a positive future, but there are not hints for a real idealistic world-view. In fact, a rather positive world-view is described. Thus, the names of those types of letters are adjusted to those findings:

- Continuous Idealistic Future => Positive Future of the Individual
- Discontinuous Idealistic Future => Positive Future of the World

Second, it was sometimes difficult to choose only one code. Letters sometimes appeared to belong to more than one type. In the original study ‘*Assessing the Existential Dimension in Narrative Futuring: Development of a Working Model*’ (2014) by Grete Velthuis, the letters from the future are analyzed and categorized according to the dominant type of letter. However, the first exploratory screening of 10 letters conducted in the original study had already shown how difficult it is to choose one dominant type. Grete Velthuis (2014) writes: “Although the borders of these categories were often soft and the categories seemed to merge into one another, it remained possible to define the types and classify the letters in them.“

The analysis of the letters from the future by the second observer has shown that a couple of letters include aspects of several types. To show how one letter from the future could contain different types of letter, I will use letter *TB1_100* as an example. In the beginning of this letter, the author writes about her new life in Africa, which could be categorized as New Start:

"*… Dit was altijd mijn droom gewezen en nu is het reëel. Al steeds wilde ik ergens anders wonen, niet meer in Duitsland of Nederland, waar het hele leven een heel groot materiele waarde heeft. Daarom ben ik in mijn studietijd voor een practicum in Africa geweest, waar ik nu ook woon. Er heeft zich mijn zicht op het leven veranderd. …*"

Then, her imagined future life, thus the Continuous Idealistic Future**,** is described:

"Ik ben gelukkig getrouwd voor nu bijna 20 jaar, heb een leuke huis en twee gezonde kinderen die ik veel kan onderwijzen."

Finally, Advice is given to her actual self:

"*Met dit brief wilde ik je alleen laten weten dat je geen angst voor de toekomst hoeft te hebben. Je bent nu een volwassen, zelfbewust vrouw die op veel dingen tegengekomen is en nu trots en blij op zichzelf kan zijn. Blijf dus jezelf, luister naar jouw hart en realiseer jouw dromen."*

The third problem was found within the type of letter Advice. The second observer analysis has shown a deviation of 10% in the frequency the type of letter Advice, this type of letter is now found more frequently than in the original study. An in-depth analysis has shown that only 14 letters are categorized with Advice as dominant type. However, Advice is found 14 further times in combination with another letter type.

To gain insight into this finding, two letters will be examined as an example. In the first letter (TB1_100) Advice is one important theme beside two further themes (New Start, Continuous Idealistic Future):

"*… Dit was altijd mijn droom gewezen en nu is het reëel. Al steeds wilde ik ergens anders wonen, niet meer in Duitsland of Nederland, waar het hele leven een heel groot materiele waarde heeft. Daarom ben ik in mijn studietijd voor een practicum in Africa geweest, waar ik nu ook woon. Er heeft zich mijn zicht op het leven veranderd.* [New Start] … *Ik ben gelukkig getrouwd voor nu bijna 20 jaar, heb een leuke huis en twee gezonde kinderen die ik veel kan onderwijzen.* [Continuous Idealistic Future]… *Met dit brief wilde ik je alleen laten weten dat je geen angst voor de toekomst hoeft te hebben. Je bent nu een volwassen, zelfbewust vrouw die op veel dingen tegengekomen is en nu*

trots en blij op zichzelf kan zijn. Blijf dus jezelf, luister naar jouw hart en realiseer jouw dromen.[Advice]*”.*

In contrast, Advice as a dominant type becomes apparent in the letter *TB1_103*:

“ ik zit op het moment in mijn nieuwe woning in Berlijn en dacht ik moet je nu echt een brief schrijven. Ik wil je alleen zeggen, dat al die zorgen, die je je over de toekomst gemakt heeft overbodig waren. Kijk, we zitten nu in onze 'dromwoning' met onze dromman en alles is meer dan goed. Jij heeft een job die je heel goed bevalt en ook goed geld om dat te kopen wat je wilt. Je maakt je veel te veel gedachten over te toekomst. Leef nu! Zij niet alijd zo kritiek met dat wat je heeft en wat je doet. Geniet liever daarvan! En als je dat doet, schrijf je in vijf jaren deze brief!”

Similar encouragement and counsel is found within the other letters from the future. Normally, such advice is found at the end of the letter.

Thus, depending on analyzing only the dominant type of letter or every type of letter the appearance of Advice differences enormously, because Advice often comes with another type of letter.

The fourth problem was, that the given letter types are not sufficient. The elaborated analysis of the types of letters has shown two more types of letters: *‘Negative Future of the Individual’* and ‘*Negative Future of the World’*. The following two paragraphs will give an in-depth description and an example of all eight letter types found in the letters from the future.

Type 7: Negative Future of the Individual: The type of letter ‘Negative Future of the Individual’ describes a realistic, personal future. This realistic future has a lot of negative aspects, for example illness or personal failure. This type describes opposite of Velthuis’ Continuous Idealistic Future. The letter *TB1_398* gives a good example of the letter type “Negative Future of the individual”:

“*Wie had dit vooraf kunnen bedenken. Alle drie onze dochters zijn geëmigreerd naar Australië. Hinke ging in 2008 met haar vriend naar Australië. In het begin leek het als ze na ongeveer 5 jaren terug zouden komen. Maar toen kwam de crisis. Er was in Nederland bijna geen werk te vinden en daar hadden ze allebei een goede baan. Toen het eerste kleinkind daar werd geboren, was dat voor ons niet leuk. Ondanks alle*

internetberichtjes en skype, wil je toch graag je kleinkind in de armen houden. Dus hiervan hebben we veel verdriet gehad…"

Type 8: Negative Future of the World: The type of letter 'Negative Future of the World' describes a big change in the world. In difference to Velthuis' Discontinuous Idealistic future, in this fictional world mostly negative aspects are mentioned. A big change from the actual to the fictional world took place. The letter *TB1_177* gives a good example of the letter type Negative Future of the World:

"Het is alweer meer dan vijftig jaar geleden dat de oorlog begon. Iedereen was toen zo optimistisch dat de mensheid de oorlog kon afschaffen, zoals het geval leek te zijn in Europa, zo hoopvol dat eeuwige wereldvrede voor het grijpen lag, dat niemand de spanningen in Europa zelf opmerkte. En toen de bom barstte, barstte die flink. Voordat men het wist waren alle Europese landen betrokken en was er geen weg terug meer…"

Based on these results, the **research question 2** could be answered. Four problems are encountered: the names of the first two letter types, the possibility that letters belong to more than one dominant type, the letter type advice is often found in combination with other types, and the existence of 2 new types. The coding scheme was modified to adapt these problems. In the next phase, the new coding scheme was applied to all 293 letters.

3.3 Applying the modified Coding Scheme

The interrater analysis has shown a moderate degree of similarity between the first and the second rater. Furthermore, four problems within the code system were identified. Based on the revised code system 293 letters were analyzed and the results sorted qua problem are described in the following paragraphs.

First, the first two letters (Continuous idealistic Future and Discontinuous Idealistic Future) are **renamed** to Positive Future of the Individual and Positive Future of the World. The new names of the types are now better fitting to their content, which was supportive by assigning the fitting type to a letter.

Second, within the original study by Velthuis only the dominant type of letter was chosen, hereby a lot of information was gone missing. *Table 4* shows the **number of the types of letters** assigned to one letter. 286 letters contain at least one type and at most three types. 188 letters contain only one type. 83 letters have shown aspects of two types and 15 letters three types were identified. Furthermore, 7 letters did not contain any hints for a type of letter.

Table 4.

Descriptive statistics for the distribution of the different types of letter within the second sample (N=293)

Number of (simultaneous) types	**Number of letters**
1 Type	188 (64,2%)
2 Types	83 (28,3%)
3 Types	15 (5,1%)
No Type	7 (2,4%)

Thus, a significant amount of letters contains more than one type of letter. Therefore it is useful to consider every type, not only the dominant type in the following elaborate analysis of the 293 letters. All letters were coded using the new coding scheme. The results were compared to the original coding of the 50 letters by Velthuis.

Based on the combination of types of letters a different **distribution of the types** was found. The distribution is shown in *table 5.*

Table 5.
Descriptive statistics for the distribution of the different types of letter within the second sample as identified by two independent observers

Type of Letter	**Velthuis Sample (N=50) (Dominant Type) in %**	**Second Observer (N=50) (Different Types) in %**	**Second Observer (N=293) (Different Types) in %**
T1: Positive F. o.t. Individual	48	58,0	50,5
T2: Positive F. o.t. World	12	10,0	10,9
T3: Choice & Consequence	10	14,0	12,3
T4: Problem & Solution	12	14,0	13,7
T5: New Start	8	8,0	5,8
T6: Advice	10	62,0	39,3
T7: Negative F. o.t. Individual	0	4,0	2,0
T8: Negative F. o.t. World	0	4,0	2,4

Analyzing the second observer analysis and the analysis given by Velthuis, a moderate level of correspondence can be found in the categories Positive Future of the Individual, Positive Future of the World, Choice & Consequence, Problem & Solution and New Start. The deviation is 10 points or lower, at which Positive Future of the World has the highest deviation with 10 points (N=50). Noticeable is the deviation of advice, within the comparison of both 50 letters analysis a deviation of 52 points and within a comparison of the original analysis and 293 letters a deviation of ~30 points was found. A listing of the percentages of the original study and the second observer (N=50 and N=293) analysis is given in *table 5*.

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As already mentioned in the previous paragraphs different problems with the category **Advice** are found. First, Advice showed a difference in the distribution rated by the dominant type by a second observer as well as a lack of agreement between both observers. Second, within the comparison of the first and second observer distribution of the types of letters a deviation of 52 points, respectively abound 30 points is found for Advice. Thus, considering every type of letters shows a different distribution of the types of letters, primarily for advice. To gain more insight, an in-depth analysis based on the combination of two types was done. This analysis outlines that Advice and Positive Future of the Individual are found in the majority of cases in combination with other types. *Table 6* shows that both, Positive Future of the Individual and Advice are found 47 times in combination with one other type, but only 33

times as a dominant type. Furthermore, mostly (33 letters) Positive Future of the World and Advice are found together.

Table 6.

Descriptive statistics for the combination of two types of letter

Types	**1**	**2**	**3**	**4**	**5**	**6**	**7**	**8**
1	-	4	3	3	3	33	0	1
2	4	-	1	0	0	6	0	0
3	3	1	-	0	1	5	0	0
4	3	0	0	-	0	0	1	2
5	3	0	1	0	-	0	1	1
6	33	6	5	0	0	-	1	2
7	0	0	0	1	1	1	-	0
8	1	0	0	2	1	2	0	-
Total	**47**	**11**	**10**	**6**	**6**	**47**	**3**	**6**

To gain more insight the combination of three different types were also analyzed. The analysis has shown that in 14 out of the 15 letters containing 3 types, Continuous Idealistic Future and Advice were found. These two types are combined with a third type. Mostly, Continuous Idealistic Future and Advice were combined with Choice and Consequence (5 letters) and Problem and Solution (4 letters). In 2 letters they were combined with Discontinuous Idealistic Future and once with New Start. One letter (*TB1_62*) was an exception: Here, Advice, Continuous Pragmatic Future and Discontinuous Pragmatic Future were found together.

Fourth, **two new types of letters**, called Negative Future of the Individual and Negative Future of the World, were found within the letters from the future. The analysis of the first 293 letters has shown that Negative Future of the Individual is, with a percentage of occurrence of 2,0%. Also, letters with the type Negative Future of the World were found in 2,4% of the letters.

The analysis has shown that the number of both new types of letters is small, but distinct types of letters. Within the first 50 letters they did not occur, thus within analyzing only the

first 50 letters they seem not important. By analyzing a more sufficient sample size (N=293) their importance appears.

Based on these results, the **research question 3** could be answered. (1) The first two types of letters were renamed to Positive Future of the Individual and Positive Future of the World. (2) Within one-third of the letters are more than one type found, which results in a different distribution of the types of letters. The main difference is found within the distribution of Advice, which is now about 30 points larger than in the original sample. (3) Advice and Positive Future of the Individual are coming 33 times together. (4) The number of two new types of letters (Negative Future of the Individual and Negative Future of the World) is small but distinct (2,0% and 2,4%).

4. DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

4.1 Main Findings

The purpose of the present study was to do further research on the types of future narration in the letters from the future, based on Grete Velthuis' study '*Assessing the Existential Dimension in Narrative futuring: Development of a Working Model'*. The analysis of the first 50 letters has shown that both raters found all types of letters with a rather comparable distribution. The inter-rater reliability was only moderate.

Aside from this, the code system given by Velthuis was analyzed and four problems were found. First, the names of the two first letters types of letters (Continuous Idealistic future and Discontinuous Idealistic Future) seem to be misleading. Second, some letters contained more types of letters than only the dominant type. Third, a high difference of the type of letter advice was found between the first rater and the second rater. Fourth, indications for two further types of letters were found.

Finally, the code system was modified, the four problems adopted and the revised coding scheme applied to 293 letters. The first two types of letters (Continuous Idealistic Future and Discontinuous idealistic Future) were renamed to Positive Future of the Individual and Positive Future of the World to fit their description. It was found that in one third of the cases (33,4%) more than one code could be assigned to a single letter. Based on coding more than the dominant type of letter the distribution of the types seems to be different, especially for Advice which is now about 30 points larger than in the original sample. Furthermore, two codes (Continuous Idealistic Future/Positive Future of the Individual and Advice) mostly occurred together. Finally, two new types of letters (Negative Future of the Individual and Negative Future of the World) were identified. The number of those new types was small but distinct (2,0% and 2,4%).

4.2 Interpretation of the Results

The analysis has shown that Velthuis' work established a good basis to analyze the existential dimension within narratives operationalised in 'letters from the future'. She carved out a functional code system. Identifying the types of letters by Velthuis contributes to the

research of narrative futuring. It is especially important to identify what people believe to be important in their imagined future life. Nevertheless, the analysis of a larger sample has shown that the given code system has different shortcomings. Thus, renaming the first two types of letters from Continuous Idealistic Future and Discontinuous Idealistic Future to Positive Future of the Individual and Positive Future of the World seems important to understand the content of both types.

Besides, within the current analysis, it was found that rating by coding only the dominant type, the richness of the data is lost. Rating by the dominant type may not reflect the subjective importance assigned to each hint by the writer. Furthermore, by choosing only one dominant type, a lot of important types of letters may remain disregarded. Based on the assumption that the types of letters are connected with the existential issues, a lot of important information would be missing. Yalom (1980) has indicated that humans are not only concerned with one existential issue, but with different existential concerns. Thus, assingning multiple types, which are connected with the existential issues, to one letter seems to be a sensible course of action. Furthermore, Yalom (1980) indicates that problems with different existential issues, lead to different psychological problems. Thus, especially within existential therapy, every existential hint may be crucial to avoid missing an important topic.

Furthermore, the results have shown different problems with the type of letter Advice. Advice showed an obvious difference in the distribution rated by the dominant type by a second observer as well as a lack of agreement between both observers. Likewise, within the analysis based on every type of letter, further deviations were found. The analysis of the different types within a single letter has shown that Advice mostly occurs in connection with another type. Thus, the question arises, whether Advice can be seen as a type of letter which is connected with the existential issues stated by Yalom. Velthuis (2014) indicates that traces of the existential issues Freedom, Meaninglessness and Isolation can be found within Advice. Based on this assumption, different questions arise: Where is the border between a type of letter based on existential themes and a simple encouragement? Could this encouragement also be an existential theme? Is it possible to give existential advice to oneself? Thus, the results within this study show that further research about Advice is needed to provide a guideline on how to handle it in the future.

Velthuis, within the creation of the types of letters such Continuous and Discontinuous Idealistic Future, focuses primarily on the positive aspects of the existential themes. Non-idealistic or negative types of letter, which create an opposite to those two types, were not

given by Velthuis. Within the existential issues stated by Irvin Yalom (1980) normally two opposed aspects of the existential issues are shown – for example death and life. Based on this fact it seems important to also consider the negative aspects within the types of letters. Thus, two negative types of letters (Negative Future of the Individual and Negative Future of the World) were added as an opposite to Positive Future of the Individual and of the World. It is expected that within the two new types (Negative Future of the Individual and Negative Future of the World) existential themes increase, because those negative types are closer to the existential issues described by Yalom. Analysis has shown that those negative types of letters are found within the letters from the future, although the task was to create a positive future imagination. Thus, creating a positive future was not possible for those writers. It could be argued that defense mechanisms are stronger within positive types than those two negative types. Thus, within Negative Future of the Individual and Negative Future of the World the defense mechanisms described by Yalom (1980) seem to be more explicitly addressed.

Based on the given results, different questions arise: What to do with the type of letter Advice? How are the letters from the future connected with the existential issues? Is it possible that defense mechanisms are more likely to occur in writing a letter from the future than when asking directly for existential themes? How useful are the types of letters within therapy? Thus, further research is important to identify a connection between certain types of letters and specific existential themes within the letters from the future.

4.3 Restrictions and Strengths of the Present Study

The present study provides an improvement on the reliability of the code system given by Velthuis. McAdams (2001b) states that at least two raters must review the material to ensure a good reliability, otherwise false positives or false negatives are accumulated, creating biased data and results. Thus, Velthuis' code system was revised by a second observer to ensure a good reliability. In contrast, one restriction of the present study is that the new code system was only revised by one evaluator. Using an iterative qualitative research approach, further analysis was conducted using a larger sample of 293 letters. To ensure an adequate reliability, this analysis should also be subjected to validation by a second independent rater, but with the new modifications, fewer problems are expected.

Within the present study, the second analysis was done using a relatively large sample of letters from the future. In total, 600 letters from the future were collected and with this study the first 293 letters were analyzed. Because of the sample size, a reasonable external validity is provided. Within the first sample (N=50), which is based on the recruiting at the University of Twente, it can be concluded that most of the participants are students. In contrast, within the second, larger sample (N=293) participants were seemingly more middle age men. Based on the larger sample two new, negative types of letters were identified. Thus, it is possible that within different target groups further types of letters may be found. Different target groups could be people from other cultures, different age groups (for example elderly people), or psychiatric patients. Thus, other methods to gain participants should be considered as well. It is a possibility to advertise on social networks like Facebook, or on local radio stations to gain a more diverse sample. Within other target groups, it is for example possible that further negative types are found within a clinical sample. Perhaps new types of letters must be considered or some of the given 8 types could not be found within a different target group. Besides, it is possible that the distribution of the types of letters and the number of found types differs. Thus, it seems important to consider different populations to ensure the external validity and to identify differences between populations.

The examination of the instrument has shown that the types of letters help to classify the letters from the future. It was shown that the types of letters are important to analyze the content of the letters, which contributes to the narrative futuring. However, different problems with the instrument were discovered. Different problems were found within the type of letter Advice. Ambiguity within the description of this type of letter perhaps explains those differences. Thus, here modifications must be implemented, based on further investigations on this type of letter. Besides, Velthuis has indicated a relation between the types of letters and the existential dimension. However, no connection between certain types of letters and specific existential issues were shown. Based on the fact that two new types of letters and a deviant distribution were found by a second observer, further research is advisable.

4.4 Suggestions for Further Research

In the original research conducted by Velthuis using 100 letters from the future, a working model was developed showing six different types of letter. Revising the code system in an iterative approach using a larger sample of 293 letters showed two additional types of letters. The question arises how the letters from the future are connected with the existential issues. Velthuis (2014) has shown first indications for a connection between the types of letters and the existential issues in a small sample (N=100). Thus, Velthuis indicated a relation between the types of letters and existential themes, but further research must be done to clarify the connection. Perhaps, based on the revised code system, a stronger connection can be found. If a connection between the types and the existential issues is given, a useful practical benefit could be given within therapy. Within a small letter, three different types of letters could be found. For therapy in particular, it seems less important how existential those themes are – it is more important that the writer broaches the issue of existential themes, as this enables a therapist to further discuss these issues without having to bring them up.

Especially combined with the existential concerns stated by Irvin Yalom (1980), letters from the future may show which themes in life are important for the client at the time of writing. Asking a client to provide a narrative and then relating it to the given types of letters may reveal the existential themes most important to the client to the therapist without increasing resistance and provoking fear (Yalom, 1980). Velthuis (2014) indicates within her original study, that writing a letter from the future does not stimulate existential themes within a writer, but defense against being confronted with existential concerns. On the other hand, it is also possible that those defense mechanisms are more acutely provoked by asking directly for existential issues, than writing a letter from the future. Thus, it seems possible that existential themes are triggered through future imagination, but also that defense mechanisms become apparent. This seems also relevant for therapy. If a defense mechanism is used, therapy is able to touch upon the issue of the defense mechanism. The starting point may thus not be extremely existential, but the further investigation of the topic may be very existential. Therefore, even small narratives like the letters from the future could contain slight existential hints and defense mechanisms that could be used to focus on the existential concerns and pick them out as a central theme. Thus, these considerations give different indications for further research.

Comprehensive qualitative research using letters from the future provides a better and more solid understanding of the different types of future narration and the different ways existential concerns are mentioned within the letters. As already mentioned, narrative futuring is connected with overall wellbeing (Chiu, 2012; King, 2001) and healthiness (Sools et al, 2013). King (2001) stated that especially the act of imagining a definite and concrete future with defined goals has a positive effect on wellbeing. During the writing process, the attention of the writer is directed towards his or her goals in life. It seems the writer is choosing priorities, enabling him or her to better articulate their goals. In this connection, King (2001) found a relation between structured goals and positive functioning of a person, which in turn has a positive effect on the general wellbeing of that person. A better understanding of why existential issues are raised within those letters provides a model of the way they achieve their positive effects, possibly allowing further researchers to increase those effects using revised instructions for writing the letter and more suitable designs.

Furthermore, the positive effects of narrative futuring in the form of letters have not yet been sufficiently empirically validated (Sools & Mooren, 2013). As described above in the "Method"-section, participants were also asked to answer the "Mental Health Continuum Short Form" (MHC-SF), measuring positive mental health. Based on the restrictions of the present study, it was not possible to consider the MHC-SF. Thus, further research should focus on the empirical validation of the positive effects of narrative futuring in the form of letters from the future in order to lay a solid foundation for applying narrative futuring in therapeutic consultations. Analyzing the correlation between MHC-SF scores and different types of letters could show possible differences between the types of letters. A positive connection between narrative futuring and different positive effects on improving psychological wellbeing and quality of life are already found (Wahle, 2012). Creating a positive aim using narratives was also found to be effective in treating depression, identity problems and low self-esteem (Sools & Mooren, 2013). Narrative futuring helps the client in therapy to choose realistic goals for his or her future and helps to work out steps to reach these goals (Melges, 1972). Furthermore, narrative futuring helps increase incentive to actually take action by reducing maladaptive behavior (Holmes & Mathews, 2009). Thus, it is important to research the connection between the types of letters and wellbeing. Based on the findings on the connections between the types of letters, existential themes and wellbeing, research could also have an important practical relevance in therapy.

4.5 Conclusion

The aim of this study was to do further research on the types of future narration in the letters from the future, based on Grete Velthuis' study '*Assessing the Existential Dimension in Narrative futuring: Development of a Working Model'*. This study has shown that the types of letters identified by Grete Velthuis, which are based on Irvin Yaloms existential concerns, are also found by a second rater within the letters from the future.

The main conclusion that can be drawn from the present study is that 8 types of letters were found within the letters from the future. The original 6 types from Velthuis were found and 2 types were added. Besides, not only one dominant type of letter can be found within the letters from the future, up to 3 types can be found within a single letter. The present study has shown that the stated code system given by Velthuis is an important basic work, but different adjustments were done.

Based on those findings different future research is indicated: Are different types of letters are found within distinct sample groups? How the letters from the future are connected with the existential issues? Is it possible that defense mechanisms are more unincisive by writing a letter from the future than asking directly for existential themes? How useful are the types of letters within therapy? Are the types of letters connected with wellbeing?

So, all in all, this study raises more question than it answers and thus shows the way into further investigation of this promising new field of working with the existential dimension by looking forward to the life ahead.

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2. APPENDIX

Appendix A - Instructions for writing the letter

The following suggestions are tips which give you an idea about the meaning of the letter. Feel free to use these instructions as a basis for writing the letter your own way. We recommend that you invent names for yourself and others, to make sure the letter cannot be traced back to you personally. Please make sure not to mention real names of others in your letter, because we want to protect their privacy, too.

If you would like to write a very personal 'real' letter with your own name, you can choose to make your letter only available for research purposes. In this case you letter is not published on the website and only visible to the researchers. After you have entered all data you are asked to make a decision about the online availability of your letter.

Where and When?

Imagine that you are travelling in a time machine.
Imagine where and when you are in the future.
When: you decide how far you want to travel in the future; this may be an hour, a day, a week, or even years later.
Where: you decide where you are travelling to; for example: a place in a particular country; in space; at home or your garden; in the city or in nature; a crowded or a deserted place; a colorful or a dull place; a noisy or quiet place; etc.

What?

Imagine that a few positive wishes, changes and dreams in your life came true.
Tell your story of a specific day, a specific moment or a specific event in that it comes clear how you have solved the problem or have found a good way of dealing with it.
Describe whatever was most useful in order to make this event happen and how you look back on your life.
Feel free to use your full imagination: Remember that it is about the future which hasn't occurred yet and that it's a chance to think about what could happen.

To Whom?

You decide to whom you want to write the letter.

- To your present self (You then give a wise, happy or other positive message to yourself)
- To another person (for example: your child or grandchild, friends, the next generation, etc.)

The letter has a maximum of 400 words.

Tip: first write the letter in Word and then copy/paste it on the site (to make sure that you do not accidently lose your nicely written letter!).