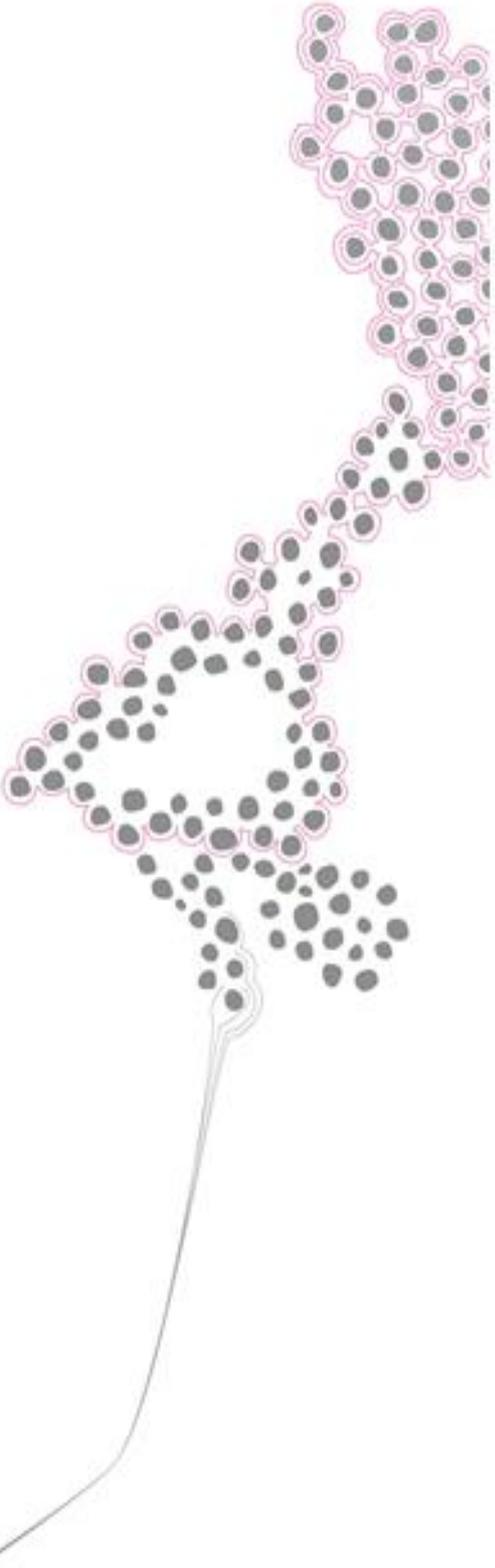


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**FACING INCREASING RISKS FOR UNEMPLOYMENT IN A  
RAPIDLY CHANGING WORLD**

INVESTIGATING SELF- AND OTHER DIRECTED DIFFERENCES WITHIN  
FUTURE NARRATIVES OF VARIOUS AGE GROUPS

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## Abstract (English)

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Due to competitions on the global labour market we have to face increasing risks of getting unemployed. This does not only mean loss of financial security, but also negative psychological consequences like depression. The present study aims to explore letters from a desired future without paid employment. The letters are based on the idea of narrative futuring, which involves the creation of selves in the future. These so called “possible selves” mirror values, strivings and goals of the author in the written story, narrated from the future to a present audience. The study combines the identification of possible selves with self- or other directed motives. Based on Agency and Communion (from David Bakan, 1966), these directed-strivings are further examined on age-related differences in the way individuals imagine themselves in a desired situation without paid work. Twenty-One letters of German and Dutch participants of three different age groups, and collected via an online website, were involved in the qualitative analysis. The possible selves were investigated based on a bottom-up analysis on sentence level to add detailed information to the investigation of a coding scheme for themes of Agency and Communion. The results of thirty-eight themes for Communion and forty-eight themes for Agency were categorized, and then compared between the particular age-group. The oldest (50<) and youngest age group (18-29) have been found to have higher amount of scores for themes of Agency, the middle-aged participants (30-49) for Communion. This concluded in the detection of a combination of self- as well as other directed themes and possible selves in all letters. Additionally, interesting findings in relation to the content of the letters show benefits of narrative futuring for individual realizations of the present situation. This may help to either change their way of acting or to hold on supporting aspects in their current lives. Recommendations for further research include the practical conversion of the theoretical findings of the present study. Especially the possibility to adopt the age-related results for use in clinical and positive psychology should be investigated accurately.

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## Abstract (Dutch)

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Door de stijgende competitie in het economische wereld market, wordt het risico van werkloosheid steeds hoger. Dit betekent niet alleen dat de financiële zekerheid daarmee verloren gaat, maar ook dat er psychologische consequenties zoals depressie kunnen optreden. Deze studie is gefocuserd erop brieven vanuit een wenselijk toekomst zonder betaald werk te onderzoeken. De brieven zijn gebaseerd op de idee van *narrative futuring*. Dit is in tegenstelling tot andere onderzoeken met narratieve documenten gefocuseerd op de creatie van zelve in de toekomst. Deze zo genoemde *possible selves* geven waarden, doelen en streven van de auteur weer, en worden vertelt vanuit de toekomst naar een publiek in het heden. De studie combineert identificaties van *possible selves* met zelf- of anderen gerelateerde themas. Gebaseerd op *Agency* en *Communion* (from Davin Bakan, 1966). Daardoor worden leeftijd-gerelateerde verschillen in de manier hoe personen zichzelf in een gewenste toekomst zonder betaald werk voorstellen. 21 brieven van zowel Duitse als Nederlandse participanten werden via een online pagina verzameld en waren alleemaal betrokken in de kwalitatieve analyse. De *possible selves* werden onderzocht op basis van een bottom-up analyse van elke zin om gedetailleerde informaties, aan het codeer-schema van McAdams voor de themas van *Agency* en *Communion*, toe te voegen. De resultaten van 38 themas voor *Communion* en 48 voor *Agency* werden gesorteerd naar de bijhorende leeftijdsgroep. Voor de oudste (50<) en jongste (18-29) leeftijdsgroepen worden hogere scores voor *Agency* vastgesteld. Voor de derde groep (30-49) worden meer scores voor *Communion* gevonden. Deze concludeerden in de herkenning van een combinatie van zelf- zoals anderen-gerelateerde themas en *possible selves* over alle brieven. Bovendien laten interessante inhoudelijke resultaten van de brieven zien dat narrative futuring ook voordelen voor de realisatie van het hedendagse self zien. Dit kan of helpen om de manier van handelen te veranderen of ondersteunende aspecten in hen tegenwoordige leven te behouden. Op basis van de theoretische resultaten worden adviezen voor praktische omzettingen gegeven. Bijzonder de mogelijkheid om de leeftijd-gerelateerde resultaten voor praktische gebruik in de positieve en klinische psychologie te gebruiken zal verder worden onderzocht.

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## 1. Introduction

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Nowadays, we are confronted with complex and ongoing multidimensional changes all over the world. External incidents like economic-, cultural- and social changes, as well as political decisions have huge influences on societies and individuals lives. These rapid changes, in various areas of daily life, are largely enhanced due to the process of globalization (Castells & United Nations Research Institute for Social Development, 1999).

Already in the 1960<sup>th</sup> Marshall McLuhan recognized the coalescence of socio-economic as well as ecological sectors in the world and calls it “the global village” (McLuhan in: Robertson, 1992, p.8). Globalization is also a micro-process, directly affecting the individual, because modern technologies like mobile phones and other communication-devices are speeding-up the connectedness and information-exchange constantly. Furthermore, Wilpert (2009) states that the term globalization includes: “the growth of border transcending flows of people, ideas, information, finances, technology, and goods with sometimes frightening concomitant socio-economic changes” (Wilpert, 2009, pp. 723-727). Hengsbach (1997) for example claims that globalization increases the pressure on individuals to adapt to the global competition on a socio-economic level. Due to this worldwide challenge, companies and employers have the opportunity to hire workers from the whole world, whereas only the most motivated and competent employees will keep their work. (Streek, 1996).

Accordingly, the impacts of globalization can be seen as a double-edged sword. On the one hand, it is a phenomena that increases the interconnections in the global village with positive outcomes concerning cohabitation and bilateral encouragement. On the other hand, negative influences, especially in terms of socio-economic changes and rising global competitions on the labor market, are ascribed to globalization processes.

The possibility of becoming unemployed, or, in this context, living without a regular income, in the post-modern time seems thus to be a problem which might affect every individual, everywhere. This is, from a psychological perspective, a grievance with huge negative impacts on the mental health of the affected unemployed people. In relation to that, the literature offers various evidence for the negative consequences of being unemployed. In a study from Clark, Knabe & Rätzel (2010) was found that the circumstance of being unemployed has greater negative effects on the aggrieved person than the loss of pecuniary income. The implications of unemployment involve “loss of social status, fewer contacts with people outside of the family, a weaker time structure leading to

motivational disorientation, and a general lack of sense of purpose and goals in life.” (Clarke et al., 2010, 52). In social psychology, as well as in the field of economics joblessness is considered to be the most harmful influence on human well-being (Eisenberg & Lazarsfeld, 1938). Additionally, findings in a longitudinal research in Germany with 24000 participant show that individuals, who have experienced unemployment, are not able to return to their previous satisfaction in life, even when getting a job again (Lucas, Georgellis & Diener, 2004).

However, recent research in the domain of positive psychology found that not every individual exhibits the same patterns of for example distress and depression when unemployed. In this regard, age seems to play a crucial role when it comes to reduced mental health caused by unemployment. It is often assumed that middle-aged individuals suffer more from having no work than older people (close to their career-end), as well as younger people (finished school). However, Paul & Moser (2009) found a u-shaped link between distress and unemployment, stating that younger individuals and people older than 50 show higher negative influences on mental health than the expected middle-aged group. According to Kistler and Hilpert (2001) the European labor market can be divided into three different age groups of workers. People from 15-29, who represent the young individuals, employees between 30 and 49, the middle-age, and the group which goes along with elder workers in Paul and Moser's study, people between 50 and 64.

Consequently, age seems at least to be partially influential on the exhibition of negative psychological reactions to unemployment. Individuals between 15 and 29, as well as older people are therefore expected to suffer more from unemployment than people in the age of 30 to 49.

Another reason for differences in the perception of negative consequences for mental health associated with unemployment is stated as the individual's personality. This is the person's ability to cope with the distress of having no work and to be resilient against mental imbalance seems to be essential.

According to Corinna Wustmann (2005) resilience is the capability of being resistant against the confrontation with stressful events in life. In a longitudinal research on Hawaii, Werner (1992) found that children developed completely different when it comes to exposures to difficulties, whereas they all had similar conditions:” Some people break down completely when life takes a turn for the worst, others manage to cope and even bounce back for more – like a jack-in-the-box.” (Sedmark, 2012, p. 45).

These developmental factors as crucial influences on resilience and overall well-being can also be found in the so called “three layers of personality” by McAdams and Olsen (2010, p. 530). In their assumption dispositional traits, characteristic adaptations and life narratives develop

consecutively with increasing age. In the early years of life the person appears as actor with reflexive behavior until the individual develops into a striving agent with his/her own motives and life goals. At last, the person emerges as an author with the ability to narrate his past and to determine situations based on life-experiences. Regarding to McAdams and Olsen, all these layers are necessary to develop a healthy and resilient personality.

In this case, resilience seems to be a part of personality, which Frederic Flach (1997) partly confirms when he defines a resilient personality for example as being aware of the self, having the ability to be creative, to adapt and to learn. However, he suggests that resilience can be enhanced due to strategies, which improve self-awareness.

The question is how to enhance the individual's resilience to stressful circumstances like – in this case – unemployment?

An adjuvant approach for this study was found in an idea from Pauline Boss (2008) in Clemens Sedmak's book "Resilience and Unemployment" (2012). She declares that the individual's ability to realistically estimate future situations has great potential to reinforcing resilience. Thus, the capability to imagine the future seems to be a predictor for healthy psychological functioning. However, there is also research in clinical psychology, sharing that thinking about one's own future can create rather negative thoughts and is often linked to depression (Andersen & Limpert, 2001).

The images of the future are apparently not homogeneous and underlying reasons seem to have impact on the way people react to uncertain future situations. This so called precariousness of life has been foregrounded by philosopher Judith Butler (2004). She states that subjective as well as objective, socio economic circumstances have influence on the sense people feel vulnerable in relation to future situations. Additionally, Sools and Mooren (2012) argued in there research that the capacity for resilience is influenced by individual differences in uncertainties of their lives, the ability to give their lives a sense and a lack of imagination to predict and to interact with uncertain situations. The assumption that imagining the future through stories can enhance resilience as well as well-being and strengthen the individual's ability to cope with rough situations forms the basis of the current study.

In the context of narrative psychology, the imagination of the future takes place through storytelling. These future narratives are quite new in the research field, whereas, according to Papp (2014), the ability to create one's own future (futuring) is directly connected with mental health. A present example for this kind of positive psychological research projects is the life-story lab on the University of Twente. One of these projects comprises letters from the future, also called *futuring*

(Sools et al, 2012), which are assumed to have positive effects on mental health and resilience. In this regard, Ruvolo and Markus (1992) claimed that imagining oneself in threatening situations in the future can be manipulated to have positive impact on the person's ability to cope with such events. Therefore, the putative negative situations should be imagined within positive circumstances and alternatives to endure and handle it.

Narrative psychology is thus likely to imply opportunities to enhance resilience and well-being in cases like unemployment. Due to future narratives, where people should imagine themselves unemployed, but in a desired way, the individual can get prepared for uncertain future situations.

As early as 1986, Markus and Nurius emphasized the function of the (moral) agent in future narratives as a motivating role model for the individual. They also describe the creation of a (future) possible self in a narrative way as an opportunity to constitute what the individual fears, wants, or could become. In their theory possible selves are stated as individual self-representations in the future including several ideas about what the self may become in the future. These possible selves represent realistically assumed ideas based on their present self and its formation due to social experiences, role models and in terms of globalization, the media. Furthermore, possible selves can represent dystopian and utopian imaginations of themselves in the future, depending on feared or desired thoughts about it. Additionally, the personal view on the present self is expected to be influential on the perception of the self in the future. In that case, positive current selves can create hope and confidence for the future, whereas negative present selves contrary can have depressing effect (Markus & Nurius, 1986).

Therefore the function of possible selves are assumed to work as either supportive or protective agent in the ideas about the future. However, cultural influences seem to have great impact on the formation of several possible selves and concluding individual strivings for positive outcomes in uncertain future situations.

These personal strivings in future narratives can be expressed with David Bakan's agency and communion. The distinction between these "big 2" have had great influence on personality psychology and are defined as "two fundamental modalities in the existence of living forms" (Bakan, 1966, pp. 14-15). Agency stands for the individual alone and its role of independency in controlling the self and the environment. Contrary, the term communion comprises the social-self, as the individual as part of a greater group or society, characterized in care, intimacy and community (McAdams, Hoffman, Day & Mansfield, 1996). Due to the intrapersonal side, agency,

and the distinct perspective, communion, it is possible to distinguish between self-directed or other-directed specifications in the future narratives.

In a study to examine agency and communion in the spontaneous self-representations of 158 adults between 20 and 88 years were found that adults of the young and middle age relied significantly more on self-directed (agency) self-representations than the older adults (Diehl, Owen & Youngblade, 2004). Furthermore, they found correlation for both, agency and communion, in terms of defense mechanisms, whereas four dimensions of psychological well-being also correlated with attributes of communion. Harter (1993) states that children as well as adults show enhanced self-esteem (similar to agency) in situations where they desire to accomplish standards they value as high important for themselves.

Especially with concerns to the above mentioned globalization processes and thus, the rising interconnection within the “global village”, communion could play a crucial role as possible to overcome problematic future situations. On the other hand, applies the increasing concurrence on the labor market pressure on individuals and may thus induce agentic ways to secure one's working place. Therefore, the intrapersonal part of the individual, agency, and communion as the social-self can be seen as two personal defense mechanisms, used to cope with difficult and frightening situations and happenings in life.

## 1.1 Summary

Summing up the above mentioned scientific findings within the literature shows that the world is getting smaller in cases of interdependence with others and contacts to people over the whole world. On the other hand, increasing pressure on the labor markets as a result of globalization can have serious consequences on an individual level. In that case, different effects on psychological well-being and the ability to cope with the increased ability to get unemployed have to be faced more and more, whereas different effects were measured on three main age groups of workers. Solutions to overcome often detected results of depression and distress are the ideas of possible selves and themes of agency and communion in future narratives, which seem to be influential on the ability to cope with frightening situations like unemployment.

For the purpose of this study, presumable differences between the selves, people show in positive future narratives are elicited using letters from a future self where participants should imagine themselves unemployed. More particularly, this study focuses on differences between other-directed, as well as self-directed themes within the letters, based on Bakan's agency and communion. In that case, it is assumed to find differences in cases of age. Therefore, in this study

participants are divided to the three age groups, which Kistler and Hilpert (2001), as well as Paul and Moser (2009) refer to, with the exception to define the group of young people beginning with the age of consent. 1) 18 – 29 young-group, 2) 30 – 49 middle-aged group, 3) 50 – 64 old-group.

Consequently the research questions are:

1. *How do self- or other directed themes and possible (future) selves come to the fore in future narratives about a desired future with unemployment*
  - 1.1 *How are these themes and possible (future) selves related to age?*

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## 2. Method

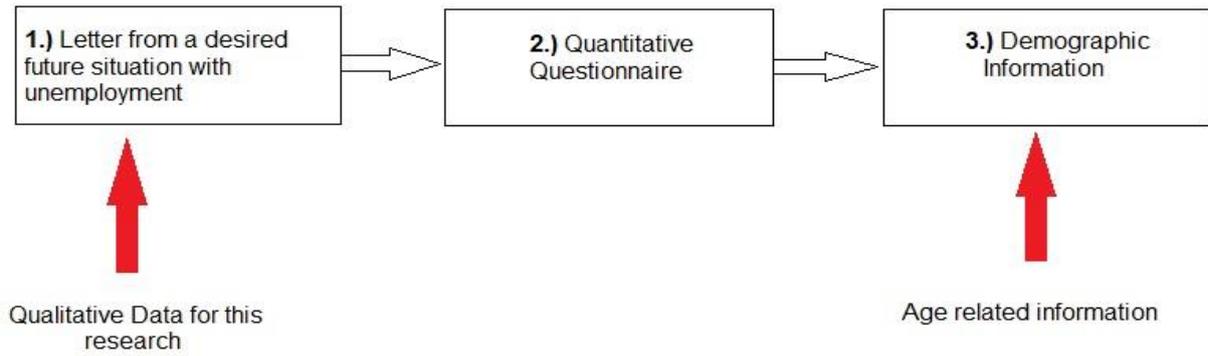
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### 2.1 Context & Design

This study took place in the context of a bachelor thesis in the field of Positive Psychology and Technology on the University of Twente. It was conducted on the basis of research in the Storylab of the University of Twente, founded in 2012 by Anneke Sools, Gerben Westerhof and Ernst Bohlmeijer (<https://www.utwente.nl/igs/ehealth/research/story-lab/>).

Their common research is directed to narrative approaches in terms of health and well-being. One study section within the Storylab focuses on future narratives in form of positive letters from a future self.

Three researchers were partly involved in this study area and made use of the future narratives with supervision of our attendant and head of the project “Building resilience by narrating the future”, Dr. Anneke Sools. The basis of the created survey is the letter from a future self without paid employment related to the research questions of the other students. Furthermore, we added quantitative questionnaires with mostly four up to five-scales as possible answers (Figure 1.).



**Figure 1.** *Distribution of the survey with relevant parts for this research*

Thus, the survey included qualitative-, as well as quantitative measurements to implement all research topics with the same sample. In the context of this specific study, it was focused on the qualitative measurement to answer the first two research questions, stated above. Additionally, the demographic information concerning age at the end of the questionnaire are conducted with the aim to answer the third research question.

Furthermore, an ethical approval was obtained before the execution of data collection and analysis.

## 2.2 Participants

The sample of this study includes participants of two different nationalities, the Netherlands (28%) and Germany (62%). The Participants were reached through purpose and convenience sampling and consisted of volunteers within the family, circle of friends and study colleagues on the University of Twente and their circle of acquaintance to secure an equal distribution of age groups and gender.

A total of 30 persons participated in this study and 21 completed it. In 6 cases no letters were written and another person did not completely fill in the BRS-questionnaire. One respondent stopped the survey after the BRS. These incomplete surveys were thus excluded from analysis. Concerning the age groups, we found 8 persons in age group 18-29, 6 between 30 and 49 and 7 participants in the age of 50 and above finished the whole survey (see table 1). The whole sample of respondents consisted of 11 women and 10 men, with an average age of 37 years ( $m = 37,095$ ).

**Table 1.** Demographics of completers in the full sample

		Sample Totals (N=21)	Percentage Total Sample
Gender	Male	10	49
	Female	11	51
Age (m=37,1)	18-29	8	38,1
	30-49	6	28,6
	50<	7	33,3
Educational Degree	Elementary school (Hauptschule/ Basisschool)	0	0
	High school (Realschule/ Onderbouw middelbare school)	4	19
	High school (Gymnasium/ Bovenbouw middelbare school)	7	33
	University (Hochschule/ HBO)	10	48
Current status of Employment	Fulltime paid job	11	51
	Parttime paid job	4	19
	Retired	2	10
	Unemployed	2	10
	Other	2	10

### 2.3 Procedure

The participants via both direct contact and social media websites, received a link to [www.qualtrics.com](http://www.qualtrics.com) where the survey was established. Furthermore, the researchers secured that every well-known internet-browser like *Google Chrome*, *Mozilla Firefox* and *Internet Explorer* were able to display the survey in the same way. This was to increase the ability and accessibility of the participants to take part in the study. An advantage of online data collection is that the

participants got the opportunity to fill in the letter and questionnaire in an environment and situation they subjectively prefer. The aim was to minimize their cognitive load through external disturbing factors, as well as to overcome response biases due to the presence of a researcher during the execution.

After accessing to the survey through clicking on the given link, the participants received the introduction. Therein, general information about the topic of the study, the context (in our case: Bachelor thesis) as part of ongoing research in the life-story lab at the University of Twente.

The informed consent was obtained after the introduction text to inform the participants about the possibility to withdraw the permission of using their data for study purposes. Moreover, the participants got information about the tasks of this survey, involving instructions over the letter as well as the execution of the subsequently questionnaire with an amount of 18 questions. These information include the extent of the letters (a maximum of 400 words), the request to write it in the own language, and essentially, to imagine themselves in a positive future situation without paid employment. Furthermore, they were informed about the approximate duration of the letter (20 minutes) and the questionnaire (10-15 minutes).

At last, an acknowledgment was added and the participants were asked whether they had understood and accepted all terms and conditions of the study. If that was the case, they were directed to the first task, the letter writing, by clicking the '>>' button.

## 2.4 Data Collection

The qualitative data used for this study were assembled via the letters from a desired self in a future situation without paid employment. The overall research instrument was adopted from a previous research from supervisor Anneke Sools. In the original survey, participants were randomly divided into the task to either write about a desired future situation with employment or unemployment, whereat the present study was specified to the future without paid work. Furthermore, some questions were excluded, because they were not expected to have additional value for the appropriate three research topics, and some quantitative questions were added. Additionally, the introduction text and informed consent, as well as the description of the letter writing task were briefly changed to adopt to the aims of this study.

### Letter from the unemployed future

At first, the participants receive information about the task to write a letter from a desired future

situation without paid work, involving the information that participants should describe this future situation as detailed as possible “*what does the place look like, smell, feel? who are there? what happens? what are you doing? etc.*”. Before, the participants are asked insistently to write about a situation without paid work, although it should be desired. Additionally, the letter should be addressed to (the own-) person/persons in the present, including a message to this present audience. Subsequent, the respondents were informed about the needed time (about 20 minutes) and the maximum word length of their letter (400 words, approximately 1 DinA4 page), as well as the fact that they are not able to revise the letter after going ahead to the next tasks, the questionnaire. However, they were able to save the letter and continue writing at another time. At last, the participants had to write their letter in a blank box, which was established underneath the introducing information about the task.

## 2.5 Data Analysis

The two research-questions were examined with the following Data.

For the main research question a coding-scheme from McAdams (2001b) was used to find themes of agency and communion (table 2). The coding-scheme consists of four themes for agency: *Self-Mastery (SM)*, *Status/Victory (SV)*, *Achievement/Responsibility (AR)* and *Empowerment (EM)* and four themes for communion: *Love/Friendship (LF)*, *Dialogue (DG)*, *Care/Help (CH)* and *Unity/Togetherness (UT)*.

Based on Bakan's (1966) “big two”, agency and communion, McAdams conducted these eight equally divided themes to encode agency and communion in autobiographical documents. Each episode represents a scoring unit and can be coded with either +1 for the existence, or with 0 for the absence of one of the themes. The scores are always determined to a whole letter. The highest total score for all four themes of either Agency or Communion can thus not be higher than 4 nor lower than 0 (see table 2). Additionally, two independent scorers are consulted to measure correlation effects for the inter-scorer reliability. Therefore, Cohen’s Kappa was estimated for the total scores of agency and communion themes, resulting in two substantial agreements between my scores and both of the independent scores ( $\kappa = .71$ ;  $\kappa = .78$ ).

**Table 2.** Coding-scheme for themes of Agency and Communion

Themes of Agency	Scores
Self Mastery (SM)	1/0

Status/Victory (SV)	1/0
Achievement/Responsibility (AR)	1/0
Empowerment (EM)	1/0
Total score	0 - 4
<b>Themes of Communion</b>	<b>Scores</b>
Love/Friendship (LF)	1/0
Dialogue (DG)	1/0
Care/Help (CH)	1/0
Unity/Togetherness (UT)	1/0
Total score	0 - 4

### Themes of Agency

- 1.) *Self-Mastery (SM)*. The subject is distinguished by the ability to enhance his power in the world. He uses the own experiences and thoughts to make actions and decisions effectually and is often characterized by sudden awareness of the self, goals, and desired achievements in life. Furthermore, SM represents the growth and power of the actor, due to an important situation or event in his life.
- 2.) *Status/Victory (SV)*. SV can be recognized in cases where the actor in the story earns sorts of honor or prizes. The protagonist defines his overwhelming status in comparison with friends or family and always describes a win over others and without this comparison there is not enough evidence for SV.
- 3.) *Achievement/Responsibility (AR)*. Contrary to SV, the actor do not have a higher rank or win over others, but takes action in terms of either successfully finishing goals or achievements, or being responsible for objectives or subjects. Most often these hints occur in terms of work or study. The actor is generally characterized with motivation to create and achieve things.
- 4.) *Empowerment (EM)*. The protagonist distinguishes himself with enhanced power due to superior circumstances or persons that act as leader or teacher. In many cases the nature or

even god are mentioned either as guide for the actor or as the reason for something especially great and beautiful.

### **Themes of Communion**

- 5.) *Love/Friendship (LF)*. LF can be found in cases where the actor describes romantic or friendship-based relationships with others. The illustration of such relations is only related to individuals with equal status or age and can thus not be ascribed to caring relationships with kids or older relatives. Furthermore, the nomination of an existing relationship to a beloved person is a significant sign for LF, even if the relationship has already ended.
- 6.) *Dialogue (DG)*. In this case, the actor expresses indirect conversations with another person/s in his story. Instrumental dialogues like interviews are not characterizing DG, because DG is rather labeled as friendly conversations that are meant to advice other persons or to support them.
- 7.) *Care/Help (CH)*. CH can be found in the actor's will to assist or support others. The benefits of another person is focused and descriptions of childcare and even financial help are scores for Care/Help. However, the help/care has to be emotionally in the context of another person and does not apply to material assistance.
- 8.) *Unity/Togetherness (UT)*. Scores on UT include descriptions of being part of a community, group or culture. Typically mentioned are harmonic scenes and situations with other individuals around like a positive imagination of a football match or a party with beloved people. The subliminal mentioning of acceptance and positive mood within a group is one of the main signs for UT scores.

Additionally, a sentence based analysis for possible selves was established to support findings of Agency and Communion themes with additional in depth details. The Possible Selves are conducted on the basis of the participant's narrated identities within the letters. Therefore, the narrative documents are coherently analyzed to secure that every meaningful detail is involved. Due to the application of a bottom up qualitative analysis on sentence level it was aimed to embrace all crucial information within the letters concerning the possible selves that come to the fore in the participant's

phrases to further determine either development, changes or constancy of the self in the associated letter. These possible selves are thus collected, both separately and as part of purposeful whole, summarized in a representative type.

To answer the comparative research question (*How are these (themes and possible (future) selves) findings related to age?*) the biographical information were consulted and ascribed to the participant's age with the appropriate letter. Therefore, the letters were divided into three categories, one for each determined age group. This diversion was made after the overall coding of the letters to prevent confirmation bias.

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### 3. Results

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This section is divided into four parts. First, an introduction to general findings, thus special or interesting conspicuities which are not directly connected with the focused research topics. Second, the found self- or other related themes due to the scores of Agency and Communion. Third, the possible selves, compressed in the nomination of types due to self- and other related findings within the future narratives and as examples for different storylines where these came to the fore. Finally, age related differences are depicted in answers to both research questions.

#### 3.1 General Findings

An interesting finding, which came to the fore is related to the amount of words participants used to write their letters. In total, 4893 words were written by all participants, in all age groups. The highest amount of words were found in letters from the oldest and youngest age group, 487 and 498 words.

Admittedly, the highest overall amount was discovered in the youngest group (N=2428), where only 2 respondents wrote less than 200 words (m=303,5). Contrary, the group of participants between 30 and 49 wrote less words than people in both of the other groups (N=1096), with two individual letters of less than 100 words (m=156,6). Additionally, interesting gender differences in the amount of words used to write the letters were also noticed. (see table 4). In general, women used more words to write their future letter than men (m=305,1; respectively m=184,1). Additionally, However, women between 30 and 49 were likely to write the less in all groups and gender (m= 89), and the lowest amount of words in male participants came to the fore in age group 1. Contrary, both

gender had the highest average amount of words within oldest age (Female:  $m=364$ ; Male:  $m=193,6$ ). The results of independent T-tests with the Statistical Program for Social Sciences (SPSS), showed significant differences between the amount of words used in group 1 and 2 ( $F(13;1,41) = 5,51$ ;  $p < 0,05$ ), as well as between group 2 and 3 ( $F(11;6,673) = 7,35$ ;  $p < 0,05$ ). These outputs can be found in the appendix to this study.

**Table 4.** Amount of words and means per age group and gender

	<i>Total amount of words</i>	<i>Amount of words Female</i>	<i>Amount of words Male</i>
<i>Age Group 1</i>	2428 ( $m=303,5$ )	2086 ( $m=347,6$ )	342 ( $m=171$ )
<i>Age Group 2</i>	1096 ( $m=156,6$ )	178 ( $m=89$ )	918 ( $m=183,5$ )
<i>Age Group 3</i>	1673 ( $m=278,3$ )	1092 ( $m=364$ )	581 ( $m=193,6$ )
<b>Totals</b>	4893 ( $m=233$ )	3356 ( $m=305,1$ )	1841 ( $m=184,1$ )

### 3.2 Themes of Agency and Communion

The aim was to accentuate how respondents describe themselves in the given future situation without paid work. Therefore, it was interesting whether individuals distinguish self-related and other related themes to handle the unemployed situation in a positive way. Due to the coding scheme of agency and communion by McAdams, it was possible to determine these themes within the letters. Additionally, the bottom up analysis of possible selves on sentence level provided in depth previous information and helped recognizing agency and communion themes more explicit, due to the appreciation of phrases in the whole context.

In general, all eight themes were found within the letters, independent of age, gender or length of the letter. However, some themes were detected in nearly every future narrative, whereas others were extremely rare. In total, the analysis resulted in 49 scores for Agency themes and 39 scores for Communion (table 5).

Below, all themes will be broadly described with appropriate quotes out of the letters from the future.

#### Themes of Agency

Within the Agency themes, Self-Mastery and Achievement/Responsibility were coded the most (18,

respectively 17 times). Empowerment were found in eleven letters, whereat only in three letters signs for Status/Victory were discovered.

The first agency theme, Self-mastery (SM), is the second most reported theme within all letters. SM is defined as the description of successful actions or experiences, which have positive value and enhance the self in any matter. SM was mentioned in many different ways and as a result of several happenings or situations. Accordingly, the most stated episodes where SM occurs seemed to be meant as justification for the decision to either lose or quit a job. *“I quit my job 2 years ago to be nearby my children (...) that was the best decision of my life”*, *“At first, I was shocked and appalled, but I started realizing that this should not mean the end of the world. In contrast, I realize now how inappropriate I actually fitted in this profit-orientated, exploitative job”*.

However, in some cases SM were also highly related to social reasons (*“[...] she is even happy about the fact that I am at home most of the time now. And I do, too”*).

The second theme, Status/Victory (SV), refers to the achievement or success in comparison with others, like getting a heightened status due to a win in a competition. This theme did just occur a few times in the letters and has the lowest amount of codes for availability of all agency themes. SV was just recognizable in the deep context of the letters and was never directly mentioned as a win about someone else, like in the definition. However, in a few narratives SV were rather reported as consequence out of positive circumstances. *“Imagine this: I won the lottery. 5 million Euros.”* as an example for such a positive mentioned event. This mentioned win in the lottery is not a sign for SV at all, but the following comparison with other individuals with less money than the self can be seen as such: *“I feel very good now. You have no idea how much fun life has to offer if one does not have to think about incomes (...) in fact: Money itself won't make satisfied. But it can offer a lot possibilities to create your own happiness.”* The self achieved a status due to lucky circumstances and is thus second to none.

In another letter, SV occurs concerning love. The self is fallen in love with somebody and relates this luck with others who don't have found this kind of positive emotion yet (*“Many people would probably wish for a life as mine”*).

The third agentic theme, Achievement/responsibility, were found in cases where respondents reported goals or situation they could effort due to unemployment (*“In the past I couldn't imagine to not have a secure job with the age of 50, but I can say that I'm very happy”*). Furthermore, the will to take action and responsibility as result to the imagined situation were coded as AR: *“I'll look for*

*another job and fight.*” Also, arrangements with the described future without work were described in terms available time to care and be responsible for others or for oneself (“*I kind of enjoy my situation as housekeeper now*”, “*And because I don’t have to care about anything anymore, we adopted two refugee children*”). AR in general, was the most found theme of agency in all letters, especially in relation to voluntary work and taking responsibility for others due to being busy, even without paid work.

Empowerment, the last theme of agency, was similar to SV rarely found and in depth analysis was necessary to recognize it. In most of these cases, empowerment occurred as a response to higher, uncontrollable situations or happenings in the respondents described future, whereat especially the description of love functioned as strengthening factor (“*Actually, my life is not that nice, but I am in love since two weeks. Now I have to do something in my life. Love is the best medicine*”, “*I had never expected that my ways would change in such way, because I had so much bad luck with love in the past*”. Additionally, the society (“*I have to get out here. Out of the grey haze of society. I have to do something for myself. For MY life.*”), politics (“*Sinds het totstandkoming van deze wetten zijn talloze Turkse gezinnen uit Europa terug gegaan naar Turkije net als mijn gezien.*”) and historical events (“*De terreurdaden van de ISIS uit het verleden hebben ertoe geleidt dat we niet meer in Europa wilden wonen.*”) were ascribed as empowerment for the self to live and act positively.

### **Themes of Communion**

The most often detected Communion theme was Care/Help (13) followed by eleven scores for Unity/Togetherness and Love/Friendship (9). The lowest amount of scores in Communion were determined for Dialogue (6).

In the first theme for Communion, Love/Friendship (LF) relationships to a beloved wife, husband or partner were predominantly focused. These relationships functioned either as support to get over negative emotions concerning unemployment (“*Yesterday was my marriage. A beautiful event.*”) or even as a positive reason to stay unemployed (“*We have us, so we have everything we need to be happy*”).

In terms of the given task, to write down a message to the receiver of the future letter, it was challenging to find dialogues within the letters that are not directly addressed to the reader, but to individuals in their stories. Therefore, specific non-verbal expressions were used to identify codes for Dialogue (DG). (“*Just the calming smile my partner shows when looking at me, gives me the overwhelming feeling that everything is alright the way it is.*”). In another future narrative an

indirect dialogue seemed to be used to enhance the own self-esteem in association with the unemployed situation: *“Some say that I should change my life, search for something different. Meanwhile, I avoid these conversations”*.

Contrary to DG, Care/Help as the third theme of communion, has occurred the most within the investigated future narratives of this study. In contrast to the agency theme AR, Care/Help was detected in terms of actual pleasure in supporting others, without nomination or at least hints to the own benefit. Most often, childcare and voluntary help in social facilities were found in the narratives as scores for CH (*“I will help refugees now. I am really looking forward to that, because I appreciate helping people. “We work voluntarily in a basic school (...) I feel happy when thinking about the kids.”* But also care for the own children or even animals scores for CH in communion: *“Then, we take these animals to our animal pension and give them food and medicine.”*, *“My son is very sick and needs to be treated in a special clinic”*.

The fourth theme of communion, Unity/Togetherness, included special mentioning of the self as part of a community. Some of these descriptions were indirectly also ascribed to CH or LF with the exception of an exclusive description of togetherness with others (*“Spending time with family and friends is not just precious, but invaluable.”*; *“Now, we live in a community (...) this is the best payment u can get.”*).

### 3.3 Self- and Other related themes in Possible Selves

In this subsection three types of Self- and/or other related themes are presented, concluding out of the bottom-up analysis for possible selves. The aim was to give a more detailed description concerning Agency and Communion, in three ways, in which these two concepts come to the fore. This process resulted in three main types, which will be broadly presented on the hand of one example letter respectively.

#### **Type 1 – “The happy together letter”**

1. Dear old friends, it is 2025 now and I write this letter while sitting in my wife's and mine
2. appartement. It's not much space left for us to live, but it's more than enough to be happy. I
3. just lost my job a few months ago, so I couldn't afford my old apartment anymore.
4. (You guys will remember it). It was a really tough time for me and I was endlessly looking

5. for a new place to work, without succes. Luckily, I always had my wife on my side. She  
6. supported me in every possible way to get over the bad feelings i had when i lost my job at  
7. first. Now, I am quite happy, even without having the possibility to earn money for a better  
8. lifestyle. My wife still loves me the way she did before and she often tells me that she is  
9. even happy about the fact that I am at home most of the time now. And I do, too. I kind of  
10. enjoy my situation as housekeeper now, I cook and care for everything at home, while my  
11. wife gets the money for us to live. So, I could say that I am happy about the current  
12. situation as long as I realize that my wife is happy about it. We have us, so we have  
13. everything we need to be happy. Greetings, your Robin.

The writer addresses his letter to “*old friends*”, which may be a sign for a social present self, who enjoys being surrounded by others. This also comes to the fore when the story switches to the future self’s point of view (“*it is 2025 now and I write this letter while sitting in my wife’s and mine apartment*”). The writer, who names himself Robin (“Greetings, your Robin”) also expresses a moderate self who is satisfied with few things (“*It’s not much space left for us to live, but it’s more than enough to be happy*”) and again he connects “us” with the feeling of happiness. The story continues with rather negative descriptions of consequences of the loss of his job (“*I couldn’t afford my old apartment anymore*”), with another designation to his friends (“*You guys will remember it*”). The future self, further underlines the troubles of looking for a new job “without success” and directly appoints the “tough” consequences for himself. After that, there is another cut in the storyline, as the “wife” again is reported as supporting stability-factor in Robin’s life and especially in his struggles with unemployment. The self thus relies on social support instead of own actions to overcome the negative situation (“*She supported me in every possible way to get over the bad feelings*”). As a consequence, the self is “quite happy” and emphasizes a moderate self again, who accepts not “having the possibility to earn money for a better lifestyle”. Furthermore, one recognizes a caring-self, as the actor expresses the importance of his wife’s happiness as well as his own (“*she is even happy about the fact that I am at home [...] And I do, too*”). This shared-happiness also comes to the fore when the self repeatedly describes his happiness about the situation without work (“*as long as I realize that my wife is happy about it*”). The author also continually underlines the emancipation of the self, concerning the role as “housekeeper” and his wife getting the money. The final sentence of the letter can be seen as a summation of important values for the self, the “us” as the ultimate reason that counts in life.

In sum, this letter contains an overall tendency to relate to Communion in the regards to social environment. The friends as addressees, and especially descriptions of love to his wife and their

reciprocal dependence of happiness no matter what happens in life, are intense signs for an rather negative attribution to the self, and contrary, positive in terms of “us”. These can thus be seen as high degrees of Communion.

## **Type 2 – “Without Love it’s tough – The Disconnected letter”**

1. Good evening. I am Nina and I’m 31. At the moment I am unemployed. I don’t have
2. now work since 10 years. I had a good job, but my employee thought that I haven’t
3. don’t good work. Now I am sitting at home and try to live my life as good as
4. possible. Actually, my life is not that nice, but I am in love since two weeks. Now I
5. have to do something in my life. Love is the best medicine.

The writer of this letter introduces herself with her name and age to an unknown reader and seems to avoid addressing it to a specific known person or even her present self (“*Good evening. I am Nina and 31*”). The actor, Nina, continues her story with short, but always self-related phrases in terms of emphasizes of the “I”, the own person. Furthermore, she accentuates, in the view of the future self, the satisfaction about the work she lost years ago (“*I had a good job*”) and reports another person for the first time in her letter (“*my employer*”). However, this first relation to another individual is constituted in rather negative expressions, because she blames her former employee as the reason for losing the job she liked (“*But my employer thought that I have not done a good job.*”). In that case, the presented future self can be seen as avoiding in terms of acknowledgements of own faults for losing the job.

After that, there is a break in the story, where the future self is imbedded in an actual situation (“*Now, I am sitting at home*”). Additionally, Nina describes challenges to live her life without work and shows a depressed self as a consequence of unemployment (“*My life is actually not that nice*”). The amount of the term “*life*” further accentuates the importance of the work she lost and resulting troubles in her life in that future situation.

In contrast to the first four phrases, which contain rather negative, undesired facts, the story finally ends with a positive twist (“*But since two weeks I am in love. Love is the best medicine.*”). In fact, (“*love*”), is not directly ascribed to another person but as a heightened term for positivism that enlightens her life.

This future narrative does not contain any direct orientation to another individual or formulations as “we” or “us”. The letter only comprises self-referred reports in the face of unemployment. The described future self thus contains constant degrees of agency.

### Type 3 – “Humanity is better off without work, and so am I – The mixed letter”

1. I’ve worked, and I’ve been working hard. I don’t have no work a present, but I have
2. so much time to spend for myself and things that I always wanted to do. Now, I can
3. spend time for others. I can help people who need help. Work was important and
4. the only source of income. In this times, work does not have the priorities anymore.
5. Thus, one can direct the time to necessary things that have to do with humanity.
6. You can spend time to directly help people in need. The structure of life was
7. dictated by work, but this is the past. Everybody can survive without work. I never
8. had the time to enjoy life. Now I can do everything I couldn’t do before. I was always
9. in hurry in the world where work was central in life. I feel released from heavy
10. weight. Humanity is better off without work.

The author of this future narrative does not address his letter to any audience and also avoids reporting personal data like name, age or the point in time the future situation takes place in. However, already in the first row the writer makes frequent use of the first person pronoun “I”. The self in this sentence seems to accentuate his past life as working person, with special mentioning of the importance and time-consuming role the work has had for him/her (“[...] *and I’ve been working hard*”). The second sentence in the first line can be seen as an early break in the story as the author states that he does not have work (“*now*”). Furthermore, he underlines that this is even desired for him, because he can spend more time in his own interests now. The word “*but*” can be interpreted as the breach between his old future-past, where he was a hard working person, and the new unemployed future, where the self is emphasized as having new interests. The self thus shows a development. In addition, he defines his new interests as time to invest in helping others (“*I can help people who need help*”). This also indicates the change from the past (- future) self, which followed the egocentric ideas of work and getting money, whereas the new future self aims to help others. The next two lines seem to support this interpretation, because the author falls back into the past tense again and describes the importance of work to have an income again. Additionally, he gives an own explanation for the change of values for the self as he construes the priority of work in the (new) future as lowered (“*In this times, work does not have the priorities anymore.*”). Instead, he defines spending time in humanity as more valuable and specifies his opinion with the aim to help people in trouble. After that, the self appears as a guide for a better life without work again as he describes his past- (future) life as lead by work, without freedom for own choices (“*The structure of life was dictated by work, but this is the past.*”), which also comes back in the statement within the last sentence. He also argues that one can survive, or even more enjoy living, without work,

which can be seen as remorseful retrospection to his life as “hard” worker. In the following sentences he falls back into the role of the new future self (“*Now I can do everything [...]*”) and also ascribes rust to his life with unemployment.

The overall conclusion within the letter seems to be the agent’s idea that work is defined as liability in life (“*I feel released from heavy weight.*”). The letter also shows a clear development of the self from statements directing to Agency to a self with will and interest to help others (signs for Communion). These comes especially in the self-reflection as example of humanities course to the fore. Humanity in itself can thus be identified as the larger whole, which determines opinion and acts of the self.

### 3.4 Findings of Agency and Communion in relation to age

Overall 49 themes of agency, respectively 39 themes of communion were found. As presented in table 5, these themes were irregularly divided over the three age groups, with the highest number of theme-scores in the group of participants between 18 and 29 with a total of 38 themes. In contrast, the amount of codes for Age Group 2 and 3 were lower than in group 1 and do furthermore not differ much from each other (24, 26). In contrast, the total scores for Agency and Communion in the middle-aged and participants of the youngest group do not show huge contrasts, although the oldest group seems to show a tendency towards agency over communion and the younger group the other way around.

In consideration of the total scores for agency, it was detected that the youngest participants seemed to rely more on agentic themes (N=20) than individuals of the older groups (N=13, respectively N=16). Especially, Achievement/Responsibility and Self-Mastery were most often stated in the letters of all three age-groups. SM and AR had the same score in group 1 (N=7), while the highest number of findings in the second group were found in SM and for Achievement/Responsibility in the oldest group. In contrast, all groups were found low on Status/Victory, with just 3 findings at all. When it comes to Empowerment, it was discovered that just 2 letters showed signs for this theme in the middle-aged group, while the third group exhibited the second highest scores for this theme (N=5).

The overall highest amount of scores for Communion were also ascribed to the first group (N=18), mostly divided on the themes Love/Friendship (N=6) and Unity/Togetherness (N=5) and the lowest amount of codes for Dialogue, which also agrees to the other groups. Compared to that, people between 30 and 49, as well as the oldest age group showed less themes of Communion in their narratives (N=11, respectively N=10). In contrast to the youngest participants, the lowest scores for

Love/Friendship were found in the other groups. The highest number of codes in the second group were ascribed to Care/Help (N=5), followed by Unity/Togetherness (N=4). The oldest participants scored even on Love/Friendship, Dialogue and Unity/Togetherness (N=2) and most often reported signs for Care/Help in reference to caring for other's and generativity.

**Table 5.** Scores for Themes of Agency and Communion in relation to the three age groups

<b>Themes of Agency and Communion</b>	Age Group 1	Age Group 2	Age Group 3	Total Score Themes
Agency Self-Mastery	7	6	4	17
Agency Status/Victory	2	0	1	3
Agency Achievement/Responsibility	7	5	6	18
Agency Empowerment	4	2	5	11
<b>Total Score Agency</b>	<b>20</b>	<b>13</b>	<b>16</b>	<b>49</b>
Communion Love/Friendship	6	1	2	9
Communion Dialogue	3	1	2	6
Communion Care/Help	4	5	4	13
Communion Unity/Togetherness	5	4	2	11
<b>Total Score Communion</b>	<b>18</b>	<b>11</b>	<b>10</b>	<b>39</b>

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## 4. Conclusions and Discussion

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In this section conclusions about the themes, based on Bakan's (1966) terms Agency and Communion, with additional information from self-representations concerning affecting ideas and goals for the individual, stated in the idea of possible selves from Markus & Nurius (1986), will be inspected first. Subsequently, peculiarities within age differences will be attracted and discussed in the context of the literature, followed by recommendations for further research. Finally, practical implications as well as limitations for this study will be specified to conclude with final remarks.

## 4.1 Agency and Communion in Themes and Possible Selves

Overall, there were more self-related themes than themes for Communion in the letters from the future. At first sight, it could be assumed that individuals, independent of age, are generally more likely to report reliance on their own goals, capacities and self-related ideas to accomplish well-being and abilities to cope with future possibilities of unemployment.

However, one has to consider various aspects that could influence these results.

Interestingly, the highest amount of codes for Communion themes of all three groups were found in Care/Help. Two third of the future narratives comprises social care in either institutes or for refugees and the own children as alternative to work. In that case, I assume that frequent mentioning of especially voluntary work with refugees come to the fore due to its current presence in the media, an influential instrument of globalization. This supposition goes along with Wilpert's (2009) definition of globalization, in terms of increasing flow of information and convergence of nationalities, which McLuhan (1992) calls the "global village".

Another crucial finding for this study is related to Self-Mastery. This theme came to the fore in all but four letters and included a sudden development of self-awareness and gaining new goals and plans for the individual's life. The high amount of codes for this theme is surprising, because it contradicts to the longitudinal research from Lucas et al. (2004) concerning their hypothesis that individuals who experience unemployment are expected to lose their goals and content in life. Although the narrative documents mirror just imagined situations in the future, it may be seen as sign for a beneficial possibility to overcome these consequences with narrative futuring. Furthermore, the high number of references to terms of Self-Mastery could even be interpreted as effective method to stimulate in depth thoughts about the individual's current situation and may thus result in taking action to alternatives at present. In this concern, the idea of Flach (1997), who defines the ability to adapt to new situations and to be aware of the self as characteristics for a resilient personality, goes along with these findings. The individual's mastering of even difficult future situations like unemployment can thus be seen as a main aspect to desired lives.

Apparently, none of the letters involved in this study included mere descriptions, which underline a constancy of neither purely social-related nor self-related descriptions without any hints for the presence of particularly opposite themes. In fact, several findings within the future narratives were detected for both, Agency and Communion. Thus, it seems that independent of age people have the tendency to rely on both, self- and other related aspects when imagining a desired future situation, even with actual negative circumstances like unemployment.

Especially the theme Achievement/Responsibility were often interconnected with themes that score

for Communion. The expression of achieved goals or taking advantage out of the unemployed situation were sometimes consequence of social contacts who were reported as crucial reason to make these accomplishments possible. These findings could thus also score for Love/Friendship. Furthermore, demonstrations of the story agent in a leading role with responsibilities for others, like voluntary work in childcare or for refugees, could also be integrated into Care/Help, depending on the particular context.

Thus, these interpretation at least partly reinforce Diehl et al. (2004) findings about the interconnection of Agency and Communion as defense mechanisms.

Additionally, the sentence based analysis generated a huge quantity of possible (future) selves. These selves often stand in conflict with each other, due to processes including a development of the agent in the story in terms of changing self- or other directed expressions. Therefore, the diversity of possible selves seems to confirm the assumption of several self - representations in the individual, as stated in Markus & Nurius' theory (1986). Nevertheless, it was possible to use these different possible (future) selves as supportive approach to conduct self- and other-related expressions. As already suggested by McAdams et al. (1996), Agency and Communion, as well as possible selves defined by Markus & Nurius (1986), can thus be seen as central clusters in narrative documents.

As stated above, none of the implemented types completely defines unidirectional presence of rather Community or Agency aspects. Nevertheless, all types represent various amounts of either self- and other directed presentations or signs for both and furthermore content related differences in the way to describe the desired situation. Therefore, and in terms of differences in the development of possible selves the types were named "The happy together type", respectively "Without Love it's tough" and "Humanity is better off without work, and so am I".

Finally, in answer to the research question (*How do self- or other directed themes and possible (future) selves come to the fore in future narratives about a desired future with unemployment*) it can be conducted that in both, themes of Agency and Communion and possible (future) selves, appear on several ways. As described in this section, self- and other directed findings occurred in unequal amounts in the whole sample of future narratives, but always in combination with each other. Furthermore, the summation of themes in all future letters resulted in more themes for Agency than for Communion, with most reports for Achievement/Responsibility, Self-Mastery, Care/Help and Unity/Togetherness.

## 4.2 Age related differences in Self- and Other directed Themes and Possible selves

The age related differences in self- or other directed findings were examined via categorization of

the future narratives. In contrast to scientific assumptions, especially in terms of gerontological literature, the results show that individuals in the age of 50 and above seemed to rely more on themes of Agency than Communion. Concerning Martin & Kliegel (2008) older people are generally expected to express needs for social contacts and support, due to fears of risks for social-isolation with increasing age. Paul & Moser (2009) support the claimed fear of elder individuals as they state that people close to the career-end as well as school-finisher suffer the most from unemployment. Even in the context of this study, the outcomes were thus expected to be the other way around. Peculiarly Achievement/Responsibility shows high scores in the oldest age group of the present study. In that case, the aims of the presented possible selves were mainly directed to new goals and purposeful tasks in high age. The present selves of several participants over 50 may thus be interpreted as ambitious to stay in form and be resilient to unemployment as well as to physical and psychological consequences of aging processes. Additionally, most scores for Empowerment were ascribed to the older individuals, which specially came to the fore in desires to live a calm but financially secure life in old age, as result of more years of hard work in comparison with the younger age groups.

Contrary, most themes for Agency as well as Communion were identified in the group of persons between 18 and 29. This group also showed the closest gap between both total scores and may thus be seen as nearly equally relying on self- and other related strategies to overcome negative effects of unemployment. However, these results slightly contradict to the assumptions from Diehl et al. (2004). They found significant results for high scores in Agency for young and middle-aged individuals, which on the other hand correlates with the findings of this study, but on the other hand also stays in contrast with the results of old people, who they expect to score high on relation to others.

Thereby, I suggest further research for age related differences in Agency and Communion in future narratives, due to the fact that the participants were not distributed equally across the three age-groups and the results may thus be influenced by more scores within young people respectively less possible scores in both other groups. Furthermore, the results concerning the number of words used per age-group should be consulted. The length of a letter might not directly influencing the content or quality of the respective narrative document in neither positive nor negative ways, but is expected to regard to the amount of information and resources for analysis. Therefore, the topmost quantity of average words were estimated for the letters of the youngest, followed by the oldest individuals. This difference may thus also be influential on the overall amount of found themes in the letters, which applies to the findings of most themes for the youngest, followed by the oldest age group in this study.

The comparative research question can hence be answered. The previous analytic findings are definitely related to age. All age groups generally seemed to rely on self-directed as well as other-related themes in the imagined desired situation, whereas especially people over 50 surprisingly showed the most concerns to themes of Agency. The conclusion is thus other than expected that older people show the tendency to rather overcome unemployment with self-enhancement and solutions that are based on their own. The other two groups seem just slightly to rely more on self-relation and are generally well-adjusted in both ways to describe the unemployed situation desirable.

### 4.3 Limitations and Practical Implications

The most obvious limitation of this study concerns the scope, scale and time frame. Due to the fact that it was conducted as topic for a bachelor thesis, only a limited amount of time was given to collect and analyse the appropriate data. This influenced the amount of data itself as well as the sample size. Especially regarding the collected amount of data for this qualitative then for a quantitative study and the results may thus not be as representative as it would have been with more participants and accessible time.

Furthermore, the used instruments for the present study may be limited in terms of validity. The internal validity might be lowered, due to the prescribed limitation of words to write the future letter. Although, participants had the opportunity to write more words than stated in the task description, some narrative documents may generate more self- or other directed information. On the other hand, this also can be seen as an advantage in the way that people should express their own story in a compressed, yet meaningful way. Despite the limitation of words, in this study was found that individuals were able to write detailed storylines with even less than 100 words.

Although the presentation of the narrative data shows detailed information of the letters from a future and might thus prepare a basis for further research, it may be partly limited in terms of reliability. Leussink (2013) stated that narrative documents may be highly valued in terms of inter-rater reliability. This conforms to this study concerning the kappa-scores with two other independent scorers on the coding scheme for Agency and Communion by McAdams (2001b). In fact, this was only established for this coding system but not for the additional analysis of possible selves as supporting value. However, the conclusion about present selves in relation to possible (future) selves was based on interpretations with an emic perspective, and due to transparency and intersubjective agreement with the two supervisors enhance the value of these findings and are thus not weakened in terms of reliability. Nevertheless, additional quantitative questionnaires like a self-

report scale for the present self would have added more in depth values to the findings of the selves and their interconnection to the self-portrayal in the future situation.

However, further research should be done to generate more specific findings for practical use. The self- or other directed findings may have advantages in the treatment of patients with for example depressions as result to unemployment or more general to similar situations and circumstances with the same negative impact. Especially, the age-related results could be used to generate more specific methods to focus the needs and goals of individuals in the respective age. Therefore, the age related differences could be valuable to recognize personal strivings, dreams and goals even faster for the individual's particular age. In that case, it can be suggested for clinical purposes that for example patients above the age of 50 could be helped to enhance their self-directed ways to overcome and be prepared for the stressful and as stated by Eisenberg et al. (1938) most harmful influence on well-being, unemployment.

This study may furthermore not only be beneficial for clinical and positive psychological practice with therapeutically purpose, but also for individual preparation of well-being and coping abilities in private circumstances. The analysis of possible selves shows that individuals could be able to prepare themselves to negative consequences of unemployment in many different ways, because due to the imagination of such a situation they might be expected to adapt their present lifestyle to the ideas in their own story. Like the findings in the three letter types show, for example descriptions of love as a greater whole, or as abandonment to another person could open the author's eyes for things, which really have importance in their lives and help them to hold on these supporting values. This can also be ascribed to the often mentioned thinking about humanity and modern society and resulting sudden awareness about actual meanings in life for the individual. This also adopts positive ways to enhance the will to help others, people in need of support like the millions of refugees at present.

### 4.3.1 Final Note

Findings of the present study show that narrating the future may help people to cope with unemployment and other uncertain situations that are expected to have negative influence on individual well-being. The paradoxical task to imagine oneself in a desired future situation with exposed negative consequences of unemployment may thus enhance individual competences to be prepared for such uncertainties. Therefore, this study shows a diversity of age-related choices for self-directed and other-directed expressions to overcome such consequences with desired future situations. Furthermore, narrative futuring may have positive effect on the current self of the author in the way that a realization of things and persons that really matter to the individual takes place, which may be love or friendship to others or a general awareness of humanity and the society we live in. The letter from a future self can thus also help the individual concentrating and caring for these crucial facts.

As stated in the literature for this research, ongoing globalization processes are increasing the risk for unemployment and therewith threats for well-being of the affected individuals. Therefore, the need to be prepared for such situations is immense, and narrative futuring is expected to be an effective way to support individuals in achieving this preparation.

Indeed, the present study is an approach use in the overall new section of narrative futuring, but it is suggested to make use of the specific findings of this study in terms of further research in the way people of different age cope with comparable situations to unemployment. If these findings can be confirmed in broader researches it could be possible to develop ways in therapeutically practice to treat existing negative consequences, with specified methods for patients with different age.

Furthermore, it may help people to get resilient to such situations even before they occur and can be done without much effort and guidelines.

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## 5. References

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## 6. Appendix

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### Appendix A: Introduction to survey

#### **Welcome to this survey about imagining the future in times of unemployment!**

This survey is a part of our research at the University of Twente. This survey takes place in the context of our bachelor thesis for the study of Psychology, in the field of Positive Psychology and Technology. This survey is also part of the research lab from the University of Twente. More information about the Storylab can be found with the following link <https://www.utwente.nl/igs/ehealth/research/story-lab/>

By participating in this survey, you will possibly learn more about your own future. Due to the technologies used in this survey, you will also contribute to new scientific research. Finally, your participation will also help us with our bachelor thesis.

#### **Confidentiality and informed consent**

**All of your responses will be processed confidentially. As a participant it is your right to stop with the survey at any moment without explanation. You can withdraw your permission to use your data for research purposes at any time without explanation.**

For any questions regarding the survey or results, please contact our supervisor Anneke Sools or one of us via the following mail addresses:

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s.a.wintermeyer@student.utwente.nl

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#### **Instructions**

This study involves two steps:

1. You write down a letter from the future (in your own language of choice) of which instructions will be provided as soon as you give your consent and start the survey. You will be invited to write a letter from a future where you do not have a paid job.

2. You answer a questionnaire consisting of 18 questions about yourself and the experience of writing the letter from the future.

Writing the letter from the future takes about 20 minutes (some people need less time, some need more time, how much time you want to spend is entirely up to you). The questionnaire takes 10-15 minutes. So in total the survey takes about **half an hour**.

**When you have understood all information above, and agree to give consent to use your data for research purposes, then please start by clicking the >> button.**

**Thank you** so much for your participation!

Ahmed, Simon en Mandy

### [Appendix B: Formulation of the letter-writing task](#)

Write a letter from a desired future situation where you are without a paid job

The following suggestions give you an idea about how to write the letter from future. Feel free to use these instructions as a basis for writing the letter in your own way.

Feel free to use your full imagination: Remember that it is about the future which has not't occurred yet and that it's a chance to think about what could happen. You are free to imagine anything you like, except that you have to write about a situation where you do NOT have a paid job. So, although you could be engaged in all kinds of unpaid work such as volunteer work, house-keeping, leisure activities, taking care of children or ill family members you have to take into account that you yourself do NOT earn a salary.

Imagine that you are travelling in a time machine to this situation without a paid job, and imagine that for you this is a *desired* situation. Try to imagine the situation in as much detail as possible (for example what does the place look like, smell, feel? who are there? what happens? what are you doing? etc.).

Tell your story of that specific future day, that specific future moment or that specific future event and describe whatever was most useful in order to make this event happen and how you look back on your way to the future. Try to have in mind, how you came to be in the desired situation without

paid employment. You write the letter from your future to an audience in the present (your present self or another person or group in the present) and conclude with a message to the present audience. Please be aware that as soon as you finish the letter and click on next, you will go to the questionnaire and you cannot go back to the letter! However you can save your letter and continue the questionnaire at another time. The maximum word length is about 400 words (1 A4 page).

### Appendix C: Translated example letter from a desired future without paid employment 2

1. Goede avond. Ik ben Nina en 31. Op dit moment ben ik werkloos. Ik heb geen werk sinds 10
2. jaar. Ik heb een goede baan gehad. Maar mijn werkgever heeft gedacht dat ik geen goede werk
3. heb gedaan. Nu zit ik thuis en probeer zo goed mogelijk mijn leven te leven. Mijn leven is
4. eigenlijk niet zo mooi. Maar sinds twee weken ben ik verliefd. Nu heb ik iets te doen in mijn
5. leven. Liefde is de beste medicijn.

### Appendix C: Translated example letter from a desired future without paid employment 3

1. Ik heb gewerkt, en ik heb hard gewerkt. Ik heb nu geen werk maar ik heb zo veel tijd voor
2. mezelf en voor andere dingen die ik wou altijd doen. Ik heb nu tijd die ik aan andere kan
3. besteden. Ik kan nu helpen de mensen die hulp nodig hebben. Werk was belangrijk en was
4. de enige bron van inkomsten. In deze tijden werk heeft niet meer de prioriteit zoals in het
5. verleden. Men kan dus zijn tijd besteden aan nuttige en noodzakelijke dingen die met de
6. mensheid te maken hebben. Je kan tijd besteden om direct hulp te verlenen aan de mensen
7. die in nood zitten. De structuur van het leven was door het werken gedictieert, dat is verleden
8. tijd. Iederen kan overleven zonder werk. Ik heb nooit echt de tijd gehad om van het leven te
9. genieten. Nu mag ik alles doen wat ik kon niet doen. Ik had altijd haast in de wereld waar
10. werken centraal in het leven stond. Ik voel me bevrijd van een zware last. De mensheid is
11. beter af van werken.

Appendix D: SPSS-Outputs per Age Group and Amount of Words

**T-Test for independent samples (amount of words in group 1 & 2)**

**Group Statistics**

AgeGroup		N	Mean	Std. Deviation	Std. Error Mean
AmountWords	Gruppe 1	8	303,5000	149,62907	52,90186
	Gruppe 2	7	156,5714	72,78703	27,51091

**Independent Samples Test**

		Levene's Test for Equality of Variances		t-test for Equality of Means						
		F	Sig.	t	df	Sig. (2-tailed)	Mean Difference	Std. Error Difference	95% Confidence Interval of the Difference	
									Lower	Upper
AmountWords	Equal variances assumed	5,505	,035	2,358	13	,035	146,92857	62,32278	12,28839	281,56875
	Equal variances not assumed			2,464	10,410	,033	146,92857	59,62766	14,77552	279,08163

**T-Test for independent samples (amount of words in group 1 & 3)**

**Group Statistics**

AgeGroup		N	Mean	Std. Deviation	Std. Error Mean
AmountWords	Gruppe 1	8	303,5000	149,62907	52,90186
	Gruppe 3	6	278,8333	163,94806	66,93152

**Independent Samples Test**

		Levene's Test for Equality of Variances		t-test for Equality of Means						
		F	Sig.	t	df	Sig. (2-tailed)	Mean Difference	Std. Error Difference	95% Confidence Interval of the Difference	
									Lower	Upper
AmountWords	Equal variances assumed	,099	,758	,293	12	,774	24,66667	84,11752	-158,60965	207,94299
	Equal variances not assumed			,289	10,321	,778	24,66667	85,31374	-164,62518	213,95851

**T-Test for independent samples (amount of words in group 2 & 3)**

**Group Statistics**

AgeGroup		N	Mean	Std. Deviation	Std. Error Mean
AmountWords	Gruppe 2	7	156,5714	72,78703	27,51091
	Gruppe 3	6	278,8333	163,94806	66,93152

**Independent Samples Test**

		Levene's Test for Equality of Variances		t-test for Equality of Means						
		F	Sig.	t	df	Sig. (2-tailed)	Mean Difference	Std. Error Difference	95% Confidence Interval of the Difference	
									Lower	Upper
AmountWords	Equal variances assumed	7,345	,020	-1,788	11	,101	-122,26190	68,38225	-272,77023	28,24642
	Equal variances not assumed			-1,690	6,673	,137	-122,26190	72,36490	-295,08983	50,56602