

EXPLORING THE EXISTENTIAL DIMENSION

Exploring the Existential Dimension in Narrative Futuring

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Abstract

In this study the relation between narrative futuring (imagining the future and making it explicit in a narrative way) and the existential dimension is under study. Both a narrative approach and the existential dimension are associated with the process of finding meaning in life. Meaning-making is negatively associated with several psychological diseases, and positively associated with benefit-finding and emotional wellbeing. Therefore it is important to examine how a narrative working mode can help to make existential themes discussable, and how this process can attribute to finding meaning in life.

In the first study a working model is developed to assess the presence of four existential concerns (Yalom, 1980) in 'letters from the future'. These letters were collected in the Life-story Lab, an online lab in which participants are asked to write a letter from a fictive, personal future, and thus to engage in narrative futuring. Any visitor of the website could donate a letter. The first one hundred letters were selected from the total pool of letters, because this way the largest variety of letters was obtained. The sample consisted of mostly female students ranging from 16-25 years old. The letters were analysed using qualitative analysing methods. Six letter categories and two criteria were found that associate with the presence of existential concerns in the letters. Through the model traces of existential struggles can be found. These findings indicate that narrative futuring is a promising instrument to explore the existential dimension.

The aim of the second study is twofold: to test the construct- and ecological validity of the developed working model, and to find out whether the writing process induced existential reflection and action. From the personal network of the researcher twelve new participants were recruited. The sample mainly consisted of Christian women between 26 and 35 years old. The participants were interviewed regarding the content of their future letter and regarding the writing process. The results from the interviews substantiate the construct- and ecological validity of the previously developed working model, and thus confirm that narrative futuring can be used as an instrument to explore the existential dimension. Furthermore, the writing process in itself elicits no confrontation with an existential concern. This finding indicates that solely writing a future letter does not help to deal with existential themes, and thus to find existential meaning.

Key words: Narrative psychology; narrative; futuring; existential; existential concerns, meaning.

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Introduction

Overview

The narrative approach and existentialism are interrelated in the sense that they are both associated with the process of meaning-making, which in turn is associated with emotional wellbeing (King et. al., 2006; Pinquart, 2002; Westerhof, Dittmann-Kohli & Thissen, 2001; Westerhof et. al., 2006 Zika & Chamberlain, 1992). The narrative approach studies the stories that people tell about themselves and their own life, and it is used in multiple human sciences (Bohlmeijer, Mies & Westerhof, 2007). In the narrative approach time plays an important role (Sools & Mooren, 2012). In this study especially the future time is studied, conceptualized as ‘narrative futuring’: imagining the future and making it explicit in a narrative way.

Existentialism is a philosophical movement in which a core challenge for every human is to create a meaningful life in an essentially useless and absurd world. Essential in this process is the existential dimension, also known as the way in which humans relate to themselves and to their own situation (de Haan, 2013).

The main aim of the present study is to contribute to the scientific basis of the narrative approach by studying the possibilities to use a specific form of narrative futuring as an instrument to explore the existential dimension. This study is part of a larger line of research conducted at the University of Twente (UT), where life stories (narratives) are studied in relation to mental health and wellbeing.

The introduction is constructed as follows. First, the concept of narrative futuring will be explained and will then be related to mental health. Secondly, the context of the existential dimension will be explained and related to meaningfulness and wellbeing. Thirdly, four aspects of the existential dimension will be specified. And fourth, the discussed concepts are joined into a synthesis from which the research questions will be formulated.

Narrative futuring and wellbeing

As mentioned above, the narrative approach studies the stories that people tell about themselves and their own life. This approach, also known as the ‘narrative turn’ is not limited to psychology but can also be found in other human sciences like sociology, anthropology, history and philosophy (Bohlmeijer, Mies & Westerhof, 2007). One specific research topic that narrative psychologists study considers written self-narratives. According to Gergen & Gergen (1988) a self-narrative is a particular type of story that helps to account for critical

events in life. Pennebaker (2000) concludes that writing a self-narrative, and more specifically, writing about one's emotions is beneficial to both mental and physical health. In the same article the author formulates an explanation for the found health improvements based on a writing experiment for students. In this experiment students were asked to write about their deepest thoughts and feelings about traumatic experiences:

(...) the act of converting emotions and images into words changes the way the person organizes and thinks about the trauma. (...) By integrating thoughts and feelings, the person then can construct more easily a coherent narrative of the experience. Once formed, the event can now be summarized, stored and forgotten more efficiently (Pennebaker, 2000).

However, not all self-narratives are necessarily beneficial to (mental) health. According to Gergen & Gergen (1987, 1988) a good narrative consists of the following elements: 1) a story goal, or the reason for which the story is formed, 2) important elements that relate to this goal and 3) a sensible order in which the events are placed. In addition to this McAdams (1996) formulated six standards for a good narrative, including coherence, openness, differentiation, reconciliation, credibility and generative integration. Although a fragmented story is not beneficial to mental health (McAdams, 1997), a too consistent narrative is neither. However, little research has been done to examine the relation between these standards and mental health (Baerger & McAdams, 1999; McAdams, 2006b).

In the narrative approach time plays an important role. Remarkably however, 'future time' is seldom explicitly theorized (Sools, 2012). Sools & Mooren (2012) write that futuring (imagining the future) is an important part of human psychological functioning:

Concepts like psychological development and education, for instance, are empty notions without the prospect of time ahead of us, as is the case with related concepts such as identity and self-actualization (Sools & Mooren, 2012, 207).

In several studies the benefits of imagining the future are pointed out. For instance, Sools & Mooren link futuring to resilience, or the ability to 'bounce back' from adverse experiences and the ability to navigate to resources that enhance well-being (Liebenberg & Ungar, 2009; Ungar & Lerner, 2008). Furthermore, Wahle (2012) gives a comprehensive overview of possible benefits of future thinking, including several positive effects on

emotion-regulation processes; more effective coping strategies; and motivation, learning and performance.

In the present study both written narratives and future time are combined into ‘narrative futuring’, which can be understood as imagining the future and making it explicit in a narrative way. In the literature no official definition can be found, but the concept is related to several other concepts. For instance, it seems to be akin to ‘narrative imagination’. According to Nussbaum narrative imagination is “*the ability to be an intelligent reader of another person’s story*”, and it enhances the ability “*to empathize with others and to put one-self in another’s place*” (Nussbaum 1997, 11).

Existential meaning and wellbeing

As mentioned in the overview, existentialism is a philosophical movement which originated in the period between the two world wars by the works of philosophers like Jean-Paul Sartre, Søren Kierkegaard, Martin Heidegger and Karl Jaspers. From an existential viewpoint every human is seen as responsible for his or her own actions and fate. Furthermore, a core challenge for every human is to use one’s freedom to create a meaningful life in an essentially useless and absurd world. Essential in this process of meaning-making is the existential dimension, also known as the way in which humans relate to themselves and to their own situation (de Haan, 2013).

In literature a distinction is often made between existential- and everyday meaning. Existential meaning concerns the meaning of life in general, whereas everyday meaning focuses on the meaning of personal life (Westerhof & Bohlmeijer, 2010). But which themes make life worth living? In literature diverse sources are mentioned, and several researchers have tried categorizing them. In short, they can be summarized in five dimensions. The first two are related to the existence of the self, both physical (1) and psychological (2). Examples of themes in these domains are physical health (1) and self-acceptance (2). The other three domains are related to the place that humans have in life. Here material conditions of existence (3), activities (4) and social connectedness (5) can be distinguished. Examples of themes in these domains are acquiring money (3), productivity (4) and good relationships (5) (Westerhof & Kuin, 2006).

Often psychological problems are associated with a lack of meaning in life. Especially this relation has been found in patients suffering from depression (Pinquart, 2002; van Selm, 1998; Krause, 2007) and addiction problems (Burrell & Jaffe, 1999; March, Smith, Piek & Saunders, 2003). Furthermore, meaning appears to be important in difficult situations, so it

touches the concept of coping (Westerhof & Bohlmeijer, 2010). Coping refers to the way people deal with stressful situations (Folkman & Moskowitz, 2004). When people are confronted with difficult situations, much is asked of their adaptability. A consequence of this may be that people lose the sense of meaning in their life. It is remarkable however that some people, despite the stressful situations they are in, keep a sense of meaning in their life. This finding seems to be related to benefit finding, or the experience of advantages or positive consequences (Tennen & Affleck, 2005). In a meta-analysis Helgeson, Reynolds & Tomich (2006) found that benefit finding is positively related to mental health. See for a more comprehensive overview Westerhof & Bohlmeijer (2010). Furthermore, a strong relation is found between meaning in life and emotional wellbeing (King et. al., 2006; Pinquart, 2002; Westerhof, Dittmann-Kohli & Thissen, 2001; Westerhof et. al., 2006 Zika & Chamberlain, 1992).

Existential concerns

Yalom, an American psychiatrist observed that many of his clients struggled with the senselessness of life in general and the creation of meaning in their own life (Yalom, 1980). According to Yalom it is important to constitute meaning in one's own life, because several psychological disorders may arise from a lack of meaning in life. In his book Yalom describes several disorders, and gives directions for psychotherapy as well. However, according to Yalom the way people struggle with the concerns can be seen as a continuum whereof only the excesses are classified as pathological.

Based on these observations Yalom (1980) identified four ultimate, existential concerns that people have to deal with, in order to constitute meaning in their life: death, freedom, isolation and meaninglessness. The confrontation with these concerns evokes intense anxiety, and in response a defense mechanism is activated (May & Yalom, 2000).

The first existential concern that people have to deal with is death. The concept of death plays a crucial role in the life experience of every person. Death and life are interdependent: although actual death destroys people, the *idea* of death forces people to live (Yalom, 1980). Death is also strongly connected to anxiety. Yalom (1980) refers to the three types of death fears described by Jacques Choron: 1) what comes after death, 2) the 'event' of dying and 3) ceasing to be. According to Yalom (1980) it is the third type that comes closest to existential death anxiety. Also, he cites Kierkegaard who said that this anxiety is not a fear of *some* thing, but a fear of *no* thing. This anxiety cannot be located, it "attacks us from all sides at once" (May, 1977). Or, as May & Yalom (2000) write:

It is apparent to all that death will come and that there is no escape. It is a terrible truth, and at the deepest levels we respond to it with mortal terror. (...) From the existential point of view a core inner conflict is between awareness of inevitable death and the simultaneous wish to continue to live.

To cope with this anxiety, people seek to invent defenses to avoid awareness of the inevitability of death. According to Yalom (1980) two main defenses exist: 1) a belief in personal “specialness” and 2) a belief in the existence of an “ultimate rescuer”. The first defense entails that one is ‘immune’ to death, that death will not befall one. An example of this defense is the answer often given by smokers when confronted with the fact that smoking is bad for health: often they argue that a vaguely known relative has grown very old while smoking like a chimney. The second defense is described by Yalom (1980) as a ‘magic helper’ or an ‘omnipotent servant’ who will save one from death and annihilation. In this sense most religions fall into this category. However, the supernatural nature of a rescuer is not essential: it can also be another human like a leader, or some higher cause (Yalom, 1980).

The second concern, freedom is associated with anxiety as well. Yalom (1980) cites Jean-Paul Sartre who speaks of an existential freedom that every human is ‘condemned to’. It is a nothingness, a groundlessness in which one is totally free, and there is nothing one *must* do (Yalom, 1980). Or, as May & Yalom (2000) put it:

This existential view of freedom has terrifying implications. If it is true that we create our own selves and our own world, then it also means that there is no ground beneath us: there is only an abyss, a void, nothingness. An important internal dynamic conflict emanates from our confrontation with freedom: conflict issues from our awareness of freedom and groundlessness on the one hand, and on the other hand our deep need and wish for ground and structure.

Existential freedom falls into two interrelated concepts. First, freedom implies responsibility for one's actions. In order to act a person needs to will and decide, and is responsible for these actions. On the other hand, every person also bears guilt for his actions in the case of a wrong decision.

Because this kind of freedom is too much to bear, anxiety obtrudes and in response people invent ways to cope with this fear. In short, Yalom describes two main defenses: 1)

denial of responsibility and 2) avoidance of decisions. The first defense is often seen in, for example people acting as an innocent victim. The second defense can be found in dependency relationships.

The third concern is isolation, or more specific: existential isolation. Between a person and the world around him is a gap that cannot be bridged. In essence, every person is alone. Yalom (1980) describes it as “*an unbridgeable gulf between oneself and any other being. It refers, too, to an isolation even more fundamental – a separation between the individual and the world*”. Isolation and especially interpersonal isolation has much to do with the process of growing up: an embryo grows from a state of total physical dependency via childhood to an independent adult. Or in other words, the child separates more and more from his parents and thereby becomes more and more isolated (Yalom, 1980). This process of separation brings a conflict that May & Yalom (2000) describe as a conflict between “the awareness of our fundamental isolation and the wish to be protected, to merge and to be part of a larger whole”. Because the experience of existential isolation is highly uncomfortable, people quickly invent defenses to reduce the tension. The main defense against isolation is entering into a relationship with others. The other might be another person like oneself or a divine being (Yalom, 1980).

The fourth and last concern is meaninglessness. May & Yalom (2000) explain it as follows:

If each person must die, and if each person constitutes his or her own world, and if each is alone in an indifferent universe, then what possible meaning can life have? Why do we live? How shall we live? If there is no preordained design in life, then we must construct our own meaning in life.

The internal conflict comes from the realization that the universe has no meaning in itself, while a person does need a meaning in life (May & Yalom, 2000; Yalom, 1980).

According the World Health Organization (2004) both depression and alcohol abuse are among the 20 leading contributors to the global burden of disease. And as mentioned before, a lack of meaning in life is associated with psychological problems like depression (Pinquart, 2002; van Selm, 1998; Krause, 2007) and addiction problems (Burrell & Jaffe, 1999; March, Smith, Piek & Saunders, 2003). Therefore existential meaninglessness could very well be an actual concern in the postmodern era. For

“ Societies and international relations seem to change at an ever-increasing speed, dragging along in this turmoil individuals who have to face increasing complexity in their daily lives while they also might face a loss of adequate frames of meaning and practical guidelines” (Sools and Mooren, 2012).

Yalom (1980) mentions two pathologic defences against the state of meaninglessness. The first one is conformity, or ‘doing what others do’. The second one is submission to totalitarianism, or ‘doing what others wish’.

Synthesis

It is argued that narrative futuring is in certain cases associated with the ability to attribute meaning to life (Pennebaker, 2000; Gergen & Gergen, 1988; McAdams, 1996; Sools & Mooren, 2012) and with several aspects of wellbeing (Sools & Mooren, 2012; Wahle, 2012). Existential philosophy is strongly associated with meaning as well: a fundamental task of every human being is to attribute meaning to one’s own life. This process of meaning-making is achieved through dealing with four existential concerns (Yalom, 1980). However, Yalom (1980) also stresses the difficulty to talk about and reflect upon existential themes, because facing a concern is accompanied with intense anxiety. Therefore in the present study it is questioned whether narrative futuring can be helpful to make existential concerns discussable and reflected upon, in order to find meaning in life.

In this master’s thesis two studies were executed. The aim of the first study is to explore the possibility of finding existential concerns in ‘letters from the future’ (a specific form of narrative futuring, explained in the method section). Through qualitative letter analyses a working model is developed containing criteria and letter types which indicate the presence of existential concerns in the letters from the future. Also the way in which the existential concerns are present is explored. To operationalize this research aim, three research questions were formulated:

- 1) Which criteria can be found that indicate the presence of existential concerns in the letters from the future?*
- 2) Which letter types can be found that indicate the presence of existential concerns in the letters from the future?*
- 2) How are the existential concerns present in the letters from the future?*

The aim of the second interview study is twofold. First, the construct validity and ecological validity of the existential nature of the struggles found with the developed working model is tested. It is assumed that if the found struggles are indeed existential, they consequently have a different place in life and are experienced differently than non-existential struggles. The second aim of this study is to obtain preliminary insight into whether the nature of the letter exercise can revive a previous confrontation with an existential concern in daily life. If this is the case, the letter exercise in itself may be a helpful instrument to reflect upon the existential concern, and thus may be contributive to the process of finding meaning in life. It is assumed that if the letter exercise does indeed revive an old confrontation with an existential concern, the writers experience the writing process differently than if this is not the case. In order to operationalize these research aims, three research questions were formulated:

- 1) Do the results of the letter- and interview analyses correspond regarding the presence of existential concerns?*
- 2) To what extent are existential letters from the future indicative for the presence and value of existential struggles in daily life?*
- 3) Does the process of writing the letter induce existential reflection and action?*

Study 1 – Exploring the Existential Dimension in Narrative Futuring: Development of a Working Model

Method

Data collection

The Life-story Lab

The data used in this research was collected in the Life-story Lab. In 2012 this online lab was founded at the University of Twente by psychologists Ernst Bohlmeijer, Gerben Westerhof and Anneke Sools, and is the Dutch expert centre on narrative psychology and mental health promotion. By fundamental research into these topics the founders try to enhance a mental health care approach that focuses on resilience and well-being. Within the lab several projects are ongoing. The in 2011 started ‘Letters from the Future Project’ was integrated in the Life-story Lab. The goal of this project is “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 & Mooren, 2012). In the project over five hundred ‘letters from the future’ have been collected, and data collection is still going on (the terms ‘letters from the future’, ‘future letters’ and ‘letters’ will be used interchangeably). See Sools & Mooren (2012) for a comprehensive overview of the project.

Participants

The letters of one hundred writers were used in this study. The sample mainly consisted of female (73%) students. Most of the writers were between 16 and 25 years old (71%) and were on average educated at pre-university level (42,70%). Most of the participants were single without children (36,67%), and had an income of less than 500 euros per month (33%).

Instruments / Procedure

Via advertisements on websites and in journals, and credits for students participants were encouraged to participate in the study. Data collection took place at the online platform www.utwente.nl/lifestorylab. Participants were asked to write a letter, answer several demographic questions and fill out an informed-consent form.

The main task was to write a letter from the future. Participants were asked to imagine stepping into a time-machine and going to a not further specified time and place in the future. According to the instructions (see Appendix A) this might be an hour, a day, a week or years later. Furthermore, they were asked to imagine a positive wish, change or dream in their life

that had come true. Subsequently the participants were asked to write a letter about that specific day, moment or event. In the letter it should become clear how the positive change was attained, or how the person had found a way to cope with a particular problem. The letter had a maximum of four hundred words, and could be written to the present self, or to someone else (like children, grandchildren, peers, the next generation, etc.). The individual letters will be referred to as TB1_ [the number of the letter].

The letter exercise was adapted from an exercise used in storytelling groups in mental health promotion settings in the Netherlands (Bohlmeijer, 2007). In narrative psychology data are usually collected through life story interviews, which result in hours-long texts. In the present study data are collected online through short letters (at a maximum of 400 words), so collection and analysis of data are much less time-consuming. On the other hand, since the data is collected online, participants have to be able to use internet. See for a more comprehensive overview of the (dis)advantages of the used data-collection method Sools & Mooren (2012).

Data-analysis

Initial analysis

From the total pool of letters collected in the Life-story Lab the first one hundred unique and complete letters entered through the website were selected for analysis, because this sample contained the highest diversity of letters. First, the dataset was calibrated to aim for variety of letters: the writing styles, the letter themes and the likelihood of the described future were differentiated. Second, twenty letters that differed from each regarding the writing styles, the letter themes and the likelihood of the described future were selected for an exploratory pilot-analysis. The likelihood criterion was used because it was found that realistic futures far more often described problems and mentioned anxiety than non-realistic futures. It was assumed that existential struggles are embedded in everyday problems, and that they can be found in letters describing such problems.

The twenty letters were analysed in a bottom-up fashion, using open-, axial- and selective coding methods as proposed by Boeije (2005) until an initial working model and analysing steps were formed. The unit of analysis was chosen to be one letter as a whole, because by investigating the letters as a whole with one overarching purpose the overall meaning and goal of the letters could be better understood. After the pilot-phase the analyses were executed on the complete set of one hundred letters. By doing so the working model was improved and elaborated in an iterative process.

The developed working model contains three steps, or approaches to explore the presence of existential concerns in the letters. The first two steps are executed separate from each other, while in the third step the results from the previous steps are combined. The individual steps are described below.

Step 1: Identification of letter criteria

Two letter criteria were found during the letter analyses. The first criterion concerns the presence of a struggle in the future letters. It was stated that, in order for a letter to be marked as existential, something of a struggle should be reflected in the letter. This statement is based upon the assumption that existential concerns are essentially big struggles of life that people have to deal with. The struggling with an everyday problem is seen as an inciter to a struggle with an existential concern. When a letter contains no problems the letter is marked as ‘no problem’, and the second criterion was skipped. But the letter was not excluded from further analysis.

Two sub criteria were found that are helpful in finding ‘promising’ struggles: struggles that seem to represent a more fundamental, perhaps existential struggle. These criteria include the 1) the way a struggle is described and 2) four types of struggles.

The second criterion regards the position of the struggle on a time dimension. It appeared that problems which were solved longer ago were described less comprehensive and substantial than unsolved or recent problems. Also regarding problems that were solved longer ago fewer feelings like doubt and uncertainty were described. I got the impression that problems in which an existential dimension seemed to be present mostly were described substantial, and feelings like doubt, anxiety or distress were often mentioned. Therefore it seemed relevant to position the problem on a time dimension. The two main criteria and corresponding sub criteria will be described in more detail in the results section.

Step 2: Identification of letter types

In order to structure the letters they were divided into letter types based upon the meaning or goal of the letters. This was done because it seemed that the meaning and goal of existential letters differed from the meaning and goal of non-existential letters.

Overall, two main letter types and six sub letter types were found. The first main letter type contained letters that provide a general overview of life in the future without mentioning specific situations. This letter type was specified into continuous futures and discontinuous futures. Continuous futures are futures that might happen in the present world, while

discontinuous futures cannot come true unless some basic structures in the world have changed fundamentally. The second main letter type contained letters that described a specific problem or situation. This letter type was specified into letters that describe a previously made choice and its consequences, a problem and its solution, a new start and letters in which advice is given.

Although the borders of the letter types 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. In the results section the individual letter categories will be explained in more detail.

Step 3: Identification of existential content

Lastly the presence of one or more existential concerns was analysed. The presence of a struggle was seen as a starting point in the search for existential concerns. Furthermore, the results from the first two analyses helped to get a good view of the presence of a struggle in the letter (letter criteria) and the function of the letter (letter types). From this point on, intuition was followed rather than strict rules, in order to avoid a too rigid classification of the letters and thus a too narrow detection of existential concerns.

In general existential concerns were present in the letters in two different ways. First, in some letters the dealing with a struggle seems to refer to the dealing with an existential concern. In these letters one or more of the letter criteria were present. Often these writers described the dealing with the struggle in an *open and honest way*. They substantially discussed their feelings of anxiety, doubt or distress. Also they acknowledge the need to experience these feelings in order to grow and develop.

Second, the function of some letters seemed to be to avoid being confronted with an existential theme. These letters were associated with certain letter types. Often these writers *do not write openly about their feelings*. Instead, they describe that the struggle they are facing at the moment of writing has disappeared in the future. Most often the way in which this has happened seems wondrous, or highly unlikely. For instance, in some letters a writer describes (seemingly major) difficulties in a love relation. In the future however these problems have disappeared, and all is well again. The writer does not describe how this improvement has been achieved, or in some letters the improvements happened almost spontaneously. In these cases it seems that the writer, although he does not admit it, is afraid of being alone, being isolated.

Both struggle descriptions can be marked as promising if a deeper struggle is suspected. If a promising struggle is found, the problem is compared to the four existential

concerns as defined by Yalom (1980). If the fundamental theme of the struggle corresponds to a concern, the letter is marked as containing an existential concern. A struggle can elicit a confrontation with more than one concern, so traces of multiple concerns can be present in one letter.

Results

In the introduction three research questions were formulated. First, it was questioned which criteria indicate the presence of existential concerns in the letters from the future. Second, letter types were sought that indicate the presence of existential concerns. And third, it was questioned how the existential concerns are present in the letters from the future. Below the results are discussed per research question.

Research question 1: Which criteria can be found that indicate the presence of existential concerns in the letters from the future?

Two letter criteria were found that indicate the presence of existential concerns: 1) the presence of a struggle, and 2) the position of the struggle on a time dimension. The two criteria will be discussed below.

Criterion 1: The presence of a struggle

The term ‘struggle’ was broadly defined, in order to start with as many promising struggles as possible. A struggle is a situation described in the letter that is different from the normal course of business in a negative way, and the writer experiences difficulty to cope with it. The situation has not necessarily taken place in the real life of the writer, but may also be fictive.

The distinctions discussed below are helpful in finding promising struggles; struggles that seem to represent a more fundamental, perhaps existential concern. First, the way a struggle is described was differentiated. Some struggles were only mentioned and described on a *factual* level: the writer only describes facts regarding the struggle. Other struggles were described more *substantially*: the writer also showed (some of) his thoughts and feelings regarding the issue. Substantially described struggles are expected to be helpful in finding existential concerns, because it becomes clear how the writer is struggling with a situation.

I also distinguished four types of struggles, because different types of struggles associated with certain letter categories and a more or less substantial description. First, *internal struggles* concern mental and physical difficulties. *Material struggles* are related to money and property, whereas *social struggles* concern issues with others. More distant struggles like war or crisis fall into the last category: *external struggles*. Internal and social struggles were especially associated with the presence of an existential concern. Material struggles were predominantly linked to non-existential struggles, while external struggles were found scarcely.

Criterion 2: Position on a time dimension

Once a struggle was detected and differentiated, it was situated on a time dimension. I classified the moment in time when a struggle was solved by using a time dimension based on the ‘Scheme of time perspectives’ (Wahle, 2012, p.16). This scheme is depicted in Figure 2.

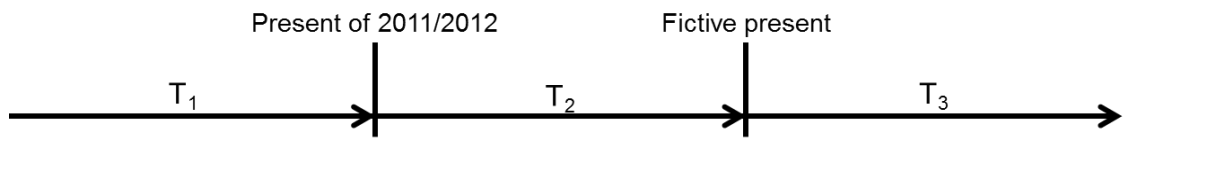


Figure 2: Scheme of time perspectives (Wahle, 2012).

In this scheme, several periods and moments in time are marked.

- T_1 marks the past. This refers to the actual past, the time before the writer participated in the study and wrote a ‘letter from the future’. This period covers issues until the moment of writing the letter in 2011/12.
- Present of 2011/12 is the moment when the writer, by writing the letter from the future, participates in the study. This moment in time is referred to as ‘real present’.
- T_2 covers the period between the real present and the fictive present: the meantime. This period covers issues between the real present and the fictive present.
- Fictive present refers to fictive moment of writing the letter, the ‘present’ in the letter.
- T_3 marks the future, the period after the fictive present.
- If the described struggle remained unsolved, it was labelled as unsolved.

Although exceptions were found as well, it seemed that if the struggle was an issue at the real present, the more likely existential content could be found. This is especially true for unsolved struggles, where a writer often more substantively mentions the struggle, including thoughts, feelings and actions. On the other hand, struggles that have been solved further away in the past seemed more closed, completed. Consequently most people wrote less about the content of these struggles.

Research question 2: Which letter types can be found that indicate the presence of existential concerns in the letters from the future?

The letter sample consisted of general and specific letters. The general letters were subdivided into the following two letter types: 1) continuous future and 2) discontinuous future. The specific letters were subdivided into the following four letter types: 3) choice and consequences, 4) problem and solution, 5) new start and 6) advice. Below the letter types will be explained individually, and for every letter type an exemplary letter will be discussed. Exemplary letters are written in Dutch.

General letters

Type 1: Continuous future

Letters in this category describe a more or less ideal future in which goals are achieved and dreams have come true. Emphasis is on a global description of what has happened over time from the present to the fictive present. 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.

In several of these letters no problems or setbacks are described. When a problem is mentioned though, it often concerns a problem solved in the past or in the meantime. The nature of the problems varied. Furthermore, the problem typically is described on a factual level. Any or scarce substantive information is given about the author's feelings about, and (difficulties in) dealing with the problem. Notably, in several letters the writers mention uncertainty and anxiety regarding various themes at the present. At the fictive present however the uncertainty and anxiety is gone. Sometimes a reason is given for this growth, but real understanding of how the person has overcome the anxiety or uncertainty is not possible.

Below an exemplary letter for this category is shown (TB1_168). It is a letter from a mother to a new born daughter in which the mother globally describes her life to her daughter by enumerating positive changes and dreams that have come true. She flourishes on multiple life domains. Also she describes some of her dreams for the future. One difficulty is described: her uncle and father have frustrations towards each other. The writer hopes the quarrel will soon be settled, but does not substantially describe the situation. She ends the letter with the wish for her daughter to grow up and become a healthy girl.

TB1_168

Een stad in Nederland, 2022

Lieve dochter,

Je bent nu nog te jong om te lezen, maar als je straks oud genoeg bent, zou ik het leuk vinden dat je een beetje mee krijgt hoe het leven nu is, met welke problemen en positieve dingen ik nu te maken heb. Misschien heb je er later wat aan, en anders is het misschien gewoon leuk om te lezen (leedvermaak?:P).

Goed, je vader en ik zijn twee jaar geleden getrouwd. Ik was afgestudeerd aan de Universiteit XXXXX als XXXXX en kreeg gelukkig direct een baan aangeboden bij een redelijk grote organisatie in XXXXX. Daar was ik enorm blij mee want dat is de stad waar ik ooit in mijn leven nog moest wonen. Papa werkte al een tijdje door heel Nederland dus XXXXX ligt dan ook nog eens lekker centraal. We hebben daar ons leventje opgebouwd en nu ben jij geboren. Ik zit nog in mijn zwangerschapsverlof maar vind het hoog tijd om weer eens wat te doen, dus dacht ik, laat ik eens een brief voor jou gaan schrijven. Als ik dat nou elk jaar doe, krijg je alle hoogte- en dieptepunten mee elk jaar.

Als het gaat over wensen, hoop ik alleen maar dat we een gelukkig stabiel gezin worden met hopelijk nog extra broertjes of zusjes voor jou. Het liefst met een vaste baan voor je vader en mij zodat we een fijn normaal leven kunnen hebben.

Maargoed natuurlijk zijn er niet alleen maar positieve dingen in het leven. Helaas is de band in de familie nog niet optimaal.

Met je tantes is het heel gezellig, helaas valt je oom daarbuiten. Dit komt doordat hij het bedrijf heeft overgenomen wat veel stress kost, maar ook frustraties oplevert tussen opa en je oom. Opa heeft namelijk het bedrijf een hele poos overgenomen, het kostte hem veel tijd en geld. Ik hoop dat we toch gauw weer snel gezellig aan tafel kunnen met z'n allen, inclusief jou!

Groei maar hard en wordt een gezonde meid!

Lieve groetjes, XXXXX

Type 2: Discontinuous future

This category can be seen as an extreme of the continuous future-category. Like in letters of the continuous future-category, a global description of the elapsed time between the real present and the fictive present is given. However, letters in this category outline a life in a world that is different from life in the present world. For instance, the writers live in a world in which people do not die anymore, in which no world economy exists anymore, in which

people live on other planets, etc. Often the atmosphere of these letters is somewhat fairy tale or science fiction-like.

Any letters were found that wrote negatively about the world the writer lives in (fictive present), although some letters seemed to be ironically intended. Accordingly, few problems were found, and all found problems were solved in the past. Furthermore, several letters contrasted the 'old world' (real present) with its wars, materialism and power struggles; against the 'new world' (fictive present) where people live in peace and harmony with each other, nature is no longer exploited and science has solved most or all big problems of life. Below an exemplary letter is shown (TB1_200). It is a letter from a grandmother to children (not further specified). She describes where and how she lives: far away from civilization, in a small and close community where humans and animals live in harmony with each other. The surrounding nature is very beautiful and provides everything they need. In the fictive present is no more war, grief or anger. In this letter, no problem is described. However, the writer deliberately seems to avoid writing about negative experiences:

There also are many animals in the area, everyone lives in complete harmony with each other. People and animals only die of old age, when someone passes away a new human or animal is born. The total number of people and animals remains constant. Everyone takes care of each other, there is no sadness or anger and there is no war.
(TB1_200)

This avoidance might be a sign that the instruction to imagine the future has activated a defence mechanism: the confrontation with an open future where negative things might happen could have evoked a denial reaction. In that case the writer may (unconsciously?) be struggling with existential themes like death and isolation at the present.

TB1_200

nederland over 10 jaar

Beste kinderen

Ik ben 61 jaar en leef op een afgelegen plek ver van de bewoonde wereld.

Het is een prachtig natuur gebied met veel bomen maar er zijn ook vlaktes, er ligt een meer en er zijn vele stromende beekjes die hierin uitkomen.

De huisjes die er staan worden bewoond door gezinnen die met elkaar een hechte groep vormen. De natuur bestaat uit vele bloeiende planten in de meest prachtige kleuren.

Ook is er ruime keus in groentes en vruchten waar iedereen voldoende van kan eten. Al het eetbare wat te vinden is wordt direct weer aangevuld wanneer de laatste gebruikt is.

Er zijn ook veel dieren in het gebied, iedereen leeft in volledige harmonie met elkaar. Mensen en dieren sterven alleen door ouderdom, wanneer er iemand komt te overlijden wordt er weer een mens of dier geboren. Het totaal aan mensen en dieren blijft constant.

Iedereen zorgt voor elkaar er is geen verdriet of boosheid en er is geen oorlog.

Mijn dochters zijn 31 en 34 jaar en hebben beide een kindje. Ik ben een trotse Oma.

Het dagelijkse leven bestaat uit zorgen voor elkaar, zorgen voor de dieren en de natuur.

Alle mensen uit deze groep zijn verantwoordelijk voor het onderhoud van bomen en planten zodat iedereen hier van kan blijven eten. De dieren eten ook alleen wat de aarde aan voeding geeft. Elke dag schijnt de zon, de temperatuur is aangenaam het is nooit koud maar ook nooit te warm.

Mensen zijn tevreden, niemand heeft haast en er is geen stress. Het leven is eenvoudig, zonder apparatuur. Mensen vermaken elkaar en genieten van de dieren om hen heen. De aarde geeft mens en dier alles wat nodig is om te kunnen leven, de aarde raakt niet uitgeput en er is geen vervuiling.

Een idiale leefwereld

Because the categories seem to be on the same continuum, discriminating between the continuous- and discontinuous future categories can be difficult. A reference point is the amount of (dis)continuity in the letter. The continuous future-category outlines a more or less

continuous future in the sense that the fictive present could possibly have taken place in the real present without the need to assume important scientific progress or changes in fundamental structures of the world. If a discontinuity is described in these letters, it is always an internal change, like a change in character or behaviour. On the other hand, in the discontinuous future-category the surrounding world has fundamentally changed or science has progressed significantly. Sometimes also an internal change has taken place, but emphasis is on external change.

Specific letters

Type 3: Choice and consequences

In this genre a choice made in the past, present or meantime is the central theme of the letter. The choice is described as an important turning-point in the writer's life. Typically the (sometimes drastic) choice is a reaction to a problem or discontent. Doubts and fears regarding the choice are often mentioned. Also the mostly positive consequences are extensively described, and the writer encourages himself to follow his heart and chase his dreams. Every letter in the choice and consequences-category contained a problem, but it was always described on a factual level and solved in the past. Also, the problems were mostly of a material or external kind.

Below an exemplary letter (TB1_102) is shown in which the writer looks back at her decision to quit on her study and to start another study. She describes her life as it is at the moment of writing, and wonders how her life would be if she had not made that choice. Also the writer encourages herself to have more faith in herself, and to make her own decisions instead of doing what others want her to do.

In this letter information is obtained about struggles regarding the decision. The writer characterizes the decision as 'difficult', and she praises herself for having the courage to choose for herself. Also the last part of the letter is very insightful in this respect; she encourages herself to trust her own choices and not to fear the meaning of others or worry about what will happen. This suggests that at the moment of writing the writer has difficulties in making her own choices and taking responsibility for those decisions. An existential theme very similar to these issues is freedom. From the letter it is not entirely clear whether the writer also struggles with these themes on other life domains. What does become clear is that the writer grows in this struggle; she manages engage in activities and relations, and thus colours her life. The fact that no setbacks are described might be an indication that she fears

possible negative consequences of her choices (e.g. unemployment), and therefore denies those possibilities as a defence mechanism. However, this cannot be said with certainty.

TB1_102

XXXXX, 5 december 2035

Beste ik,

Ik zit op dit moment te genieten van een welverdiende vakantie op een mooi warm eiland met zon zee en strand. Ineens begon ik na te denken over de keuzes die ik in mijn leven heb gemaakt en die ervoor hebben gezorgd dat ik alles bereikt heb waar ik ooit als student nog maar van kon dromen. Tegenwoordig werk ik in de XXXXX en geniet hier volop van. Ik ben getrouwd met mijn jeugdliefde XXXXX en samen hebben we 2 prachtige kinderen die inmiddels al in de pubertijd zitten. we bezitten een mooie villa in een rustige woonwijk. Hoe anders zou mijn leven er nu uit hebben gezien als ik in mijn studietijd niet de moeilijke keuze had genomen om met mijn studie XXXXX waar ik inmiddels een half jaar mee bezig was te stoppen en toch voor XXXXX te gaan? Als ik terug kijk ben ik blij en dankbaar dat ik toch de stap heb durven nemen om voor mijn eigen keuze te gaan en voor mijzelf te kiezen. XXXXX was misschien zo slecht nog niet maar in dat halve jaartje merkte ik wel dat ik mij daar niet de rest van mijn leven mee bezig wou houden en toch liever de kant van XXXXX opging. Ondanks dat mijn mentor mij dit op de middelbare school had afgeraden vanwege de vele studenten die al XXXXX studeerden heb ik toen toch besloten om met mijn studie XXXXX te stoppen en ben XXXXX gaan studeren, iets wat ik altijd al wou. De reden dat ik mijzelf deze brief schrijf heeft dan ook als reden om mijzelf een boodschap mee te geven: Geloof en vertrouw iets meer in jezelf en in je eigen keuzes. Wees niet altijd bang over wat een ander wel niet zou denken of ongerust over wat er komen gaat. Uiteindelijk komt het allemaal wel goed en van fouten leer je! Dus wees niet meer zo bang en sta achter de keuzes die je maakt. Maak keuzes waar je zelf achter staat en gelukkig van wordt en niet omdat een ander wil dat je een bepaalde keuze maakt! Geloof in jezelf, je kunt het!

Groeten ik

Distinguishing between the choice and consequences- and continuous future categories may be difficult, because the borders of these categories tend merge into each other. In many continuous future-classified letters also one or more choices are described, and

several choice and consequences letters contain elements of a continuous future. To classify the letters it is important to determine the main aim of the letter. The amount of space the writer takes to mention both topics is helpful to determine the focus of a letter.

Type 4: Problem and solution

In the problem and solution genre the writer mainly tells about his struggle with a problem. Typically the problem is very recent and affects the writer's own life at the time of writing (present). Problems were always substantially described, and mostly of internal or social nature. At the fictive moment of writing sometimes the problem is solved in the meantime, but it can also be solved at the fictive present or remain unsolved.

In the exemplary letter below (TB1_114) the writer has become a movie star. Shortly before an important night she thinks about which dress she wants to wear. In the letter she describes her considerations, and in the end she makes a decision. But although the letter in the first instance seems to be about choosing a dress, this decision can also be seen as a struggle to make one's own choices regardless of the opinions of others. This theme highly corresponds with 'freedom': the writer struggles with daring to make her own decisions and accepting the consequences of her decisions.

TB1_114

In XXXXX in een hotelkamer in 10 jaar

Beste XXXXX

Ik zit hier in mijn hotelkamer en weet niet wat voor jurk ik vanavond zal aandoen. Het is lastig. The mensen van de krant kijken altijd precies wat je draagt en of het de eerste keer is of wie de jurk heeft gemaakt. Je mag niet meer dragen wat je wilt je mag niet meer zijn wie je wilt. Je moet aan hun verwachtingen voldoen anders krijg je geen rol in een film meer. Soms ben ik bang mijzelf te verliezen. Gek toch? 10 jaar geleden heb ik er überhaupt niet over nagedacht. En ik heb dit aan gedaan wat ik zelf mooie vond onafhankelijk wat de anderen dachten. Maar mensen veranderen en je ziet niet hoe jezelf meer en meer een mens wordt die je eigenlijk niet bent. Will ik dit? Moet ik dit? Ik denk dat ik vanavond de jurk draag die ik op de huwelijk van mijn vriendin aanhad. Dit is nu bijna 10 jaar geleden. En ik gaa er niets om geven als de anderen het kut vinden. Ook als je ziet dat je verandert en misschien niet meer de mens bent die je was of die je eigenlijk wilde zijn is het toch jouw keuze zo te blijven!

The problem and solution-category needs to be distinguished from the choice and consequences-category. In the latter category, the choice often has been made longer ago, and emphasis is on the (positive) consequences. Also often the initial problem has been solved by making the decision. In the problem and solution-category the problem often is still present at the moment of writing, and emphasis is on considerations regarding the choice. Both categories do not exclude each other, because over time many decisions bring new problems.

Type 5: New start

This category can be viewed as a variant of the choice and consequences-category. In these letters a radical change in the life of the writer is central, which is often experienced as a new beginning, a new life. Earlier the life of the writer was significantly restricted through high-demanding activities like work or study. These activities are not per se negative, but they put a limit to other activities. At the fictive moment of writing one or more important activities have omitted, which gives the writer new possibilities live a meaningful life. Often the change coincides with a transition to a new life phase like graduation or retirement. In the letter difficulties regarding the change are described (anxiety, depressive feelings) as well as new possibilities to set up one's life. In every new start-letter a problem was mentioned, and

substantially described. The problems were mostly internal, but some were material (retirement) or external (crisis), and most problems were solved in the past. Special in this category are the letters in which the writer recovers from severe illness. In these letters the 'new life' can almost be taken literal, since in several letters the writers has faced poor life expectancies.

In the exemplary letter below (TB1_256) the writer describes how her life has been since she has retired. Before her retirement she worried about her life losing its meaning because important pursuits and responsibilities would be lost. The letter is written after retirement, and the writer encourages herself. She has found new activities and contacts, and so has given new meaning to her life. Also she encourages herself to live life and exploit opportunities. It can be concluded that the writer at the present struggles with her life losing its meaning after she retires.

TB1_256

In een café in de stad, 28 juli 2016

Beste XXXXX,

ik zit hier in een café midden tussen vele jonge mensen en drink een bakje koffie. Ik heb een afspraak met een vriendin met wie ik vanmiddag iets leuks ga doen. In de tijd die ik nog op haar wacht schrijf ik je een klein briefje. Als je misschien al hebt gezien komt dit brief bijna vijf jaar vanuit de toekomst.

In de tussentijd is veel gebeurd. Ik ben sinds en halve jaar een gepensioneerd. De gedachten eraan dat ik ooit niet meer ga werken vond ik altijd heel raar. Ik moet toegeven dat ik zelfs iets angstig tegen deze tijd heb gekeken, omdat het voor mij een zo ongewis periode van het leven was. Ik was bang ervoor dat ik niets meer te doen zou hebben en dat ik dan in een soort vacuüm zou leven, omdat er geen belangrijke taken meer voor mij zijn. Ik was ook bang ervoor, dat mij niemand meer nodig zou hebben.

Maar gelukkig kwam alles anders. Oftewel ik nooit een heel erg actieve mens was heb ik, toen ik gepensioneerd was, begonnen nieuwe activiteiten te zoeken die ik leuk vind en die mijn leven vervulling geven. Ik ben begonnen mij vaak met vrienden te ontmoeten (zo als vandaag) en nu heb ik ook eindelijk de tijd ervoor. Ik bezoek iedere week een schildering cursus en er heb ik ook al met leuke mensen kennis gemaakt. Bovendien heb ik door een vriendin van een vereniging gehoord die zich om oude en zieke mensen zorgen. Sinds een maand help ik er ook en het is een goede gevoel te weten, dat men als men nog ouder wordt niet 'tot het eind' alleen moet zijn.

Sinds ik gepensioneerd ben heb ik niet weiniger te doen. De angst daarvoor dat mij niemand meer nodig heeft, heeft ertoe geleid, dat ik actief werd en even dat niet opgetreden is. Ik moet zeggen, dat het open spreken met vrienden en familie over mijn angsten mij ook heeft geholpen.

Ik denk dat het jou zou geruststellen als je weet, dat jou leven niet voorbij is, alleen omdat je niet meer gaat werken. Ik wil je gewoon eraan herinneren dat er nog vele leuke dingen zijn die je nog wil doen en waarvoor je nu de tijd heeft. Dus, nut jou kans!

Although in the present study no cases of doubt were found, differences between new start letters and respectively choice and consequences- and problem and solution letters must be made clear. In contrast to the choice and consequences- and problem and solution category

the difficulties described in new start letters are not choices, but events that happen to the writer, and the writer has to deal with it.

Type 6: Advice

In this category the writers struggles with a problem at the present. Typically the writer encourages his younger self and gives advice to get through the hard time. The predominantly internal and material problems are substantively described, but the overall goal of the letter is to encourage and advice the younger self. In every letter of this category the problems were solved or have significantly improved in the meantime.

Below an exemplary letter is shown (TB1_208). This is a letter written to the younger self. The younger self is not doing very well; she has debts, is dissatisfied with her job and is looking for love in her life. She encourages herself by globally describing what her life is like at the moment of writing. Also she gives herself advice to take things easy and continue in a therapy. Regarding this problem, she appeals to her responsibility for her future family: without persevering in therapy she won't be ready for an enduring relationship and children. This struggle has much to do with taking responsibility, a theme in the concern 'freedom'.

TB1_208

XXXXX, 12.12.2021

Beste XXXXX,

Door een tijdmaschine was het mogelijk tien jaren in jouw toekomst te reizen. Ik zit met jouw echtgenoot en jouw dochter in jouw woonkamer. Jij woont nog steeds in het oude huis van jouw overleden XXXXX maar al lang niet meer alleen. Acht jaar geleden hebt jij jouw huidige echtgenoot ontmoet, op een verjaardagsfeest van een vriend. Twee jaar later zijn jullie getrouwd en dan kwam jullie dochter. Ik weet dat jij in jouw tegenwoordige tijd in grote problemen zit: jij hebt Schulden, jij bent niet tevreden met jouw baan en jij bent op zoek naar de grote liefde. Maar laat het rustig aangaan! Ik weet wel dat het allemaal goed komt. Desondanks is het belangrijk dat jij een therapie tegen jouw XXXXX maakt. Ik weet dat het niet makkelijk is en dat jij het liefst wilt wegrennen. Maar jij moet het volhouden anders ben jij niet klaar voor een echte relatie en kinderen. Ik weet van een situatie waarin jij bijna wilde opgeven maar dan heb jij aan jouw toekomst gedacht en daaraan dat jij zo graag een partner en kinderen wilt hebben. Dat heeft jou geholpen de therapie vol te houden. Denk er altijd aan als het weer erg is: De therapie is belangrijk voor jouw toekomst.

Letters in the advice-category mainly need to be distinguished from continuous future letters. Discrimination is based on the overall goal of the letter, the main message. A letter is marked as an advice-letter if the outlined future is meant to encourage, stimulate or otherwise positively engage the reader and comprehensive and/or detailed advice is given. If the letter focuses largely on describing the future and few or general advice is given about how that future can become reality, the letter is classified as continuous future. However, the categories seem not clearly distinct but rather blend together.

Research question 3: How are the existential concerns present in the letters from the future?

Below first an overview is provided of the number of struggles found per criterion and letter type, differentiated in existential- and non-existential struggles. Then in general and per concern it is discussed how the existential dimension is present in the different letter types.

Overview

In total, in 68 of the 100 analyzed letters a struggle was found. 37 of these struggles were eventually classified as existential. Table 1 shows only the numbers and percentages of letters in which struggles were found (N=68). In the columns the existentiality of the found struggles is differentiated: numbers and percentages of both existential and non-existential struggles are shown, as well as numbers and percentages of all the found struggles. The rows show the numbers and percentages of (sub) criteria and letter types that were found in the letters.

Existentiality of the struggle Criteria and letter types	Existential struggles	Non-existential struggles	All struggles
Criterion 1: Presence of a struggle Struggle description - Factual - Substantial Struggle types - Internal - Material - Social - External	7 (19%) 30 (81%) 17 (46%) 8 (22%) 10 (27%) 2 (5%)	19 (61%) 12 (39%) 15 (48%) 11 (35%) 2 (6%) 3 (10%)	26 (38%) 42 (62%) 32 (47%) 19 (28%) 12 (18%) 5 (7%)
Criterion 2: Time Struggle solved in: - Past - Real present - Meantime - Fictive present - Future - Unsolved	12 (32%) 0 (0%) 13 (35%) 6 (16%) 0 (0%) 6 (16%)	21 (68%) 0 (0%) 7 (23%) 0 (0%) 0 (0%) 3 (10%)	33 (48%) 0 (0%) 20 (29%) 6 (9%) 0 (0%) 9 (13%)
Letter types General: - Continuous future - Discontinuous future Specific: - Choice and conseq. - Problem and solution - New start - Advice	5 (14%) 0 (0%) 1 (3%) 10 (27%) 8 (22%) 13 (35%)	16 (52%) 3 (10%) 6 (19%) 1 (3%) 0 (0%) 5 (16%)	21 (31%) 3 (4%) 7 (10%) 11 (16%) 8 (12%) 18 (26%)
Total	37 (100%)	31 (100%)	68 (100%)

Table 1. Observed numbers and percentages of existential and non-existential struggles found in the letters, differentiated per letter criterion and letter type. Also the numbers and percentages of all struggles found per letter criterion and letter type are shown.

Regarding the problem types (criterion 1), both existential and non-existential struggles were mostly of an internal nature (46% respectively 48%). In existential letters slightly more social struggles were found (27% versus 6% in non-existential letters). Also, existential struggles were predominantly described substantially, while the description of non-

existential struggles varied. Regarding the time in which the struggle was solved, existential struggles were solved varyingly in the past and the meantime (32% and 35%), while the majority of non-existential struggles were solved in the past (68%). Furthermore, all problems solved in the fictive present were classified as existential. In the letter categories big differences were found regarding the existentiality of the problem. The first three categories; ‘continuous future’, ‘discontinuous future’ and ‘choice and consequences’ were mostly classified as non-existential (both general and specific letters), while the ‘problem and solution’, ‘new start’ and ‘advice’ categories were mostly classified as existential (all specific letters).

The existential dimension

Regarding the two letter criteria, it appeared that the way in which a struggle was described matters regarding the existentiality of the struggle: especially substantially described problems are associated with the presence of an existential concern. The four types of struggles do not show a clear pattern, although social struggles seem to be slightly stronger associated with the presence of an existential concern. Also existential letters are predominantly associated with struggles that are unsolved at the moment of writing, while non-existential struggles mostly were solved in the past.

And regarding the letter types, especially letters in the ‘problem and solution’, ‘new start’ and ‘advice’ categories are associated with the presence of an existential concern. Existential struggles in these categories are often described in an open and honest way, while existential letters in the ‘continuous future’, ‘discontinuous future’ and ‘choice and consequences’ categories more often functioned as defences against a confrontation with an existential concern.

Concerns

Death

Traces of existential death anxiety were found mostly in NS-letters. Also, struggles related to existential death anxiety were mostly substantially described, vehement experiences of an internal nature, and were solved in the past or meantime.

Furthermore, in the letters different levels of explicitness were found. Many writers describe a personal confrontation with death only on a factual level, or describe mourning and grief over a deceased family member: as if personal death is too difficult to consider.

Attitudes resembling a defence mechanism were found however: both personal specialness

(e.g. not losing any relatives in war) and an ultimate rescuer (e.g. scientific progress eliminating the inevitability of death) seemed to be present. Also it seemed that a confrontation with death forces people to live: in several letters writers who have survived a confrontation with death persist in living life to the full. An example of this effect is shown below in TB1_218.

TB1_218

XXXXX, 16.01.2014

Liefste familie,

Weer gezond!

Mijn hele pijnen zullen vergeten zijn. Ik kan weer eten, dansen en glimlachen en ik zal nooit weer huilen. Mijn therapie laat een groot potentieel zien, dus wordt de kanker in mijn lichaam van dag te dag minder. Nu mag ik weer alles aantrekken wat ik vroeger zo leuk vond en ik kan met vrienden buiten vieren gaan. Mijn gezondheid zal de hele familie weer nieuwe krachten, levenslust en moed geven. Mijn haren groeien weer langzaam aan en ik zal nog op een grote reis met jullie gaan. Ik heb veel geleerd door mijn ziekte: Sterk te zijn voor de familie, bereid te zijn om te overlijden wat soms ook depressies veroorzaakte. Ik heb geleerd dat niets in het leven op toeval berust en iedere seconde kostbaar is. Ik heb geleerd wat familie precies betekent: Voor elkaar te zorgen, hulp te krijgen ook in moeilijke situaties en in iedere geval aan een goed einde voor mij te hopen. Ik kon beter met de ziekte omgaan als jullie, omdat ik al met me zelf afgesloten had. Door de hulp van jullie en vrienden had ik niet altijd aan mijn ziekte gedacht en ook leuke dagen volbracht. Bedankt! Maar nu ben ik gezond en ben al op zoek naar een nieuwe baan. Hoe vinden jullie dat? Ik hoop dat ik verder gezond en gelukkig blijf.

Freedom

Traces of existential freedom were found mostly in PS- and A-letters. The kind of struggles related to existential freedom varied; internal, material and social struggles were found. The struggles were (moderately) vehement and described substantially. Most of these struggles were solved in the meantime, thus at the moment of writing the struggles were not yet solved.

Many writers seemed to struggle with existential freedom, since this concern was found by far the most often. Probably the design of the study causes to think about freedom: people are asked to think about a future that is completely blank and open to any interpretation. Also the great number of students in the study may declare the high amount of freedom-related struggles: they have entered a new life phase, started living away from their parents and now have to take responsibility for their own life. This freedom to establish an own life may cause a confrontation with existential freedom. And indeed, many writers describe uncertainty about their capabilities, choices and future. Also in several letters the

responsibility that comes with freedom is mentioned: the responsibility to grow up and establish a life, to care for other persons etc. Guilt, which is inextricably linked to responsibility, was not found in the letters. Moreover, in letters in which guilt seems to play a role writers seem to avoid the theme by transferring their responsibility –and corresponding guilt to other people. For instance, in TB1_255 the writer struggles with a broken relationship. In the letter she decides to make it up with –presumably- her boyfriend:

Therefore I went to you, ringed the bell. You opened the door and only looked in my eyes. Everything I said was: “I missed you. I’m sorry for what happened.” Then you took me in your arms, we did not say anything. We stood there for five minutes. Then you looked me in the eyes and said: “I’m glad you’re here.” At that moment I felt warm and good and safe. Now here I am and I am very glad that this conflict is out of my life.

Isolation

Existential isolation is associated with NS- and A-letters, and with internal, social and material struggles which were solved in the meantime. These struggles were mostly vehement experiences and described substantially.

Regarding existential isolation, several letters mention (a search for) amicable or love relationships. Sometimes anxiety that comes with the search for good relationships is described. Also, although they do not mention it explicitly, some writers seem to cling to unhealthy relations for fear of loneliness. However, in the letters writers generally have succeeded in establishing a new life and relationships. Below a translated fragment of a previously discussed letter containing traces of existential isolation is shown (TB1_256, see page 33 for the complete letter).

‘A lot has happened in the meantime. I’m retired for half a year now. The thought of ever having to quit working always seemed very strange to me. I must admit that I even was a little anxious about this time, because it seemed such an unsure period of life to me. I was afraid that I wouldn’t have anything to do anymore, and that I would live in a kind of vacuum because there wouldn’t be any more important tasks for me. I also was afraid that no one would need me anymore.’

Meaninglessness

Also meaninglessness is associated with NS- and A-letters. Struggles related to meaninglessness mostly were of an internal nature and were solved in the meantime or remained unsolved. These struggles were (moderately) vehement and described substantially. Many writers seem to struggle in dealing with existential meaninglessness. They struggle on what to live for and what to do with their life. In the fictive present most people have found meaning: in general they lead a meaningful and satisfying life. In general writers find meaning in their work, their family and in wealth.

Two writers who have seriously been confronted with death (through cancer and major depression) explicitly name love and loving relationships as the (only) reason for living. These confrontations with death seem to be actual events that have taken place around the real present. Although the number of letters is extremely small, the fact that both writers have faced comparable situations and cling to the same reason for living is remarkable. They must have literally lost almost everything and have only left love as a reason for living, which suggests that love is a more underlying motive for living than more 'superficial' motives like work or wealth. An exemplary letter containing traces of existential meaninglessness is shown below (TB1_163).

TB1_163

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, XXXXX

Conclusion and discussion

Main conclusion

In this study a working model was developed to explore the existential dimension in letters from the future. The model consists of 1) two letter criteria, 2) a division into six letter categories and 3) search for existential content. The main conclusion that can be drawn from this study is that the existential dimension can be found in the future letters, and that the criteria and letter categories are helpful to find letters with existential content. So, it is possible to explore the existential dimension through narrative futuring. However, regarding the existential dimension varying degrees of explicitness were found in the letters. Below first the research questions will be answered, secondly the strengths and limitations of the developed working model will be discussed, and thirdly implications and recommendations will be given for future research.

Research questions

Research question 1: Which criteria can be found that indicate the presence of existential concerns in the letters from the future?

The first part of the model consists of the identification of two letter criteria: 1) the presence of a struggle and 2) the position of the struggle on a time dimension. These main criteria were divided into sub criteria. Below per criterion the relevance will be discussed with regard to the existential dimension.

The first criterion; the presence of a struggle functioned as a starting point in the search for existential content. In approximately two third of the letters a struggle was found. These letters were further classified regarding 1) the way in which the struggle was described and 2) the type of struggle. Especially the way in which the struggle was described appeared to be predictive for finding existential content: 81% of the existential struggles were described substantial, while 61% of the non-existential struggles were described on a factual level. The 19% existential letters containing a struggle described on a factual level were classified as existential because these writers described a future in which the struggle has been solved in a highly unlikely way. Although these struggle descriptions were factual, the writer seemed to have (existential) fear of possible negative events in the future and denies these possibilities. The identification of struggle types appeared to be less predictive: almost half of the existential (46%) and non-existential struggles (48%) were of an internal nature. Regarding

the other struggle types small differences were found between existential and non-existential struggles, but these differences were not big enough to exclude coincidence.

Regarding the second criterion, the position of the struggle on a time dimension it appeared that more than two third of the non-existential struggles were solved in the past, while the moment of solving of existential struggles differed. Thus, the position of the struggle on a time dimension does have predictive value for the finding of existential concerns. These findings seem to be partly in line with Pennebaker & Seagalls theory (1999) that when people construct a coherent narrative of a difficult experience, the event can be summarized, stored and forgotten more easily. Based upon this theory one would expect most non-existential struggles to be solved longer ago, and most existential struggles to be actual or very recent. On the other hand, since a confrontation with an existential concern is a very vehement experience and evokes intense anxiety (May & Yalom, 2000) people may try to avoid such a confrontation at all cost and thus may cling to less effective defences like denial and distraction. Furthermore, the interplay of concerns may blur these findings. Since in many letters multiple concerns were found, a confrontation with one concern may influence or evoke a confrontation with another concern, causing a sequence of confrontations over time. This makes it difficult to distinguish at which moment in time people were struggling with which concern(s).

Research question 2: Which letter types can be found that indicate the presence of existential concerns in the letters from the future?

Six letter types were identified. Varying numbers of existential struggles were found in the letter types, thus they have predictive value for the finding of existential content. Below the predictive value of the individual letter types will be discussed.

In the first two letter types, ‘continuous future’ and ‘discontinuous future’ relatively few problems were found, and they had mostly been solved in the past. Consequently these categories are associated with the absence of an existential dimension. In the letters it seemed that writers deny the considerable chance that major problems will occur in the future. This tendency relates to McAdams finding (1997) that some letters are too consistent: they are not open to changes in the environment and opinions from others. Also these letters can be seen as less ‘good’ (beneficial to mental health): since they are less open to an unknown future and outline a minimally differentiated future (writers succeed in almost every aspect of life), they are less credible because practically no life is free of setbacks (McAdams, 1997). The

tendency to deny the possibility of future struggles can also be seen as a defence mechanism (Yalom, 1980).

The third and fourth category, ‘choice and consequences’ and ‘problem and solution’ imply the presence of a (former) struggle. All problems in the ‘choice and consequences’ category are solved in the past, while the moment of solving is divergent in ‘problem and solution’ letters. This time-effect can also be seen in the percentage of existential letters found: 3% in ‘choice and consequences’ letters and 27% in ‘problem and solution’ letters. Thus, the ‘problem and solutions’ letter category moderately associates with the presence of an existential concern, while the ‘problem and solution’ letter category is not.

It appeared that existential confrontations are related the strongest to the ‘new start’ letter category: only existential letters were found in this category. The ‘new start’ category describes specific struggles that have actually changed the life of the writer, in so far as that some writers speak of a ‘new start’. Even if struggles have been solved longer ago (in the past) their influence on the life of the writers is still tangible. Through these struggles, which often coincide with a transition to a new life phase, writers are urged to reconstruct meaning in their lives. Also in multiple letters some of the consequences of a loss of meaning are described: writers suffer from anxiety and depressive feelings. These results are in line with the finding that a lack of meaning in life corresponds to depression (Pinquart, 2002; van Selm, 1998; Krause, 2007).

Most struggles in the ‘advice’ letter category are described substantially, and were solved in the meantime. Consequently more than two third of these letters were classified as existential. Most ‘advice’ writers seem to struggle with a problem at the real present, and use the letter to encourage and advice themselves. In this sense ‘advice’ writers may be more resilient: they might be better able to ‘bounce back’ from difficult experiences and to navigate to resources that enhance wellbeing (Liebenberg & Ungar, 2009; Ungar & Lerner, 2008; Sools & Mooren, 2012).

Research question 3: How are the existential concerns present in the letters from the future?

To begin with, in approximately one third of the letters an existential struggle was found. These struggles seemed to be present in two different ways. Some writers openly and honestly described their dealing with the struggle and their feelings of anxiety and distress, while others seem to write from a defence mechanism. As mentioned before, the solutions to these (serious) struggles seemed so unlikely, that it was suspected to be a defence mechanism to a confrontation with an existential concern.

Regarding the individual concerns, letters containing traces of existential death anxiety mostly fell into the NS-letter category. Also the two main defences as described by Yalom (1980) were found: personal specialness and the appearance of an ultimate rescuer. In some letters from writers who were strongly confronted with death, the confrontation also forced them to live life to the fullest. This tendency is also described by Yalom (1980).

Regarding existential freedom in many letters themes concerning responsibility were found, while any writer mentioned guilt-related themes. However, according to Yalom (1980) responsibility and guilt are inextricably related to one another; they are two sides of the same coin. An explanation for this discrepancy may be that writers are ashamed of their mistakes and keep them hidden from publicity. Thus, writing only about taking one's responsibility regardless of the doubt and fear (which is often seen as something good and honourable) may be much more attractive than admitting that one is guilty to a wrong decision.

In many letters containing traces of existential isolation (the search for) satisfying relationships was found. Since a high number of students participate in the study, one could expect many cases of existential isolation. For becoming and being a student essentially is to be isolated from one's former life and 'old' frame of reference. For good reason Yalom (1980) describes isolation as a process which has much to do with the process of growing up: the child separates more and more from his parents while growing up. An explanation for the relatively low number of letters containing existential isolation can be that at the time of the data-collection the students have already 'defended' themselves against the isolation by building new relationships.

Existential meaninglessness was found the least in the letters. This is remarkable, because according to Sools & Mooren (2012) today's societies and international relations seem to change at an ever-increasing speed, while adequate frames of meaning and practical guidelines are lost. It would then be expected that individuals experience difficulty to make sense of life in general, and to constitute meaning in their own life. An explanation for this finding may be that the writers cling to defence mechanisms (Yalom, 1980). A tendency found very often in letters containing traces of existential meaninglessness is denial of the possibility to be confronted with feelings of meaninglessness in the future. Often writers seem to cherish a (childish) hope for a future in which they have found ultimate meaning in life.

Strengths and limitations

As mentioned before, by using the developed model in approximately one third of the letters an existential concern was found. Since this is a first exploratory study into the possibility to

find existential themes in letters from the future, the size of this result firmly underpins the conclusion that it is indeed possible to find existential themes in the letters. Thus the developed working model appears to be a promising instrument to assess the presence of the existential dimension in the letters of the future.

On the other hand, the model needs to be further elaborated in order to more specifically assess the presence of the existential dimension in the letters. First, the classification of the letters as existential / not existential needs to be firmer specified. The model as it is now is based upon intuition and lacks a clear coding system by which the existentiality of a letter is determined. Second, in approximately one third of the letters no struggle was described. Because the description of a struggle formed the basis from which the presence of the existential dimension was explored, these letters were all classified as non-existential. Thus, regarding these letters I expect the model to under detect the existential dimension. Third, it was decided to analyse on letter-level. Strength of this approach is that the letter is seen as a whole instead of individual sentences, and thus the core message of the letter can be captured and analysed for existential content. On the other hand, through the decision to analyse a letter as a whole, smaller existential remarks may be overlooked.

It may be argued that participants do not write about real problems, but simply fantasize about what might happen in the future. In that case the problems, however authentically described do not refer to currently experienced existential struggles. And indeed, the writing instructions do encourage using one's full imagination (see appendix A). However, in narrative psychology fiction is equally valued as facts, because fiction too tells something about the writer or the world (Oatley, 1999).

Implications and recommendations

In the introduction it was explained that this study is part of a larger line of research at the UT. The present study is of a fundamental nature, and thus forms the basis for future research. Two lines of research will be worked out below. First, the model developed in the present study needs to be further underpinned. Since the model was developed by one researcher, I recommend interrater reliability to be executed. Also the validity of the developed model needs to be strengthened. In order to gain more certainty about the existentiality of the found struggles, further research is required. For instance, in-depth interviews could be conducted to obtain additional background information, and thus creating a broader basis to determine whether the struggles are existential. At the present, further underpinning the developed model seems to be the most relevant direction for further study.

Therefore in the next study the developed model will be validated through the conduction of in-depth interviews.

Second, the other relations in the described research model need to be explored. Specifically, insight is needed into the way(s) in which narrative futuring enhances existential reflection, and how by doing so the finding of (existential) meaning can be facilitated. In the second study preliminary insight will be gained through in-depth interviews about whether the writing exercise induces existential reflection and action. If these relations are well studied, insight is needed into the way in which narrative futuring, through enhancing the finding of (existential) meaning contributes to psychological wellbeing. This relation could for instance be studied by relating the writing of a future letter to the scores on one or more mental health questionnaires.

When more insight is gained about the effects and possible benefits of narrative futuring, the letter exercise and analytical model may be implemented as a screening instrument to assess the content and quality of the dealing with existential themes. Also the exercise may be implemented as a therapeutic intervention to creatively stimulate existential reflection, and implicitly enhance the finding of existential meaning.

Final remark

In this study a model was developed to assess the presence of existential concerns in the letters. Six letter types were found that indicate the presence of existential struggles. Also two letter criteria (the presence of a problem and the position on a time dimension) appeared to be helpful in identifying existential struggles in the letters. It appeared that all four existential concerns could be found in the letters. Also attitudes resembling defence mechanisms were found. Especially denial and distraction were found often. Therefore, despite the limitations it can be concluded that narrative futuring is a promising instrument to explore the existential dimension.

Study 2 - Exploring the Existential Dimension through Narrative Futuring: Validation Study

Research questions

In the introduction, the two main aims of this study were formulated: 1) to test the construct- and ecological validity of the concerns found by the developed model, and 2) to obtain preliminary insight into whether the nature of the letter exercise can revive an old confrontation with an existential concern. These research aims were operationalized into three research questions:

- 1) Do the results of the letter- and interview analyses correspond regarding the presence of existential concerns?*
- 2) To what extent are existential letters from the future indicative for the presence and value of existential struggles in daily life?*
- 3) Does the process of writing the letter induce existential reflection and action?*

Method

Participants

In order to answer the research questions, interviews were conducted with twelve new participants. A convenience sampling technique was used. Among the participants were friends (N=4) and relatives (N=4), but not all participants were acquaintances of the author (N=4). Participants had to be mentally healthy adults (18⁺) who had access to a computer with an internet connection. All the participants were Dutch. Among them were five men and seven women with an average age of 26-35 year. Most participants were single without children (N=8) and had completed tertiary or higher education (N=10). All participants were Christian, except for one. Most future letters were written at home (N=10), the other letters were written at school (N=2). The writers were alone (N=7) or family was around (N=5) during the writing process.

Procedure

All participants received via e-mail a brochure containing the necessary information about the study (appendix B), an informed-consent form, the letter instructions (appendix A) and the questionnaire (appendix C). If the filled-in documents and the future letter were received by

the researcher, an appointment was made to conduct the interview. A time interval of one week between receiving the letter and the interview was pursued. Eventually time intervals ranged from 6 to 16 days, with an average of 11 days. The data contains one outlier of 24 days, due to an intervening vacation.

The future letter was analysed according to the model developed in the first part of this study. Among others the letter type was listed, as well as the presence of a problem, the position on a time dimension and eventually the presence of existential concerns in the letter was assessed. The letter analysis was executed before the interview was conducted, so that an initial idea was formed about the themes the writer was struggling with. These ideas were verified during the interviews in order to assess the ecological validity of the developed working model.

Once the letter was analysed, an interview was conducted at the home of the writer, or at another quiet place. The interviews were recorded using a voice-recorder. Before the interview started, the participants received instructions about the interview (Appendix D). The interview was opened by asking the participant to read his letter aloud. Then questions about the contents of the future letter and about the writing process were asked. After the interview was finished, the participants were debriefed (see Appendix D). On average the appointments took about an hour, and the interviews themselves about half an hour.

Instruments

Letter

The participants were asked to write a letter from the future according to the same writing instructions as used in the previous study (Appendix A). Also a short questionnaire was included, containing demographic questions and some informative questions about (writing) the letter (Appendix C).

Interview

In order to find out how or to what extent the letter topics and the writing process were existential, semi-structured phenomenological interviews were conducted with all participants. I assumed that the participants would have trouble in understanding and answering direct questions about existential concerns, so I decided to formulate indirect questions to assess existential concerns. Based upon the previous study expectations were formed about which main letter topics referred to an existential confrontation, and when a

writing process had elicited a confrontation with an existential theme. Differences in existential- and non-existential letters were sought regarding these expectations, in order to substantiate the existentiality of the concerns found with the developed working model and the effects of the letter exercise. In total, six expectations were found and formulated as interview questions. The interview schedule can be found in Appendix D.

Regarding the second research question three expectations were found:

- 1) The meaning of the main letter topic was differentiated. Since a confrontation with an existential concern can be a life-changing experience, it is assumed that writers of existential letters attribute a different meaning to their main letter topic than writers of non-existential letters.
- 2) The value of the main letter topic is determined. It is expected that since existential experiences can be very vehement, writers attribute more value to their main letter topic than writers of non-existential letters.
- 3) Associations of the main letter topic with other themes or events in the life of the writer are determined. I assume that when the letter topic is taken from real life, the more likely it contains traces of existential struggles. If the letter topic is just a triviality with little or no connections with the writer's own life, I expect the letter to much less likely relate to existential struggles. An exception to this assumption is the case in which the letter contains symbolic connections to the writer's own life. For instance, when the letter must be read as a personal fairy-tale or parable in which important life lessons are hidden. Because this interview question is very open, I added structure to the answers by using the Critical Incidents Technique (Flanagan, 1954; Zemke, & Kramlinger, 1991). This technique focuses on a specific situation in which the participant was confronted with the mentioned theme, so that an in-depth discussion of the theme is made easier and the chance on collecting hollow or fragmented data is reduced. Also, I used a small checklist to specify the answer components I minimally wanted to hear something about (Osbourne, 1990). To be precise, the answer should minimally cover thoughts, emotions and behaviour (during the experience, not afterwards!).

Regarding the third research question I distinguished three expectations.

- 1) The experience of the writing process was differentiated. It is assumed that if the letter exercise incited a confrontation with an existential concern, the writer would experience the writing process differently than if no existential confrontation is incited.
- 2) The reconsideration of the future letter was determined. It was expected that if an existential confrontation had taken place during the writing process, writers do think back

more often and more substantially to the letter than writers who were not confronted with an existential theme during the writing process.

3) The effects of the future letter were determined. Specifically, only effects after the writing process was finished and before the interview was conducted were taken into account. It is expected that if an existential confrontation is elicited through the letter exercise, this experience may be so powerful that the writer is incited to not only think about his life, but also take action. These actions do not have to be big or well planned, but may be very small.

Furthermore, I used bracketing and memoing techniques in order to become conscious of my own assumptions (Osborne, 1990; Groenewald, 2004). By doing so I could take them into account during the interview analyses. Also, because the interview schedule was not tested before use in this study, it was critically reviewed after each interview session and if possible, improved. Small alterations were made in the order and formulation of the interview questions to ease the course of the interview and to improve the intelligibility of the interview questions.

Data-analysis

The interviews were transcribed verbally, because the focus of this study was on the answers as a whole, not on e.g. intonation. The transcripts were closely read, and key passages containing (partial) answers to the sub question were marked and coded. Then for every participant a document was made in which both the letter analysis and an overview of the participant's answers were listed. The sub-research questions were used to organize the participant's answers, using the information from all the corresponding interview-questions and eventually 'loose' bits of information given in the interview. The overviews were formulated as literally as possible, and every new bit of information was included.

Then, *for every individual participant* the two main research questions were answered using the answers to the sub-research questions (the indicators). By combining all the answers to the sub-questions the main questions were answered (the existentiality of the participant's experiences was assessed). For instance, if the main topic of the future letter 1) had significant meaning to the writer, 2) the writer attributes value to the described letter topic and 3) the writer can easily associate the letter topic to events in his/her personal life, I assumed that the content of the letter indeed refers to an existential struggle in the life of the writer. Or, in other words, that the letter indeed is existential. On the other hand, if the participant answered negative to the three indications, I assumed that the content of the letter does not refer to an existential struggle in the life of the writer. Thus, existential letters may also contain

distinctions that were initially assumed to be unrelated to existential struggles and vice versa. This is due to the fact that the final assessment of the existentiality of the letter is made afterwards, and is based upon all the interview questions together.

Below per interview question it is explained how the answers were categorized. These categories were formed based upon the words used by the participants. Regarding the first research question, first the meaning of the main letter topic was categorized into writers who describe their future as 1) something that can actively be achieved by the writers themselves, and 2) something that is beyond their control. When writers (predominantly) feel capable of achieving the described future by themselves, the indicator is marked as not existential. If writers however define the described future as beyond their control, the indicator is categorized as existential. Second, the value of the main letter topic is categorized into 1) the desire for the described future to come true and 2) the expected consequences if the future does not come true. If a higher desire for the future to come true and greater consequences if this will not be the case is reported, the letter topic is marked as existential. Third, the situations with which the main letter topic is associated are divided into four components: the writers 1) became aware of/were confronted with 2) the presence / lack of 3) their own possibilities or limitations / other people, and 4) this experience was more or less vehement. When writers report a more vehement (4) situation in which they were confronted with (1) the lack of (2) other people (3), the situation is classified as probably referring to an existential struggle. On the other hand, when writers report a less vehement situation (4) in which they became aware of (1) the presence of (2) their own possibilities (3) this sub question does not show traces of existential struggles.

Regarding the second research question, first the experience of the writing process was categorized into 1) the writing method, 2) the difficulty of the writing process and 3) the experienced emotions during the writing process. If a writer starts to write before totally thinking out the topic, experienced more difficulty and more negative emotions during the writing process, the sub question scores positive on revealing existential content. Second, regarding the reconsideration of the future letter three distinctions were found: 1) the writer did or did not think back, 2) the writer thought of the content or the form of the letter, and 3) the reconsideration was a positive, a neutral or a negative experience. When writers did think back (1) to the content of their letter (2) and the experience was negative (3) the sub-question seems to refer to existential content. I assumed that non-existential writers would not think back to the letter (1). If they did however, I assumed that they would focus more on the letter form (2) and that it was a neutral or positive experience (3). And third, the effects of the

future letters were categorized. Besides 1) the presence and absence of effects 2) an effect continuum was found ranging from raising awareness to taking action. If through the letter the writers became more aware of something, the sub question seems to be related to an existential struggle. I expected no effects from non-existential letters. If, however an effect is reported, I expect it to be a practical taking action.

In order to answer the sub- and main research questions *in general*, I listed the answers of all the participants per sub question, divided into existential and non-existential writers. I compared answers from existential writers with answers from non-existential writers to see if the number of criteria found in existential- and non-existential letters differed. A difference of 50% was held as a significant difference.

Results

Research question 1: Do the results of the letter- and interview analyses correspond regarding the presence of existential concerns?

In table 2 the results of the categorization of the twelve future letters is shown. First, the future letters were reasonably distributed over the six letter categories. Almost every category is represented by at least one letter. In the ‘problem and solution’ category most struggles were found (N=3), followed by the ‘continuous future’ (N=2) and ‘advice’ category (N=2). Only the ‘discontinuous future’ category is unrepresented (N=0).

Regarding the two letter criteria, in nine of the twelve analysed letters a problem was found. The majority of problems are of an internal nature (N=7) and are solved in the meantime (N=8). The existential concerns found in the letters are spread over the letter categories. In total, in four of the twelve analysed letters a concern was found.

Existentiality of the struggle Criteria	Existential struggles	Non-existential struggles	All struggles
Criterion 1: Problem types - Internal - Material - Social - External	2 1 1	5	7 1 1
Criterion 2: Time (problem solved in) - Past - Meantime - Fictive present - Unsolved	3 1	5	8 1
Letter categories Continuous future Discontinuous future Choice and conseq. Problem and solution New start Advice	1 1 1 1	1 2 2	2 1 3 1 2
Total	4	5	9

Table 2. Observed numbers of existential and non-existential problems found in the letters, differentiated per letter criterion. Also the total numbers of problems found per letter criterion are shown.

Furthermore, in table three an overview is shown of the presence of concerns in both the future letters and the interviews. The presence of a concern in the future letters is differentiated in the rows, and the presence of a concern in the interviews is shown in the columns. From the table it appears that the model developed in the first study is reasonably valid. From the 8 letters that were classified as non-existential during the letter analyses, only one letter was nonetheless classified as existential during the interview analysis. Regarding

the four letters in which a concern was found, the interviews analyses confirmed these findings. Thus, the results of the interviews do confirm the results of the letter analyses.

Interview Future letter	Non-existential	Existential	Total
Non-existential	7	1	8
Existential	0	4	4
Total	7	5	12

Table 3. Observed numbers of (existential) letters, contrasted with numbers of (existential) interviews.

The non-existential letter that nevertheless was classified as existential after the interview analyses was written by a woman who longs to have a husband and children. In the letter, she describes her life as it would be having a family. She writes about it light-heartedly, and does not mention any negative thoughts or feelings, except for one sentence (I7, in Dutch): “Van vrijgezel en soms wat eenzaam naar een druk en vol leven met een geweldige man en prachtige kinderen.” In the interview however, she finds her life as a bachelor more difficult than she shows in the letter. Also she feels lonelier than she initially admits, to the extent that I categorized the interview as existential (isolation). During the interview the writer appeared to avoid being confronted with her struggle by not reflecting upon her feelings. Thus, the concern appeared to be present, but seemed avoided and ignored by the writer. Since the answering of the interview questions is based upon the existentiality of the future letter and not upon the existentiality of the interview, I handled this letter (I7) as non-existential.

Research question 2: To what extent are existential letters from the future indicative to the presence and value of existential struggles in daily life?

Interview question 1: What meaning do writers of existential letters attribute to their main letter topic, compared to writers of non-existential letters?

In order to structure the letters, four categories of meaning were defined: 1) dream, hope or longing, 2) setting out lines, 3) development and 4) plan of action. These categories are based on the word use of the writers. First, 7 writers described the meaning of their letter as a dream, a hope or a longing. This dream can be very specific, like studying obstetrics (I5) or setting up a shelter for young women (I11). But it can also be a more general dream like remaining ‘good friendships’ (I1) and longing for God to return and do justice on earth (I6).

Two writers saw their letter as an instrument to ‘set out lines towards the future’ (I3). They described the future on a conceptual level: they only indicated area’s in which the writer wants to develop himself, without mentioning a practical approach. In I8, the writer describes his letter as a ‘vision document’ (in Dutch):

(...) Wat betekent de toekomstbrief voor jou?

Ik heb het serieus geschreven. Het is wel een stukje waar ik waarde aan hecht. Ja. Dus het is in die zin wel meer geworden dan meedoen aan een onderzoek.

Ook een stukje analyse van iets wat ik lastig vind en wat ik in de toekomst graag anders zou willen. En ik had natuurlijk een droom of een wens kunnen kiezen, waarvan de kans bijna nihil is dat die uitkomt. Bijvoorbeeld een baan op een bepaalde plek. Dat het precies zo loopt, die kans is niet zo groot. En je kan natuurlijk ook een tijdsspanne pakken van 10-15 jaar, in die verre toekomst iets schrijven. Ik had kunnen schrijven, dat ik getrouwd was en kinderen had. Prachtig om over na te denken, maar dan iets het inderdaad meedoen aan een onderzoek en leuk is om eens over na te denken. En ik heb nu toch wel, ook wel redelijk bewust hoor, iets gekozen waarvan ik denk ‘daar heb ik zelf ook nog iets aan’. Dat is wel zo efficiënt, dan doe je niet alleen mee aan een onderzoek, die tijd heb je dan ook nog voor iets anders besteed.

And further in the interview:

Eigenlijk is de brief een soort van, daarin heb je je gedachten op papier gezet. Van ‘hier staat het en dat kan ik nog eens doorlezen’.

Ja, je zou kunnen zeggen, dat het een soort van visie stuk is voor de komende jaren, waarvan ik zeg: 'ik wil die kant op, ik ga het zo doen' (...).

Also two writers (17%) used the future letter to describe some ways in which they have developed over the past few months/years. For instance, in I10 the writer tells about her search for an appropriate lifestyle: she thinks about whether she wants to be a Christian like her parents, or if she will interpret her faith differently. From these interviews it appeared that the development is recent and important to the writers. In I12 the writer, besides describing his development over the past few years, also wrote down lessons he had learned during the development.

Lastly, one writer (I4) wrote his letter as a plan of action. He chose a short time lapse of a few months in his letter. In the fictive future, he managed to handle his irritations towards a study-group, and transform them into a positive impulse to improve the atmosphere at the meetings. Because of the short time-interval, the writer was able to give his younger self very specific advice about what to do to reach his goal (in Dutch):

De volgende vraag, wat betekent de brief voor jou?

Wat hij voor mij betekent is dat ik in elk geval een aantal dingen gewoon heb neer kunnen leggen en plannen heb kunnen maken voor dat of dat ga ik doen. Ik ga dus, ben nu van plan om zo 'n stukje te gaan schrijven om uit te delen op de bijbelclub, of in elk geval te mailen, van 'ik zit me deze vragen, door iedere keer die zelfde discussie die steeds weer terug komt.' En, in die zin heeft het voor mij de betekenis dat ik daardoor als het ware een soort actieplan in mijn hoofd heb, van dat kan ik gaan doen. Dat zou misschien, dat en dat zou de oplossing kunnen zijn.

The results are shown in table 4. In the rows the different letter meanings are shown, and in the columns the existentiality of the letter is differentiated. Also the total numbers of (non) existential letters are shown in the bottom row. Every writer of an existential letter typed his/her letter as a dream, a hope or a longing. Although some non-existential writers typed their letter as a dream/hope/longing as well, they type their letter otherwise as well. Concluding, writers of existential letters type their letter specifically as a dream, a hope or a longing, while the meanings of non-existential letters vary.

Existentiality of the letter Letter Meaning	Existential	Not existential
Dream, hope, longing	4	3
Set out lines	0	2
Development	0	2
Plan of action	0	1
Total	4	8

Table 4. Observed numbers of letter meanings, differentiated by the existentiality of the letter.

Interview question 2: Do writers of existential letters attribute more value to their main letter topic, compared to writers of non-existential letters?

The value of the main letter topic is worked out in two constructs: the desire for the described future to come true and the anticipated consequences when the described future remains fantasy. When these concepts are differentiated against the existentiality of the future letters, letters that were marked as existential stand out. Writers of existential letters report a great desire for the described future to become reality, and great anticipated consequences if this will not be the case. For instance, the (existential) future letter discussed in I1 describes the ideal future of the writer, containing three main themes: writing a book, marrying and maintaining good friendships. Although the writer can deal with the situation if the first two themes fail to happen, the consequences of a future lack of friendship are great (in Dutch):

Hoe belangrijk is dat onderwerp voor jou, wat er in de brief staat? Hecht je veel waarde aan zo'n toekomst?

Nou, niet heel veel, eigenlijk. Het is wel mijn ideale leven, maar als het anders gaat, en het gaat waarschijnlijk anders, dan is dat ook prima.

Het zou kunnen gebeuren, maar het zou ook niet kunnen gebeuren. Maar hoe zie je het dan? Is het gewoon een leuke fantasie?

Natuurlijk, het is mijn droom om lekker te trouwen, en vrienden zal ik toch wel altijd hebben, en een boek schrijven is eigenlijk ook wel mijn droom. En omdat dat allemaal mijn droom is komt dat waarschijnlijk ook wel uit, maar zo specifiek, dat weet ik niet.

Nee. Maar wel trouwen, een boek schrijven en vrienden houden.

Ja, dat zijn wel de drie elementen.

En daar hecht je wel veel waarde aan, aan die drie?

Ja, ik hecht er veel waarde aan. Ik hecht heel veel waarde aan mijn vrienden, dus als ik die nooit meer heb dan wordt het echt verschrikkelijk. Maar als ik geen man heb of als ik geen boek schrijf, daar stort mijn wereld niet van in. Dus het is een beetje, mijn wereld stort er niet van in als het niet uitkomt, maar van vrienden stort mijn wereld denk ik wel in.

Dus eigenlijk is vriendschap het belangrijkste thema in je brief?

Ja.

As a contrast, the future letter discussed in I9 was not marked as existential. In this letter the writer looks back on establishing a shelter for young women. When asked what value she assigns to the described future, she answers as follows (in Dutch):

Voor sommige mensen is de toekomst heel belangrijk voor andere minder. Ik ben benieuwd welke waarde de toekomst heeft voor jou?

Nou niet enorme waarde of zo. Ik zal het wel onthouden maar niet aan vastklampen. Want als je het over geleid hebt (leven wordt geleid door God, author) dan geloof ik ook wel gewoon dat ik geleid word. En dat ik me daarom niet echt zo vastklamp, maar geloof dat het gaat zoals het zal gaan.

En dan dat het goed is zoals het gaat?

Ja.

Ja, dus niet echt niet heel belangrijk, maar je vindt het wel gewoon leuk. Het is gewoon een mogelijke toekomst, leuk om over na te denken.

Ja.

Dus je ziet wel hoe het loopt?

Ja.

An overview of the results is shown in table 5. The desire for the described future to come true and the expected consequences if this will not be the case are differentiated in high, moderate and low (rows). Also the existentiality of the future letters is distinguished (columns). It appears that writers of existential letters report a high desire for the future to become true, and/or high consequences if this will not be the case. In interviews without an existential dimension writers equally report moderate or low desire and anticipated consequences. Thus, the (coming true of the) described future is more important to writers of existential letters than to writers of non-existential letters.

Existentiality of the letter Desire and consequences	Existential	Not existential
High	4	0
Moderate	0	4
Low	0	4
Total	4	8

Table 5. Observed numbers of the desire for and expected consequences of the described future, differentiated by the existentiality of the future letters.

Interview question 3: Are existential topics associated with different themes or events that happened in the writers' own life, than non-existential topics?

As mentioned under indicator 2b, the main letter topics are veracious. They concern recent problems or developments in the life of the writer. Also, the topics often, but not always play a role in multiple situations.

From the interviews various topics appeared. Four writers told about their interactions with other people: their competency (I9) or struggles (I2, I4, I8) in the interaction. For instance, in I2 the participant tells about his uncomfortableness in a conversation with a classmate. She told him about an emotional situation, and he struggled to adequately react to her emotions. Also, three interviewees told about missing a relationship. In two interviews it concerned missing a (future) husband (I7, I10), while one interviewee misses her deceased father (I5). In two interviews the participants were confronted with their own limits. In I3 the interviewee struggles in managing his irritations towards a study group, while in I11 the participant tells about a day on which she was very busy. She was very tired and wanted to cancel an appointment in the evening, but she did not dare it. In this situation the interviewee crossed her own limits, and she told about the frustration and anxiety it caused. Lastly, in three letters the participants went through a difficult situation: in one situation the interviewee tells about how her friends helped her through a difficult situation (I1), while in the other two the writers were isolated from important others (I6, I12). For instance, in I6 the interviewee tells about a situation in which her husband underwent a major surgery. She tells about the anxiety and impatience the long wait evoked.

Although the described situations varied widely, four distinctions were made to structure the descriptions. The distinctions described below are applicable to all the situations collected in the interviews, and appeared relevant to distinguish existential from non-existential interviews.

First, every writer describes himself being in a certain situation which was more or less difficult. Through the situation the writer 1) became aware of something, or 2) was confronted with something. The difference between raising awareness and a confrontation lies in the emotional perception. Raised awareness is related to a neutral or positive feeling. But a confrontation with something is experienced as negative or painful. Second, the writers are confronted with/ became aware of 1) their own possibilities or limitations, or 2) important other people. Third, the writers may experience 1) the presence of, or 2) a lack of own possibilities/ other people. And fourth, the situation was experienced as 1) vehement, 2) moderately vehement or 3) not vehement.

As an example, in I1 the writer describes a situation in which she felt particularly bleak. At that moment a friend called, listened to her and cheered her up a little (example shown below, in Dutch, significantly shortened). In this example the writer (1) became aware of (3) the presence of (2) important other persons, in this situation a good friend. The writer experienced this situation as quite vehement (4, not derivable from this fragment). Alike this example every situation can be classified.

De brief heeft dus overeenkomsten met dingen uit je eigen leven, en je hebt net genoemd dat vriendschap toch wel een heel belangrijk thema is voor jou. Kun je een gebeurtenis of een situatie beschrijven waarin dat naar voren kwam, dat die vrienden zo belangrijk zijn? Waarin dat duidelijk werd voor jou?

Bijvoorbeeld maandagavond. Ik zat op de bank, en ik dacht: wat moet ik met mijn leven, ik zie het allemaal niet meer zitten. (...) Ik deed niks, ik keek voor me uit, en ik dacht 'ik heb geen zin meer om te leven'. Ik voelde mij verdrietig. (...) Toen belde die vriendin. (...) Ze vroeg even wat over de vakantie (...) en toen zei ze: 'hoe gaat het eigenlijk met je?' Ik zei ik: 'nou, eigenlijk niet zo goed'. Ja, ze zegt 'dat dacht ik al, vertel eens'. En toen was ik heel lang stil, en toen was zij ook heel lang stil, en dat vond ik eigenlijk heel erg fijn. Het was niet zo iemand die er dan overheen dendert (...), maar het was gewoon iemand die wachtte. En ze wachte net zolang totdat ik wat zei. (...) En toen zei ik dat ik me heel ellendig voelde, en dat ik niet snapte waarom ik moest leven, en dat ik de zin van het leven even niet snapte (...) Ze luisterde eerst naar me, en daarna beurde ze me op. Dat vind ik heel fijn. (...) En toen voelde ik me zó goed! (...) Het is niet dat ik toen door de kamer sprong, maar de 'doodsdrang' was weg. Dat was het hele verschil, dat ik niet meer denk van nou, (hapt naar adem). (...) En dan is dat even het telefoontje waardoor dat ik denk 'oh, okee' (opgelucht).

Dat je gewoon even wordt opgebeurd. Daar wordt het niet anders van, maar ...

Je hebt het even gedeeld. De last is even verdeeld. Ook al kan zij daar niks mee, maar ze heeft even geluisterd.

In table 6 an overview is shown of the distinctions (rows) and the existentiality of the interviews (columns). In existential interviews, writers equally described situations in which they became aware of something and situations in which they were confronted with something. In non-existential interviews, slightly more confronting situations were mentioned than awareness-raising situations. Regarding the subject participants became aware of/ were

confronted with, in existential interviews the subject mostly was other people while non-existential interviews mostly concerned the participant's own possibilities/ limitations. In both existential and non-existential interviews participants mentioned more situations in which they experienced a lack of something. Regarding the experienced vehemence of the situation a reverse pattern is found: existential writers mainly mention vehement situations, while in non-existential letters more trivial topics are described. Concluding, writers of existential letters do associate their main letter topic with other situations than writers of non-existential letters. Specifically, existential writers associate their main letter topic mainly with vehement situations in which they missed important other people, while writers of non-existential letters mainly associate their letter topic with non-vehement situations in which they missed own capacities.

Existentiality of the letter Distinctions	Existential	Not existential
Raising awareness	2	3
Confrontation	2	5
Own possibilities/limitations	1	7
Other people	3	1
Presence of –	1	2
Lack of -	3	6
Vehement	3	0
Moderately vehement	1	1
Not vehement	0	7

Table 6. Observed numbers of distinctions with regard to the situations described in the interviews, differentiated by the existentiality of the future letters.

Research question 3: Does the process of writing the letter induce existential reflection and action?

Interview question 4: Did writers of existential letters experience the writing process differently than writers of non-existential letters?

Although the character of this question is very open, during the interviews I distinguished several aspects of the writing process. Hence I gradually started to ask questions about these aspects, without taking away the possibility for the writer to tell about (other) topics he considered important. I distinguished three aspects: 1) the course of the writing process, 2) the difficulty of the writing process and 3) emotions during the writing process.

First, two different courses of the writing process were found. Before the writing process started, 5 writers had some vague idea about the main topic they wanted to write about, and first thought once or multiple times about the themes they wanted to address. The other 7 writers just began to write, and during the writing process they started to think about what they wanted to say in the letter.

Concerning the difficulty of the writing process, all the writers report that the writing process was easy. Also, 9 writers experienced positive emotions during the writing process. They felt good when they thought about a positive future. Two writers look back on the writing process as a negative experience, while one writer experienced no specific emotions regarding the topic of his letter. An overview of the observed numbers and percentages is given in table 6.

Existentiality of the letter Distinctions regarding the writing process	Existential	Not existential
Writing course		
Start with thinking about topic	1	4
Start with writing	3	4
Writing difficulty		
Easy	4	8
Difficult	0	0
Emotions during writing		
Positive emotions	3	6

Negative emotions	1	1
No emotions		1

Table 7: Observed numbers of main- and sub distinctions regarding the writing process, differentiated by the existentiality of the letters.

Regarding the existentiality of the letters, slightly more existential writers started writing before they had completely thought out their letter topic than non-existential writers. All the writers experienced the writing process as easy, so no differences are found on that aspect. Also no significant differences were found between existential- and non-existential writers on experienced emotions during the writing process. Hence, writers of existential letters did not significantly experience their writing process different from writers of non-existential letters. The only difference found is that some of them started with writing before totally figuring out the topic more often than writers of non-existential letters.

Interview question 5: Did writers of existential letters reconsider their letter differently than writers of non-existential letters, after the writing process was finished?

Three aspects regarding the reconsideration of the letters were found. First, it was distinguished whether or not the writer thought back to the letter. Second, it was determined whether the writer thought of the contents of his letter, or the form. Thinking of the content implies that the writer starts to substantially think about the main letter topic, and/or about his own life on the occasion of the letter. Thinking of the form of the letter concerns e.g. thoughts about the correctness of the letter and (participation in) the study. The third distinction regards the way in which the reconsideration of the letter was experienced: as positive or negative.

The results are shown in table 8. In total, five writers recalled their letter in the period between writing the letter and the interview. Two writers thought about the accuracy of their letter or their participation in the study. The other four writers reconsidered the content of their letter. For instance, in I7 the interviewee reports fantasizing about the (viability of the) described future during a vacation. In three cases the content of the letter also incited the writers to take action.

Regarding the existentiality of the letters a considerable difference is found. Of the four writers of existential letters, three thought back of their letter. On the contrary, only two of the non-existential writers thought back of their letter. Also existential writers thought of the content of the letter, while non-existential thought of the form. And existential writers

experienced the reconsideration as more positive than non-existential writers. Thus, writers of existential letters did think back to their letter (topic) differently than writers of non-existential letters.

Existentiality of the letter	Existential	Not existential
Distinctions		
Did think back	3	2
Did not think back	1	6
Thought of content	3	0
Thought of form	0	2
Positive experience	3	0
Neutral experience	0	2

Table 8. Overview of distinctions regarding the reconsidering of future letters, differentiated by the existentiality of the letter. The first distinction concerns the total pool of participants (N=12), while the latter two distinctions only concern writers who did think back of their letter (N=5).

Interview question 6: Did de future letters have other effects on writers of existential letters than on non-existential writers, after the letters were written and before the interview was conducted?

In every interview the effects consisted of 1) a certain degree of raising awareness, and 2) a more or less strong action tendency. These components varied from absent to strongly present. Below the discussion of the letter effects gradually continues from writers who mainly report enhanced awareness, into participants who reported a strong action tendency. Also the results are shown in table 9 (below).

In total, nine participants report at least some effect of writing the letter while three writers report no effect at all. From the writers of existential letters, three writers reported a letter effect. The letters sorted various effects. First, in I1 the writer has learned to look at the future in a more open, positive way. She has learned not to focus mainly on limitations, but to

look at possibilities as well. She reports to have become aware of her tendency to focus on negative thoughts, but does not mention specific actions in order to change this tendency. Second, in two interviews (I5, I11) the writers report to have become aware of their dream (described in their future letter). Perhaps at some moment in the future they will take action to make the future become reality, but due to their circumstances in life (e.g. young children) the writers are not able to take any action at the present. Third, in two interviews the participants became more aware of the need to take action if they want the described future to become reality. For instance, in I7 the writer tells about her dream to once have a family. Through writing the letter she became more conscious of her dream. And it encouraged her to take action if she wanted the dream to become reality. She describes it as follows (in Dutch):

Heb je in de tijd tussen het schrijven van de brief en dit interview ook nagedacht over je eigen leven naar aanleiding van de brief?

(...) Die brief heeft het weer boven op de stapel gelegd zogezegd. Er zijn heel veel dingen waar je over nadent of soms gewoon langere tijd niet over nadent. En dan zakt het gewoon verder naar beneden. Maar, door die brief is alles weer boven gekomen. En is het voor mij makkelijker om er weer over na te denken.

Je hebt teruggedacht aan de brief en dan ga je automatisch over je eigen leven nadenken, van: "Hé, het is nog niet zo". En: "Hoe zou dat kunnen, hoe zou ik dat kunnen doen?". Heb je daar ook al concrete ideeën over?

Ja. Maar, alle ideeën die ik heb, zijn dingen waar voor ik heel erg spontaan moet zijn. En dat vind ik soms nog wel lastig. Of, heel erg spontaan. Dat je heel erg het initiatief moet nemen en dat vind ik vrij lastig om te doen.

Dus, het blijft een beetje bij ideeën?

Dus, het blijft op dit moment bij ideeën, ja.

En heeft de brief daar ook iets aan bijgedragen of deed je dat al gewoon?

Ja. Nou ja, niet echt aan bijgedragen. Die brief heeft gewoon gemaakt dat ik er weer over na ging denken. En ook dat het vrij dichtbij is al. Als ik de toekomst graag wil hebben zoals in die brief staat, dan moet ik wel wat gaan doen.

Dus, eigenlijk is het ook wel een soort van impuls van: "Hé, ga eens wat doen".

Ja. Even een zetje van: "Hé, dit wil je. Doe er wat aan."

Fourth, two interviewees report that the letter mainly incited them to take action in order to (partially) solve the described problem. For instance, in I4 the writer starts to take specific

action in order to solve the problem he described in his future letter. He wants to make his irritations towards a study group discussable. Because his described problem is very specific, it is relatively easy to actually try to solve the problem and make the described future come true. And fifth, two writers described the topic of their letter as a recurring theme in their life, and they will continue to work on it. But these actions are independent of the letter writing. Although the writers did describe the themes in their letter, they did not think back of the letter nor did the letter incite them to take action. Therefore these letters are categorized as ‘no effects’. As an example, in I12 the interviewee describes it as follows:

Heb je in de tijd tussen het schrijven van de brief en dit interview ook actie ondernomen?

Nee, veel acties die ik destijds ervoor heb genomen, op zoek gaan naar werk. Nee, dat soort dingen lopen nu nog steeds, maar het is niet zo dat ik na die tijd hierdoor acties ben gaan ondernemen.

Niet door de brief?

Nee.

Dat doe je gewoon?

Ja.

From both existential and non-existential writers, 9 report a letter effect. The kind of effect seems to differ among writers: existential writers mainly experience raised awareness (N=2), whereas non-existential writers mainly are incited to take action (N=4). So, the future letters do indeed sort different effects on existential writers than on non-existential writers.

Existentiality of the letter Letter effects	Existential	Not existential
Awareness	2	1
Both awareness and action	1	1
Action	0	4
No effects	1	2

Total	4	8
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Table 9. Observed numbers of different letter effects, differentiated by the existentiality of the letter.

Interview observations

Regarding the first interview question (whether differences are seen in existential and non-existential letters during the interviews) the interviewees have been confronted with the existential dimension in different periods in time, varying from an actual or very recent confrontation to a confrontation that happened long ago. In case of an actual or recent confrontation any or primitive defence mechanisms seem to be present (like in I7 the interviewee avoids to think about the topic, and in I6 the interview had to be paused because the participant became emotional) while in old confrontations more elaborate mechanisms seem active. For instance, in I12 the writer is no longer confronted with isolation, because he has found new, satisfying friendships. On the other hand, in I5 the writer has lost her father several years ago. The loss is still tangible and painful, but the interviewee has come to a certain degree of acceptance (in Dutch):

(...) Dus het doet nog wel... pijn, en het is er ook altijd wel. Alleen je hebt ook altijd wel emoties toegelaten, dus het is wel... minder? ... Ik vind het heel moeilijk om het me voor te stellen, hoor.

Ja, dat is ook heel moeilijk voor te stellen! Dat is ook zo. Het doet nog steeds pijn. Het is gewoon een soort wond die eerst echt gaat bloeden, en elke keer is er weer iets waardoor je die wond weer openhaalt, en dan gaat het ook weer bloeden. En bij mij gaat dat waarschijnlijk met tranen gepaard. En het is een litteken dat je altijd blijft voelen. Waarvan je altijd denkt 'he, bah, ik heb een litteken'. Maar hoe vervelend het ook klinkt, je gaat wel gewoon door. En hoe veel respect ik ook voor mijn vader heb en had, het leven nu is niet heel vervelend. Ik bedoel, mijn moeder is lief, mijn stiefvader is acceptabel, dat gaat nu redelijk,

Je houdt ook mensen om je heen.

Ik houd mensen om me heen. Mijn vader is ook niet weg uit gesprekken, hij wordt nooit verzwegen ergens. We zijn er altijd heel bewust mee bezig geweest, en het is wel zo dat je daar nu de vruchten van plukt. En natuurlijk, als je kind gedoopt wordt dan zit je te huilen. Maar dat is, dat hoort erbij denk ik. Ja, dat is gewoon zo. En op een

gegeven moment ga je de dingen toch zien als feit. En als je er goed over nadenkt dan weet je dat het zeer doet, en dan weet je 'er zit een litteken', maar in je dagelijks leven is het een feit geworden. Ja, ik denk dat ik het zo het beste heb uitgelegd.

Regarding the second research question whether the writing process did elicit a confrontation with an existential concern, focus was on the time between writing the letter and the interview. No attention was paid to the possibility that participants could be (re)confronted with an existential concern during the interview. However, during at least two interviews in which existential themes were discussed, I got the impression that the participants were again confronted with their existential struggle. One participant seemed to re-experience her feelings of anxiety and distress during a critical surgery of her husband so strong that she became emotional and the interview had to be paused (I6). During the other interview we talked about the participant's desire for a husband and a family. When I asked her whether she sometimes was afraid of remaining single her whole life, she answered: 'I'd rather not think about that too much, so, yes' (I7). The interview topic clearly made them feel uncomfortable, and they both showed a strong reaction.

Conclusion and Discussion

Main conclusion

In the introduction, the two main aims of this study were formulated: 1) to test the construct- and ecological validity of the concerns found by the developed model, and 2) to obtain preliminary insight into whether the nature of the letter exercise induces existential reflection and action. The main conclusion that can be drawn from this study is that the results indicate that the ‘existential’ struggles found by the developed model are indeed existential. To be specific, the found struggles have a different, more fundamental position and value in life than everyday struggles. Furthermore, the process of writing the letter does not induce existential reflection and action. On the contrary, the writers seem to use the letter exercise as a defence against being (again) confronted with an existential concern.

Research questions

Research question 1: Do the results of the letter- and interview analyses correspond regarding the presence of existential concerns?

In every interview the same concerns were found as in the letter analyses. Also negative results (absence of concerns) were almost always confirmed in the interviews. Thus, the letter- and interview analyses do correspond regarding the presence of existential concerns. This finding indicates that the ‘existential’ struggles found during the letter analyses do indeed refer to actual existential struggles in the lives of the writers, and thus that through both the letter analyses and the interviews the same construct is measured.

Research question 2: To what extent are existential letters from the future indicative to the presence and value of existential struggles in daily life?

From the interview analyses it appeared that the existential letters from the future are indeed indicative to the presence and value of existential struggles in daily life. Specifically, writers of existential letters typed the meaning of their letters specifically as a dream, hope or a longing, while the meaning of non-existential letters varied. Also the desire for the described future to come true and the expected consequences if this will not be the case are greater to writers of existential letters than to writers of non-existential letters. And writers of existential letters associate their main letter topic with vehement situations in which they missed other people, while writers of non-existential letters associated their main letter topic with non-vehement situations in which they missed own capacities. Behind these findings may lie that

participants who tell about their own possibilities or limitations feel more as if they are in control of the situation than participants who tell about missing important other persons. This difference of feeling 'in control' can also be seen in the meaning of the future letter. All the writers of an existential letter typed their letter as a dream, a hope or a longing (which is beyond the control of the writer). Setting out lines, developing in a certain area and making a plan of action are words that indicate that the writer feels like he has a certain amount of grip on the situation; he seems able to achieve the desired future by his own capacities. Thus it seems that non-existential writers feel more in control of their situation than existential writers. According to Yalom (1980) existential concerns are big struggles of life, and a confrontation with a concern is a very vehement experience which evokes intense terror (May & Yalom, 2000). Therefore it seems reasonable to assume that when someone who is confronted with a concern feels *everything but* in control.

The results indicate that existential struggles found in the letters do have a different position in daily life than non-existential struggles, which underpins the ecological validity of the developed working model.

Research question 3: Does the process of writing the letter induce existential reflection and action?

From the interview questions it appeared that existential writers did not experience their writing process differently than writers of non-existential letters. Differences were found however in the way writers thought back to their letter. Existential writers predominantly thought back to the content of their letter and reported it to be a positive experience, while non-existential writers predominantly thought back to the form of their letter, and reported it to be a neutral experience. Also different effects of the writing process were found: existential writers reported a raised awareness, while non-existential writers predominantly report actions resulting from the writing process.

Despite the found differences however it is concluded that writers of existential letters were not (again) confronted with an existential theme through the writing process. First, this conclusion is drawn because existential writers did not experience their writing process significantly different than non-existential writers. Thus, during the writing process no existential confrontations took place. After the writing process was finished however, more existential writers did think back of their letter than non-existential writers. This may seem as if the writers are afterwards confronted with the theme. But the existential writers described reminding their dream, hope or longing to be a positive experience. This finding indicates that

the writers were not confronted with the theme afterwards either, because a confrontation with an existential theme mostly is accompanied by negative feelings (Yalom, 1980; May & Yalom, 2000). In fact, the writers might have re-used thinking about the described future as a defense mechanism: since it gave them a positive experience during the writing process, it might do so as well afterwards.

These findings are an indication that letter exercise as a single instrument is not strong enough to incite an existential confrontation and thus to help people find existential meaning. However, the research questions did not focus on the possibility that participants could be confronted with an existential theme during the interview. During at least two interviews I got the impression that the participants were again confronted with their existential struggle. This indicates that while the letter exercise seems not strong enough to elicit a confrontation with an existential concern, a subsequent interview session may be strong enough.

Strengths and limitations

Regarding the participants, the fact that new participants were sought ensured a short period of time between the writing process and the interview. Specifically, a time lapse of one week was pursued. In contrast to a longer period of time between the writing process and the interview, information about the writing process now was still accessible and reliable. Most participants were highly educated young adults, thus it is advised to replicate this study with a sample of older, less educated participants.

Also, beside one exception every participant was a Christian. In Christianity all four existential themes play a central role. Specifically, Christians believe that there is a personal God who is concerned with their lives. Through this belief they might be more intensely confronted with the existential questions of life. In this sense I tend to disagree with Yalom (1980) who states that Christian belief only is a defence mechanism against existential confrontations. On the contrary, these confrontations might be more vehement for a Christian than for someone who believes that life essentially is useless and absurd, and that suffering happens by chance. It might be interesting to further explore this expectation, also with respect to other beliefs, for instance Islamists who do not believe in a personally involved God.

A considerable number of participants were acquaintances of the researcher, including close friends and family. My prior knowledge of their story may have influenced the data-collection and data-analysis. On the other hand, because the participants were acquainted with

the researcher they might have felt more comfortable to talk about a very personal subject since a relationship of trust already existed.

In order to validate the developed working model, phenomenological in-depth interviews were conducted. Strength of this method is the detailed background information that was obtained about the letter topic and the writing process. By using a phenomenological approach the validity of the collected data was also strengthened. Specifically the bracketing and memoing techniques helped to collect and analyse the data as objectively as possible.

Also, I used the Critical Incidents Technique (Flanagan, 1954; Zemke, & Kramlinger, 1991) in order to structure the stories about experiences related to the main letter topic. This technique helps to deeply discuss an experience or situation, thus ensuring useful data. The reliability and validity of this technique were assessed by Ronan (1974), and proved to be satisfactory. On the other hand, according to Osborne (1990) the quality of phenomenological research partly depends upon the personal qualities of the researcher. The relation between the researcher and the participants parallels the relationship between counsellor and client. Since I lack (extensive) counselling experience and did not receive special training before doing phenomenological research, I may have overlooked certain existential struggles.

During the interviews I also asked indirect questions to assess the presence of existential concerns. Through this method my assumptions about how to assess the existentiality of a topic through indirect questions probably have been of influence in drafting the questions. Therefore a critical assessment of the interview questions by another researcher is recommended. Also, during the interviews I reviewed and improved the interview questions. On the one hand this procedure enhanced the quality of the following interviews, while on the other hand it complicated comparison.

The procedure of this study slightly differs from the procedure used in the previous study, which may trouble comparison between both studies. First, participation in the study was not anonymous. In fact, some participants were close acquaintances to the researcher which increases the risk on distorted data. Also, an effect of personality may have occurred. The step to participate in a non-anonymous study, allowing the researcher to conduct an interview in the personal environment of the participant may have been too big for shy or introvert people. I expect that especially people who have higher levels of extravert and altruistic personality traits participated in this study. Since extravert people perhaps more easily talk about personal difficulties than introvert people, the use of the developed working model could be different for people who score higher on introversion. Another risk in the design of this study is the risk on experimenter's bias, because both the model development

and the validation of the model were executed by only one researcher. Assumptions and prejudices of the experimenter could have been of influence during the forming of hypotheses, the data-collection and the data-analysis. Therefore the model should be tested by another researcher to strengthen the interrater-reliability.

The interview analyses were executed in several phases: first for every participant a literal overview was made of his/her answers to every sub-question. This overview formed the basis on which the answering of the main questions (per participant) was justified. Eventually the individual answers to the main questions were combined to formulate the final answers to the main questions. During the analyses I based the answering as much on the literal wording of the participants as possible, thus ensuring a valid answering of the main questions. The most important risk during the data analysis was again the fact that it was executed by only one researcher. As mentioned above, probably personal assumptions and prejudices have played a role in the analysing process, and may have blurred the conclusions.

Implications and recommendations

In the introduction it was argued that narratives are helpful in addressing meaning to life. They might function as ‘carriers’ of (bits of) existential information, thus supporting the process of finding existential meaning. At the University of Twente this relation between narrative futuring and finding meaning in life is under study. One research line assesses whether this relation is mediated by the existential dimension.

In the previous study a contribution to this research line was made: it was studied whether narrative futuring (the letter exercise) can function as an instrument to make the existential dimension accessible and discussable. It appeared that the existential dimension is indeed accessible through narrative futuring.

In the present study two aims were pursued: first aspects of the quality of the previous study (the developed model for letter analysis) was assessed, and second it was studied whether the writing process incited a new confrontation with an existential concern. Regarding the first research aim, the results from the present study indicate that the previously developed model is indeed valid. This finding strengthens the conclusion from the first study that narrative futuring can indeed be used as an instrument to assess the existential dimension and to make existential themes discussable. Regarding the second aim of this study it appeared that letter exercise in itself is not strong enough to elicit a confrontation with an existential concern. However, indications were found that a subsequent interview session may. As mentioned before, according to Osborne (1990) the phenomenological research

method parallels therapeutic or counselling practices in several ways. Similar interpersonal, clinical, analytical, rhetorical skills are needed in both counselling situations and during phenomenological research. Therefore I assume that since a subsequent phenomenological interview may help to incite a confrontation with an existential concern, a counselling or therapeutic session might as well. In this view the letter exercise helps to convert the (sometimes vehement) existential confrontation into words, thus making it discussable. And the interview (or perhaps counselling session) helps to re-experience the confrontation and to find new, more effective ways to deal with it. This process can help to find existential meaning in life, which in turn can enhance psychological wellbeing. Therefore I advise to find out whether a subsequent phenomenological interview indeed helps to (re)confront the writers with their existential struggle. As a subsequent study the possibility to generalize this hypothesis to a counselling or therapeutic setting can be explored. I would advise to use the letter exercise as an instrument to assess the existential themes the writer is dealing with, and as a guide in the search for existential themes during the interview. During the interview the way the writer is dealing with the concern(s) can be further examined.

Also, in future research the reliability and other aspects of the validity of the previously developed model can be strengthened. The limitations of the present study are explained in detail in the 'strengths and limitations' section, but three main improvements are to be made: 1) the model needs to be tested by one or multiple other researcher(s), 2) the model needs to be tested on another pool of participants and 3) the researcher needs to be experienced in therapeutic situations, and/or needs to be more thoroughly trained in doing phenomenological research. A third line of study concerns the research model explained in the introduction. It was explained that in the present two studies the relation between narrative futuring and the existential dimension is explored (see figure 3 below). It is advised to also study the possibility to induce existential reflection through narrative futuring. When insight is gained about this relationship, also the relation with (existential) meaning and psychological wellbeing should be explored.

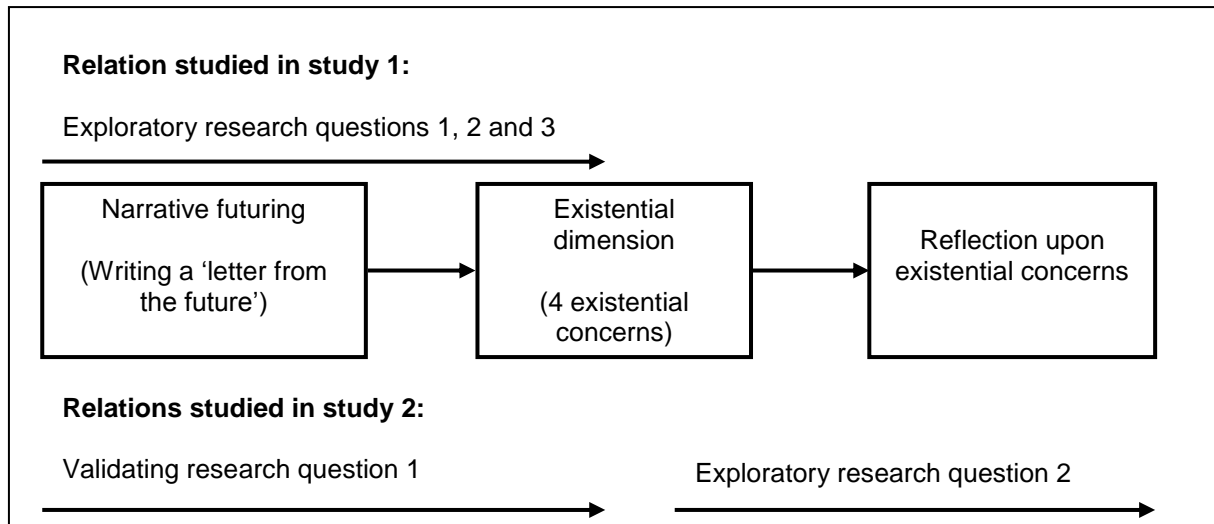


Figure 3: Model of relationship between central constructs studied in this thesis and the relations studied in this study.

Final remark

Despite the limitations of this study there is substantial evidence that the concerns found during the letter analyses are indeed existential, and that they do have a practical basis and value in daily life. Furthermore, there are no indications that the writing process induced existential reflection and action. These findings underpin the construct- and ecological basis of the working model developed in the first study, and thus substantiate the conclusion that narrative futuring is indeed a useful instrument to explore the existential dimension. More research is needed to determine whether narrative futuring, mediated by the existential dimension also influences the finding of (existential) meaning and psychological wellbeing.

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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 your 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 accidentally lose your nicely written letter!).

Appendix B – Information Brochure

INFORMATIEBROCHURE OVER HET ONDERZOEK NAAR TOEKOMSTBRIEVEN

Beste lezer,

In deze informatiebrochure wil ik u informeren over het onderzoek ‘Toekomstbrieven’ waarvoor u zich heeft aangemeld. Dit onderzoek, waarop ik hoop af te studeren, gaat uit van de universiteit Twente en wordt uitgevoerd onder de verantwoordelijkheid van onderzoeksleider Anneke Sools.

Procedure van het onderzoek

Het onderzoek bestaat uit een óf uit twee delen. Iedere deelnemer doet mee aan het eerste deel. In dit deel wordt u gevraagd om een toekomstbrief te schrijven. **Afhankelijk van uw brief wordt u al dan niet uitgenodigd voor het tweede deel van het onderzoek.** Het tweede deel bestaat uit een interview over de door u geschreven brief. Hieronder volgt een uitleg over de beide delen.

In het **eerste deel** wordt u gevraagd om 1) een toekomstbrief te schrijven en 2) een korte vragenlijst in te vullen. U krijgt via de computer een schrijfinstructie en een vragenlijst toegestuurd. Het gaat om een brief van maximaal 1 A4 (400 woorden) en een korte vragenlijst met een aantal vragen over de brief en uw achtergrond, zodat ik verschillende brieven met elkaar kan vergelijken. Het invullen van de vragenlijst duurt ongeveer 15 minuten, en dit doet u nadat u de brief heeft geschreven. Na afloop mailt u de brief samen met de ingevulde vragenlijst naar ondergetekende.

U bepaalt zelf waar en wanneer u de brief wilt schrijven. Dat mag thuis, maar ook op een andere plaats zijn. Voor dit onderzoeksdeel hoeft u dus geen afspraak te maken. U mag de brief in één keer schrijven, maar dat hoeft niet. U kunt de brief ook tussendoor opslaan en het schrijven op een later tijdstip voortzetten. Zo kunt u in uw eigen tempo en op uw eigen manier de brief schrijven.

Wanneer u gevraagd wordt om ook deel te nemen aan het **tweede deel** zal ondergetekende een afspraak met u maken voor een interview over de door u geschreven brief. Dit interview zal plaatsvinden bij u thuis, of wanneer u dat liever heeft op een andere rustige plaats. Het interview zal ongeveer een uur duren. Tijdens het interview zal ik vragen stellen over de ervaring van het schrijven van de brief en over de inhoud van de brief. Het interview wordt opgenomen met een voicerecorder, zodat ik het achteraf kan analyseren. Ook kan het zijn dat ik tijdens het interview wat aantekeningen maak.

Na het interview is ruimte voor een nagesprek. Tijdens dit gesprek zal ik u uitleggen wat precies het doel van het onderzoek is. Ook is er gelegenheid om vragen te stellen over het onderzoek en door te praten over hoe u het onderzoek ervaren hebt. In totaal zal de afspraak ongeveer twee uur in beslag nemen. Mocht u na afloop van het onderzoek toch behoefte hebben aan een extra gesprek, dan is het eventueel mogelijk om een afspraak te maken met één van de onderzoekers.

Voorwaarden voor het onderzoek

Om mee te kunnen doen met het onderzoek moet u voldoen aan een aantal voorwaarden. Hieronder staan deze voorwaarden genoemd. Vervolgens noem ik de dingen die u van mij mag verwachten als u meedoet aan het onderzoek.

Wat ik van u verwacht:

- Ik doe onderzoek naar volwassenen, dus u kunt meedoen wanneer u ouder bent dan 18 jaar.
- Om de brief te kunnen schrijven moet u beschikking hebben over een computer met internetaansluiting. Dit hoeft niet per se thuis te zijn.
- U moet bereid zijn om tijd te maken voor het onderzoek; zowel voor het schrijven van de brief als voor het interview.
- Het onderzoek zou belastend kunnen zijn voor mensen met psychische klachten. Daarom kunt u niet deelnemen aan het onderzoek wanneer u matige tot ernstige psychische klachten heeft.

Wat u van mij mag verwachten:

- Een toekomstbrief schrijven en daarover praten kan heel persoonlijk zijn. U hebt zelf controle over hoeveel details u wilt vermelden in de brief, en hoeveel u wilt vertellen in het interview. Iedereen heeft grenzen waarin hij/zij een ander wel of juist niet toe wil laten. Ik respecteer uw keuzes daarin.
- Uw gegevens worden alleen voor dit onderzoek gebruikt onder verantwoordelijkheid van de onderzoeksleider Anneke Sools, en niet aan derden verstrekt. De bandopnamen en aantekeningen worden uitgeschreven en geanalyseerd voor dit onderzoek. Na gebruik voor het onderzoek worden al uw gegevens vernietigd.
- Uw gegevens worden vertrouwelijk behandeld en anoniem verwerkt zodat ze nooit naar u persoonlijk herleid kunnen worden. Lezers van mijn onderzoek zullen u niet als individu kunnen herkennen.
- U hebt het recht om u tot 24 uur na afloop van het onderzoek zonder opgaaf van reden terug te trekken van deelname aan het onderzoek. Al uw gegevens zullen dan worden vernietigd.
- Onder alle deelnemers worden twee etentjes bij ondergetekende thuis verloot.

Met vriendelijke groet,
Grethe van der Zwaan

Onderzoeksleider:

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053-489 4470 (secretaresse)
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Contactpersoon bij klachten:

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j.rademaker@utwente.nl

Appendix C – Questionnaire

Vragenlijst bij de briefopdracht (In te vullen *na* het schrijven van de brief)

Ik zou het erg op prijs stellen als u onderstaande vragenlijst invult, omdat ik met deze gegevens de onderzoeksresultaten onderling kan vergelijken. De enquête is niet anoniem, omdat deze gekoppeld wordt aan het interview. Uw gegevens worden alleen voor dit onderzoek gebruikt, en worden niet doorgegeven aan derden. Na analyse worden uw gegevens vernietigd. Lezers van mijn onderzoek zullen u niet als individu kunnen herkennen.

Algemene vragen:

Naam:

.....

Vragen over de briefopdracht:

Vraag 1. Wanneer is de brief geschreven?

Datum:

.....

Vraag 2. Wat is uw geslacht?

Man 5

Vrouw 7

Vraag 3. Wat is uw leeftijd?

Jonger dan 25 jaar

26-35 jaar

36-45 jaar

46-55 jaar

56-65 jaar

66-75 jaar

Ouder dan 75 jaar

Vraag 4. Wat is het hoogste diploma dat u behaald hebt?

Geen diploma

Lager onderwijs

Voortgezet onderwijs (VMBO, HAVO, VWO e.d.)

Beroeps/ wetenschappelijk onderwijs

Postacademisch (bijvoorbeeld notariaat, doctorstitel, artsexamen)

Anders, namelijk:

.....

Vraag 5. Hoe is uw gezinssamenstelling?

Thuiswonend bij ouder(s)/verzorger(s)

Alleenstaand zonder kinderen
Samenwonend/getrouwd zonder kinderen
Alleenstaand met kinderen
Samenwonend/getrouwd met kinderen
Anders, namelijk:

.....

Op de achterzijde staan nog een aantal vragen.

Vraag 6. Wat is uw nationaliteit?

.....

.....

Vraag 6. Wat is uw levensovertuiging?

Atheïst
Christen
Islamitisch
Joods
Hindoeïstisch
Boeddhistisch
Anders, namelijk:

.....

Vraag 7. Waar hebt u de brief geschreven?

Thuis`
Op het werk
In een openbare gelegenheid
Ergens anders, namelijk:

Vraag 9. Wie waren aanwezig tijdens het schrijven?

Niemand
Familie
Vrienden
Onbekenden

Vraag 10. Welke positieve verandering staat centraal in uw brief?

.....

Appendix D – Interview schedule

Interviewschema

Vooraf:

Datum van het interview:

Naam geïnterviewde:.....

Leg aan de deelnemer uit dat:

- Het interview wordt opgenomen (audio).
- Het interview ongeveer een uur duurt.
- Je kunt tussendoor even pauzeren als dat nodig is.
- Het gesprek is opgedeeld in drie delen. Eerst zal ik je vragen om de brief voor te lezen. Vervolgens neem ik het interview af. Ik stel eerst een aantal vragen over de inhoud van de brief, en vervolgens een aantal vragen over het schrijven van de brief. Na het interview is gelegenheid om vragen te stellen. Ook geef ik je dan uitleg over het precieze doel van het onderzoek.
- Ik maak misschien wat aantekeningen.
- Vertel je ervaringen zo precies mogelijk. Blijf zo dicht mogelijk bij de feiten/gebeurtenissen.
- Probeer geen mening of waardeoordeel over de gebeurtenissen te geven, of erover na te denken. Probeer alleen te vertellen wat je op dat moment ervaren hebt.

Interview

1. Laat de deelnemer zijn brief voorlezen.

2. Allereerst wil ik je graag een paar vragen stellen over wat je hebt ervaren tijdens het schrijven van de brief.

- a. Kun je om te beginnen iets vertellen over waar en wanneer je de brief hebt geschreven?
- b. Kun je ook iets vertellen over hoe je te werk bent gegaan bij het schrijven van de brief? Wat dacht, voelde en deed je?

3a. Kun je iets meer vertellen over hoe waarheidsgetrouw de brief is?

3b. (als er meerdere thema's genoemd worden bij 3). Welk thema is op dit moment het belangrijkste thema voor jou? Welk thema speelt de grootste rol in je brief?

3c. Kun je een gebeurtenis uit je eigen leven beschrijven waarin voor jou duidelijk werd dat dit thema belangrijk is voor jou? **OF:** Kun je deze kerngebeurtenis beschrijven?

Vink minimaal af:

- 1 Feitelijke gebeurtenissen
- 2 Gedachten / gevoelens / gedrag op dat moment
- 3 Effect v gebeurtenis op persoon

3d. Speelt het thema alleen op één specifiek levensdomein, of komt het terug in uiteenlopende rollen en situaties, over een langere periode?

4. Voor sommige mensen is de toekomstbrief heel belangrijk, voor anderen minder. Ik ben benieuwd naar welke waarde de brief voor jou heeft.
5. Ook kan voor sommige mensen de brief een persoonlijke betekenis hebben, terwijl het voor anderen een eenmalig meedoen aan een onderzoek is. Wat betekent de toekomstbrief voor jou?
6. Heb je in de afgelopen week nog teruggedacht aan de brief?
7. Heb je in de tijd tussen het schrijven van de brief en dit interview nagedacht over je eigen leven naar aanleiding van de brief?
8. Heb je je voorgenomen om actie te ondernemen naar aanleiding van de brief? Of heb je al echt actie ondernomen? Dit hoeven geen grote dingen te zijn.

Debriefing

- Er is nu gelegenheid om na te praten over het onderzoek. Allereerst ben ik benieuwd naar hoe je het interview ervaren hebt.
- Leg het doel van het onderzoek uit.
- Je hebt het recht om je gegevens in te zien. Dus als je dat wilt kan ik je een kopie van je gegevens toesturen. En je kunt een kopie van mijn scriptie krijgen wanneer deze af is. Als je dat nu al weet mag je dat nu beslissen, maar dat kan ook later.
- Wanneer je na afloop toch behoefte hebt aan een extra gesprek, dan kan je mij daarvoor benaderen. Ik verwijs je dan door naar één van de onderzoeksleiders. Zij zijn beiden psycholoog.
- Heb je verder nog vragen over het onderzoek of deze afspraak?