

# Towards Narrative Futuring in Psychology: Becoming Resilient by Imagining the Future

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*In this article we develop a narrative psychological approach to futuring (imagining the future). We explore how this approach addresses the question of how people can become resilient in order to anticipate (social) crisis and change. Firstly, we bring to the fore how futuring takes shape in psychological theories. We argue that the linear-causal temporal perspective underlying the classical theories developed by Alfred Adler and Albert Bandura is insufficient to deal with the increasing speed and complexity of social change. The more complex temporal approaches of Frederick Towne Melges and Thomas Lombardo seem better suited for the purpose at hand. Secondly, we complement our search for a psychological theory of futuring by exploring the role a narrative approach can play in understanding and enhancing resilience. We illustrate the potential of a narrative approach to futuring with an example of on-going research into the relationship between narrative futuring and well-being at the life-story lab at Twente University, the Netherlands. We conclude with a reflection on methodological and epistemological issues of the proposed narrative psychological approach.*

*Keywords: Narrative psychology, future imagination, resilience, non-linear time, letters*

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## **Introduction**

In this article, we develop a narrative psychological approach to futuring (imagining the future) to address the question of how people can become resilient in order to anticipate (social) crisis and change. While crisis and change are arguably characteristic for the 'condition humaine', specific to our contemporary era is a crisis as a result of serious challenges facing humanity on an ecological, economic, cultural, social and political level. As

psychologists we are interested in the complex interplay between the macro-processes (for instance globalization), the meso-processes (organization-level, local government), and micro-processes at the individual level (social relations, daily interactions). 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. Postmodern philosophers such as Jean-François Lyotard (1979) refer to this last development as the 'loss of Grand Récits.' Lyotard used this expression to indicate the inadequacy of all-encompassing religious beliefs, as well as ideologies like the belief in the Enlightenment, socialism, etcetera. Ernst T. Bohlmeijer (2007) describes the psychological consequences of living in a post-modern time as a two-edged sword, e.g. increased freedom to shape our identities, and at the same time increased pressure to deal with life on our own.

One of the most distinctive characteristics of our current social crisis is perhaps the speed with which our world changes. Future consciousness psychologist Thomas Lombardo<sup>1</sup> presents a dramatic outlook where 'humanity is in a battle over the future. Our minds are in a battle over what to believe and what to do' (Lombardo 2006, 37). Perhaps more than his description of specific crises (such as an impending ecological disaster, a global economic crisis, and the so-called postmodern crisis in which the promise of progression of modernity is questioned), his temporal approach of crisis is particularly worth mentioning. Lombardo holds that 'time is compressing – more and more is happening in a day – in a week - in a year. One could say that the future is coming at us more rapidly than ever before – the flow

of the river of time is speeding up' (Lombardo 2006, 36).

It has been argued that our world is not only speeding up, but becoming larger and consequently more complex too, thanks to technological advancements, modern communication devices, and worldwide economic, political and social connections. Stewart for instance, an evolutionary thinker, argues that mankind moved from adapting to local and immediate concerns (the here and now) to adapting to changes in an expanding space-time frame (Stewart in: Lombardo 2006, 30). This enlargement of space for meaning and action is considered an effect of globalization. Globalization might be a very abstract notion, but its influence is felt through varying real local effects (e.g. Kennedy 2010; Eriksen 2007; Savage et al. 2005). In describing globalization as a process, anthropologists Tine Davids and Francien Th. M. Van Driel (2005) do not refer to unification processes such as the global interconnectedness of economic and ecological systems, but emphasise local differences in how everyday lives are shaped by global processes. Particularly interesting from a psychological perspective is their description of how men and women in local settings act under the influence of global processes. This is not an easy accomplishment considering that the authors characterize globalization metaphorically as an 'ever-changing landscape of

on-going flows and moving structures, shifting borders and different perspectives' (Davids and Van Driel 2005).

From a psychological perspective, we consider resilience as one important way of negotiating social change. The concept of resilience was developed in response to deficiency models in health care and health promotion (Bohlmeijer 2012; Westerhof & Bohlmeijer 2011; Westerhof and Keyes, 2008; Sools 2010). Resilience encompasses not only the ability to 'bounce back' from adverse experiences, but also the ability to navigate to resources that enhance well-being (Liebenberg and Ungar 2009; Ungar and Lerner 2008).

Resilience has largely been studied in relation to times of personal transition. However, it can also be a useful concept to study the way people at an individual level deal with collective transitions brought about by globalization processes, cultural changes and technical revolutions (like the introduction of the home-computer). Then resilience is not merely an inherent individual trait, but rather emerges in dynamic interaction with the environment (Tusaie & Dyer 2004; Jacelon 1997; Olsson et al 2003). Moreover, there might be differences in the extent to which people need, want and can be resilient.

These differences might depend on individual variation as well as structural inequalities between peo-

ple regarding the extent to which they are or feel vulnerable - in the sense of being exposed to the precariousness of life (Butler 2004). These differences could be due to subjective (experiential) varieties or to objective (due to socioeconomic) circumstances. The experience of loss of the Grand Récits, as well as the extent to which people are capable of imagining the future, further impinges on the capacity and need for resilience. We assume that these three dimensions (differences in precariousness, in loss of stories to make sense of their lives, and in imaginative capacity) interact with each other, but not necessarily in a predictive, stable way. In this article, we bring these dimensions together by combining insights from psychological temporal theories on futuring with narrative psychological theories. Narrative psychology takes storytelling as root metaphor for human thought and action (Sarbin 1986). We consequently explore narrative futuring, e.g. imagining the future through storytelling, in terms of its capacity to address the question of becoming resilient to anticipate crisis and change.

To more concretely explore the question of what a narrative psychological approach has to offer when addressing the question of becoming resilient to an uncertain, complex, dynamic future, we take as an example on-going research at the life-story lab. This lab was founded at Twente University in January 2012

by psychologists Ernst Bohlmeijer, Gerben Westerhof and Anneke Sools. The life-story lab is the Dutch expert centre in the area of narrative psychology and mental health promotion. The lab engages in a critical project to counterbalance current complaint and deficiency-oriented approaches in mental health care with an approach focused on resilience and well-being. Whereas the first approach tends to rely on standardized procedures, the second approach is aimed at reinstating a person-oriented approach with eye for difference (see [www.utwente.nl/lifestorylab](http://www.utwente.nl/lifestorylab)). At the lab we do fundamental and applied research, using mixed-methods derived from both approaches, to study the relationship between stories (storytelling and writing) and well-being. One of the studies in the lab, the letters from the future project, serves as an example in this article. We consider these letters prospective reflective tools, and study if and how they can be used to promote health and resilience.

Becoming more resilient in anticipating the complexity, the speed and the dynamics characteristic of social crisis and change processes such as globalization, implies paying attention to the future. The future, however, is not an explicit part of the concept of resilience. To understand how futuring might play a role in building up resilience in anticipating crisis and change, we turn first to some psychological theories

in which the future is explicitly addressed, without suggesting completeness. In the second part of the article, we explore the possible role of the narrative approach in understanding and enhancing resilience. We illustrate the potential of the narrative approach to futuring with an example of the letters from the future project at the life-story lab. Finally, we conclude with a reflection on methodological and epistemological issues of the proposed narrative psychological approach.

### **Theories of futuring in psychology**

In this section, we first describe linear temporal theories on futuring in psychology, and then more complex theories of futuring. We conclude this brief literature review by exploring how futuring can play a role in enhancing resilience.

#### *Linear future time*

Futuring (imagining the future) is a capacity that defines who we are as human beings. It forms an important part of psychological functioning. Although he himself did not formulate a theory about the future, Abraham Maslow (1968) certainly had a point when he remarked that 'no theory of psychology will ever be complete which does not centrally incorporate the concept that man has his future within him, dynamically active at this present moment' (Maslow 1968, 15). Indeed, a host

of psychological phenomena presupposes the continuation of existence in time yet to come. 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. Erik Erikson's concept of identity, defined as the subjective experience of sameness and continuity over the life-span presupposes future time (Erikson 1968). The same applies to self-actualization, defined as the process of developing one's abilities, in order to realize one's potential, one's not yet actualized capabilities (Maslow 1968, 191 ff). Emotions like hope, anxiety, despair, or desire and emotion-related states like expectation, boredom, stress or nostalgia only make sense in the context of time moving on. In cognitive psychology the study of choosing, planning, forethought, goal-directed behaviour and self-regulation, as well as control-theories would not exist when no future was implied. Without too much exaggeration, one could say that the future is always and everywhere.

It should be mentioned, however, that more often than not the temporal dimension of these phenomena, especially concerning the future, is neglected or not made explicit. As an example we can refer to theories of the will. The will, considered one of the basic functions of the psyche (like thinking, feeling, etcetera), can

be described as the conscious wish for something to obtain or to do, in combination with the determination to act according to this wish. What we want, then, always lies before us, even when our longing is coloured by nostalgic overtones. Nevertheless the future does not come into the picture in, for instance, Roberto Assagioli's (1974) research into the act of will. Philosophical issues of debate are whether the will exists (as Assagioli forcefully states; see Assagioli 1974, 7) and what is its nature. A central question here is to what extent we are capable of consciously determining our actions in order to shape our own future. Also the subject of extensive debate is the connection between the will and the concept of man as a rational being, capable – if strong enough – to wilfully create his future.

However few, in some psychological theories futuring is part of the concepts and the future explicitly has its place. One of the early personality theorists who gave the future its due is Alfred Adler (1947), the founder of Individual Psychology. 'Individual' is used here to express the fact that the human being is indivisible as well as unique' (Ellenberger 1970). Adler states as one of the axioms of his system of thought (inspired by his experience as an internist with 'organ inferiority' and compensatory processes) that psychic life is future-directed and teleological: it is striving toward a goal ('Zielstrebigkeit im Seelenleben';

Adler 1947, 13). He made this premise one of the cornerstones of his approach, and tied this to a second fundamental premise. From the philosopher Hans Vaihinger he borrowed the concept of 'fiction' as well as his contention that fictions have important psychological, scientific and cultural functions. Vaihinger (1924/1968) stated that 'without the imaginary factor neither science nor life in its highest form are possible' (Vaihinger 1924/1968, 44).

Adler's 'goal', then, is fictional in nature, and human behaviour is to a large extent determined by striving for this goal. It is formed to a large extent during early childhood (in the first five years), partly as the outcome of the interaction between feelings of inferiority and a striving to superiority. This results in an unconscious fictitious norm or ideal, going by the name of 'Leitlinie', which has to be actualized. 'Leitlinie' is a complicated concept. It is often translated in English as 'lifestyle'. This generic concept should not be confused with the sociological concept of lifestyle that designates a specific (middle-class) way of living. Lifestyle, in its original sense of the word, reasonably captures what Adler had in mind, although something is lost as well in this translation. 'Leitlinie' also means guideline and line of action, while at the same time it has motivational power. According to Adler, present behaviour is determined by an unconscious goal, an image of the fu-

ture that is partly formed in the past. What drives us is not only what lies behind us (as in psychoanalysis) but in what is ahead of us. This is why Adler's theory is characterized as 'fictional finalism' (Hall and Lindzey 1970, 121). Circumstances and adversity may result in the individual diverging from their 'Leitlinie', forcing them to seek compensations for the activities intended to give them the illusion of power. To the extent that these compensations are culturally acceptable and that the 'Zielstrebigkeit' (goal-directedness) is not too obsessive in nature, the individual is, according to Adler, a healthy person. Overcompensation, in which the compensatory activities dominate the function of the organism at the expense of other functions, in the end leads to psychic problems and pathology (Adler 1947, ff). In Adlerian theory, every human being is considered to be motivated by its Leitlinie, but there are culturally shaped differences in the space for individuals to follow or diverge from their Leitlinie.

Forethought, a concept developed by Albert Bandura (1986, 19 ff), one of the main advocates of the social cognitive approach, is another example of explicit theorizing about the future in psychology. For Bandura forethought is not a magic capacity to foretell the future, but 'the capacity to extrapolate future consequences from known facts' (Bandura 1986, 136). Social cognitive theory explains human function-

ing not in terms of inner forces (as does psychoanalysis) or controlled by external stimuli (as does behaviourism). Instead, Bandura sees behaviour, cognitive factors and environmental events operating as interacting determinants of each other ('triadic reciprocity'). The concept of triadic reciprocity describes the interaction between individual and environment in a more complex way than Adler's (1947) largely intrapsychic theory. It is unclear, however, how Bandura's theory addresses a rapidly changing social environment. Do the same regularities apply, that govern healthy psychological functioning in dealing with a relatively stable and simple social environment, when 'the known facts' are dismantled?

To explore this question in more detail we focus on one of the cognitive abilities central to Bandura's theory: forethought capability. It is Bandura's contention that the future acquires causal efficacy by being represented cognitively in the present (Bandura 1986, 19). Forethought then, consists of the capacity to regulate one's actions on the basis of predictors of response consequences (Bandura 1986, 205). This is possible because cues acquire predictive value through close observation of outcomes of one's actions. In a rapidly changing and complex social environment, it is precisely this predictive value that becomes problematic. The causal linkage between cues in the present and

future events, always a precarious linkage, of course, becomes less taken-for-granted when variety in life cycles increases. In addition, it is much more difficult to cognitively represent a future which is increasingly uncertain, complex, and dynamic. Moreover, the emphasis on control over one's future (proven to be an important cognitive ability for enhancing psychological well-being), is challenged when the horizon of what we desire expands and yet what we can control is diffused by the multiple possible life paths, and by interfering cultural and social processes. Finally, the conscious goal setting presupposed in Bandura's concept of forethought is insufficient in light of recent neuropsychological evidence that our conscious mind is poorly equipped to deal with complex processes. Unconscious processes play a much larger role in processing complex information (Donald 2001, 20; Dijksterhuis 2008), than social cognitive psychology takes into account.<sup>2</sup> So, interestingly, in this respect Adler's unconscious Leitlinie might be closer to current neuropsychological findings than social cognitive theory.

The above differences in theorizing futuring in terms of an unconscious Leitlinie or of conscious goal setting represent different images of the human being (conscious versus unconscious agent). Both theories concur, however, in the value they place on control. The social cognitive theories are exemplary of the

value placed on predictability and reliability in mainstream experimental psychology. Adler's theory risks a form of social control, by placing value on adaptation to cultural norms. How much room is there for people who do not abide to predictable or culturally accepted behaviour, perhaps because they face structural barriers when trying to realize their goals or *Leitlinie*? In addition, both theories concur in their reproduction of linear-causal thinking dominant in our Western society, which seems to us insufficient to deal with rapidly changing and complex social processes. Moreover, this view does not leave much room for creative future imagination in the sense that new perspectives are developed from multiple, uncertain, unknown or unknowable facts, which cannot (and need not) be inferred causally from either a *Leitlinie* or the present.

#### *Complex future time*

Frederick Towne Melges' temporal view on psychopathology allows for a more complex, non-linear way of theorizing the future, and for the inclusion of creative imagination. Psychiatrist Melges conceptualizes futuring as a way of generating future possibilities through 'the process of visualizing future images' (Melges 1982, 38). He complicates a linear progressive time perspective by making a distinction between objective and subjective time.<sup>3</sup> Objective time refers to clock-time, which represents a linear-causal

time perspective. Subjective time or sense of time refers to how people experience time. Sense of time has three components: duration (long or short future time perspective) and rate (fast or slow pace); succession (different sequences of events unfolding); and temporal orientation (retrospective, prospective, or oriented at the present). These three components of subjective time play a role in developing an individualized kind of 'personal inner future' (e.g. how each person is experiencing his unique future).

Melges (1982) relates this personal inner future to psychiatric conditions: psychosis is characterized by temporal disintegration (incoherent sense of inner personal future, the past, present and future are mixed up); depression by spirals of hopelessness (the future is blocked and looks empty and meaningless); neurosis by dread of the future (ambivalent and foreboding sense of inner personal future) (Melges 1982). More specifically, Melges describes how the development of a sense of inner personal future is mediated by emotions. For instance, unpleasant emotions accompany a sense of time in which the future time perspective is foreshortened (e.g. anxiety accompanies the dread of a pending bad future). Pleasant emotions accompany slower time sense, in which a longer, open, and unrestricted time perspective is experienced. During pleasant states there is little need to accomplish



a goal within a short time span. From the progressive perspectives of Lombardo (2006) and Erikson (1968) it is argued that the capacity to hold a longer time perspective, including concern for later generations, is a complex developmental task that comes to the fore later on in the adult life-span and later on in the evolution of humanity.

Melges' (1982) concept of futuring, influenced by cybernetics, allows for a creative, open way of imagining the future through anticipation. According to Melges, futuring 'involves expectation, anticipation, and imagination, and specifically refers to the visualization of future images' (Melges 1982). While forethought implies linear thought in which current and past events result in one outcome, visualization is a form of thinking, in which parallel future images, and thus a variety of future possibilities, are simultaneously produced. This complex cognitive process involves both a more conservative (expectation) and a creative (imagination) process. Anticipation is 'the process of preparing to respond to a future event in advance of its occurrence' (Melges 1982, 20), while expectation visualises future possibilities based on extrapolation from past events. Where expectation of what we know results in reproducing our past, anticipation opens up to possibly new and unexpected events. Therefore anticipation is a less deterministic form of futuring,

in which new behaviour, feelings, and thoughts can emerge. Melges developed his temporal perspective with the treatment and prevention of mental illness in mind. However, his ideas could potentially be translated to our question regarding the enhancement of well-being and resilience (both of which are concepts referring to more than the absence of illness) via futuring.

#### *Futuring and resilience*

Lombardo (2006) notes that there are individual differences in the extent that people can anticipate multiple, possible futures. There are individual and structural differences in the capacity to envision the future. However, it is also a capacity that can be developed. Our imaginative capability is strengthened by using it, not unlike exercising our muscles. We expand our mind by enriching it with new possibilities. Training imaginative capacity could serve many purposes that bear relevance to resilience. For instance, increased capacity to seeing possibilities and thinking them out facilitates open-mindedness and makes us mentally flexible (Lombardo 2006). Mental flexibility is considered one of the main criteria for psychological well-being (Bohlmeijer 2012; Hermans & Hermans-Janssen 1995). Lombardo connects the capacity to imagine the future with a supposed need for certainty. It follows then, that the higher the need for certainty, the higher the need and/or relevance

for imagining the future. This would entail becoming more resourceful in times of crisis and change as a form of resilience. An important question for psychologists then, is if and how people with different personal, social, and cultural resources, can become more skilled at futuring as one way of developing resilience in the face of uncertainty.

Enhancing the anticipatory capacity, and future consciousness in general, might be even more important among people with a low sense of certainty. However, the risk of this line of reasoning is a separation (and consequent stigmatizing) between those who feel certain or have certainty in life (and are therefore more inclined to develop anticipatory skills) and those who feel uncertain. A related risk is blaming people for lacking courage to face uncertainty, without acknowledging existing inequalities in how uncertainty is distributed across the population. However, a low sense of certainty does not necessarily go hand in hand with low objective exposure to the vulnerabilities of life as the result, for instance of socio-economic inequality, job-related health problems, living in a situation of war or being a member of vulnerable groups (such as elderly, migrants, ill people). That being vulnerable is not the same as being a victim is an important notion in a resilience approach.

Post-traumatic growth theories, developed by such researchers as

Aaron Antonovsky (1987), can illustrate our point. Antonovsky investigated why some people after traumatic experiences (of, for instance, holocaust survivors) did not develop post-traumatic stress disorder and sometimes even functioned better than before the trauma experience. To explain this finding, he developed a salutogenic approach (searching for the origins of health) as a complement to dominant pathogenic approaches (focused on the origins of illness). His conclusion was that people differ in what he called the 'sense of coherence' (SOC), which he defined as 'a global orientation that expresses the extent to which one has a pervasive, enduring though dynamic feeling of confidence that:

- a) stimuli deriving from one's internal and external environments in the course of living are structured, predictable, and explicable;
- b) resources are available to one to meet the demands posed by these stimuli and;
- c) these demands are challenges, worthy of investment and engagement' (Antonovsky, 1987, 19).

There is ample evidence that a high SOC-score is related to better health (Bengel, Strittmatter and Willmann 1999; Eriksson and Lindström 2006), and that high SOC scores are found among groups with and without traumatic experiences. One might expect that people with a high SOC-score are better at shap-

ing their futures than people with a low score. In addition, it could be argued that the resilience to deal with uncertainty might actually be greater among those exposed to the vulnerability of life, because one has learned that a sense of uncertainty does not necessarily entail a loss of a sense of coherence.

Greater exposure to the vulnerability of life could also result in greater recognition of vulnerability in others. This recognition forms the heart of Butler's (2004) ethical and political project that she embarked upon after 9/11 to formulate an alternative for an antagonistic perception of difference in which others are perceived as threats. She does not propose to refrain from political action to diminish structural inequalities, but focuses instead on recognition of our inevitable vulnerability as human beings. Butler's proposal involves rethinking the meaning of strength and precariousness and, more importantly, rethinking the subject as relational. Butler makes clear that she does not argue against the importance of developing autonomy, but this striving should be complemented with a recognition that we are first of all relational beings who share vulnerability to the precariousness of life. Her arguments resonate well with our position that it is important to acknowledge that the concept of resilience should include a self-transcending dimension in order not to envision the development of resilience of one person at the

expense of others. Becoming resilient through futuring thus not only accommodates goals and values such as becoming an autonomous being, but also values that concern the other and the world as well (cf the concept of generativity; Erikson 1950).

Our proposal could easily be mistaken for further contributing to a moral discourse on individual responsibility (Lupton 1995), even of a responsibility of individuals beyond their own lives. However, to acknowledge the fact that my future is connected to the future of other people could perhaps, rather than being a burden, be a realisation of our relational being (Gergen 2009). Instead of encouraging people to take the whole world on their shoulders, we propose a more creative (possibly inspiring and fun) route of using narrative futuring as an individual and collective instrument for reflection. This can be done, for instance, in group sessions by using imagination in a process of producing shared future narratives about environmental, political or social issues and about collective strategies to realize the desired outcomes (Mooren 2011). Personal and group prospective reflection can also be achieved via writing letters from the future. This latter type of prospective reflection serves as an example case in the next paragraph to illustrate the relevance of a narrative approach to futuring.

### **A narrative approach to futuring in psychology**

The development of a narrative approach in psychology started in the 1980s. Narrative psychology takes storytelling as root metaphor for human thought and action (Sarbin 1986), for identity construction (Polkinghorne 1988), and for giving meaning to life (Bruner 1990). Storytelling provides a powerful way of constructing identity in the face of social crisis and change because of its capacity to create coherence and meaning (Polkinghorne 1988; Bohlmeijer 2007). Time plays an important role in narrative psychology, although the future is seldom explicitly theorized (Sools 2012; Squire 2012). Paul Ricoeur (1984) for instance, who had a huge influence on narrative psychology, hardly mentions the future in his seminal work on *Time and Narrative*, and when he does, it is predominantly in linear terms. Due to the 'linear character of the speech chain ... it follows that retrospection and anticipation are subjected to the same conditions of temporal linearity' (Ricoeur 1984, 75). The future comes to the fore in Ricoeur's reference to the conditional tense<sup>4</sup> in narrative, which is used to signal anticipated information. In this view, the future remains a relatively empty notion, because anticipated information 'only means that the information is given prematurely in relation to the moment of its realization' (Ricoeur 1984, 74).

Mark Freeman (1993), a student

of Ricoeur, wrote intricately on temporal orientation and narrative. He sheds light on how we rewrite our past from the present, and focuses mainly on retrospective processes of identity construction (Freeman 1993; 2009). The few times when he does refer to the future, it is either in the negative sense of 'narrative foreclosure', indicating the end of story (Freeman, 2000; 2011), or as an empty space that yet has to acquire meaning when it becomes present. 'So it is that we must often await the future in order to discern more fully the meaning and significance of what has gone on in the past' (Freeman 2009, 24). As opposed to the full meaning and significance that only the past and present can acquire, the future appears in bits and pieces, in the form of hints of what might happen. The emphasis on retrospection and memory in Freeman's work seems to arise from his diagnosis of our contemporary era, in which our image of the future is no longer stable and enduring. Freeman describes 'the situation in which we find ourselves' as 'living in waiting, in anticipation, not quite knowing what is going on now, much less what the future will bring, and relying on hindsight, again and again, to discern what meaning there may be' (Freeman 2009, 90). He seems uneasy with a present that is an 'open, indeterminate space, largely devoid of meaning' (Freeman 2009). Freeman sees the route out of narrative foreclosure not

so much in projecting ourselves into the future, but in gaining self-knowledge by telling autobiographical stories. His psychoanalytical affinity here seems to play a role in his contention that only through hindsight can we come to understand that 'the present differs from the past and that it will not be repeated in the future' (Freeman 2009, 31).

A more positive engagement with the future comes to the fore in the concept of narrative imagination. This 'fundamentally inventive capacity' (Randall & McKim 2004) links 'the way we imagine our lives' to 'the way we are going to go on living our lives.' It is 'the genre through which events become experiences' (Hillman 1975, 146 in: Randall and McKim 2004). According to Martha Nussbaum, narrative imagination (defined as 'the ability to be an intelligent reader of another person's story'), enhances the ability 'to empathize with others and to put oneself in another's place' (Nussbaum 1997, 11). The multiple perspectives readers engage with when reading literature increase empathy. William L. Randall and A. Elizabeth McKim (2004) translate this literary competence to narrative competence in everyday life, and propose its relevance for developing practical wisdom. Because narrative imagination is par excellence the narrative mode that deals creatively with an open, uncertain future, developing this capacity arguably facilitates becoming resilient in a way that fits coping with

an uncertain, complex, dynamic future. To explore this assumption we now take as an example on-going research at the life-story lab at Twente University.

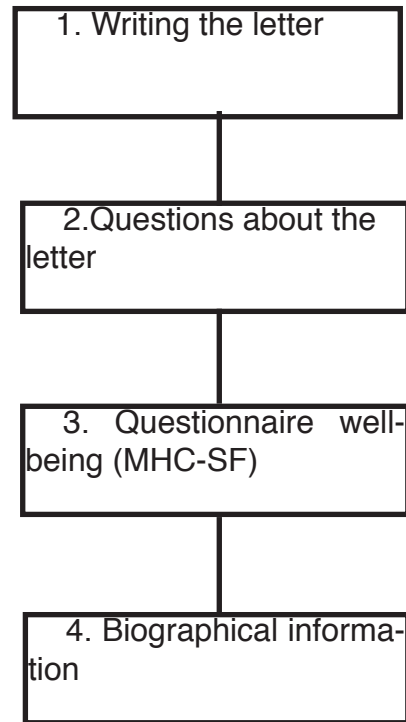
#### *Letters from the future*

In December 2011 the 'Letters from the Future Project' started at the life-story lab. The goal of the study was to gain insight into the function of one particular narrative medium - a letter from the future - by studying the relationship between the content, the structure, form and audience of these letters with psychological well-being. In contrast to life story interviews (usually hours-long oral texts) letters are short, written texts. Because life story interviews are the main data collection and intervention method in narrative psychology, written letters provide an interesting new medium for research. The letter exercise is an adaptation from an exercise used in storytelling groups in mental health promotion settings in the Netherlands (Bohlmeijer 2007). However, currently there are no empirical studies into if and how such letters function to promote well-being.

A practical advantage of using letters rather than interviews is that collecting letters online is much less time-consuming than interviews. However, sufficient narrative competence of participants is required. They have to be willing and able to read, write, and use a computer. In

the recruitment process and in the instructions we emphasise that no special writing skills are necessary and that all letters are welcome. Nevertheless, we anticipated a literacy bias in our sample. However, there is also evidence in favour of using online tools. An advantage of online self-help programmes for instance is that these programmes are available to anyone with access to the internet, which facilitates easy access from home. Not only spatially but also temporally the threshold to participate is lowered, because participants can choose a time that fits their daily routines. Moreover, physical presence is no longer necessary, and the internet provides a high degree of anonymity that is positively evaluated (Gerhards et al. 2011). Our actual sample of over 600 letters, collected between December 2011 and May 2012, consists of a diverse group of participants: there are both men and women, from lower and higher educational backgrounds and socioeconomic status, from different age groups, and at least two nationalities (the first phase consists of Dutch and German<sup>5</sup> participants, and the second phase which started in May 2012 targets an international participant group, starting with one of the North African “Arab Spring” countries, see [www.utwente.nl/lifestorylab](http://www.utwente.nl/lifestorylab)).

*Figure 1. Research Design letters from the future project*



In the project we invite participants to donate letters from the future online at the website of the life-story lab. They follow a four step procedure (see figure 1). Firstly, they are asked to vividly imagine a particular situation at a particular moment in the future, in which something positive has been realised. By asking for particulars, we aim to invoke what Tom Wengraf (2001) calls ‘particular incident narratives’. Participants are invited to write a letter to someone in the present from their experience of this particular, positively

evaluated situation. Secondly, some open questions follow regarding the experience of writing the letter, the motivation for writing and so on. Thirdly, participants are asked to fill out the Mental Health Continuum Short Form (MHC-SF), a questionnaire measuring psychological, emotional, and social dimensions of positive mental health (Lamers et al. 2011). Finally, they provide biographical information regarding their gender, age, socio-economic background and so on. At the end participants are asked for their informed consent to use their letter for research purposes. The additional questions (step 2 t/m 4) are optional as is the option to share their letters by publishing them online (about one third of the participants agree to share their letters online).

The resulting letters show great variety in terms of content (personal and societal themes, different domains of life, more or less fictional), structure (for instance regressive, progressive, and stable plots), form (formal and informal, length, tone, more or less literary), genre (for instance letter, life-review, tutorial, utopia, testament), audience (directed at the present self or others), and temporal orientation (for instance long and short horizon, proportion of retrospective, prospective and present-oriented sentences).

*Example 1. Ironic expression of personal achievement in the near future*

2011, reading behind the computer in my office at the university.

Honorabel Me

Hey Me, cool that I bump into you, the fact is that I want to tell you than I am really proud of us. The way you nowadays respond to your duties, assignments and other responsibilities, not postponing them any longer, gives me an intense feeling of love for you, and thus for myself. I still remember well how difficult this was ten years ago. You were very talented in avoiding your responsibilities. That came in handy for momentary pleasures, but if you had persisted in it, it would have been a disaster for your long term happiness.

So, cool that you became how I wanted to be, we fixed that nicely.

Greetings (I don't give you a smacker, no idea how one takes it nowadays, but in 2011 it is still a bit weird to kiss oneself)

You, byyyy .

*Example 2. Utopian manifest of the distant future*

A life in and with nature, the year 5000

Dear me of times gone by

[...] The by mankind chosen lifestyle was self-destructive in nature. When this started to dawn on man, it already was too late: the earth became uninhabitable. Only some people survived. Those who did, came together to start a new life. They let nature have her way and soon extensive woods emerged, rich with food and animals, and clear waters and clean air. Nowadays man and Nature are one. We only eat the old animals. And what we find in the woods and in the vegetable gardens. We live together. What is mine, also belongs to my neighbour; when my neighbour helps me out, I return the gesture. Everything is ours, but at the same time we don't have personal

belongings; stealing therefore, is impossible [...]. When I want to shine, it is not to outshine others, but to gain respect and it is to be able to better help myself and others. We take care of each other and live as one great family. We believe that when it is the right moment and we make an effort to come to know each other we can befriend everyone. We accept and respect everyone and try to be as little judgmental as is possible.

So, let life find its own way, and in the end everything will be all right.

These data provide rich material to study how narrative futuring works. At this point, we would like to share some preliminary findings, to outline the possible relevance of a narrative approach to futuring.

Firstly, the narrative instrument we used, e.g. letters from the future, seems to invite implicit, unconscious goal setting, in addition to the more explicit goal setting in most psychological research on this process (see, for instance, Emmons 1999). The distinction between conscious and unconscious goal-setting thus seems to get blurred. Even when writers at first consciously define which goals they strive for, and then write their letters, some report that unexpected goals emerge. In other words, their own writing surprises them, which is an indication that they engage in a truly creative process. Writing thus can be considered a generative and unpredictable process.

Secondly, the goals and values appearing in the letters acquire meaning in a specific and highly per-

sonalised context, in which different values are brought into relation with each other. This characteristic of the letters becomes more pronounced the more the letters are written in the narrative mode rather than in the paradigmatic mode (Bruner 1986). The letters can accordingly be situated on a continuum from more to less narrative (e.g. in highly narrative letters values are narrated more vividly, concretely and therefore closer to lived experience, whereas letters in the paradigmatic mode typically present values as general, abstract categories). Thirdly, a functional analysis of the letters shows that they fulfil a myriad of roles, for instance emotional (e.g. to motivate, grieve, process); social (e.g. promise, share, express pride, communicate); educational (e.g. give and receive advice); behavioural (e.g. to encourage action, guide choices); spiritual-existential (to establish a value orientation, belief and hope, to prophesise); autobiographical (to look back on one's imagined life, to remember and project desired and valued life-trajectories).

Finally, the letters can be categorised according to their stance towards the future: 1) control, involving planned goal-directed behaviour, 2) openness, involving an open, welcoming and accepting attitude in anticipation of an unknown future, 3) understanding, involving a hermeneutical enterprise of making sense of what is to come, and 4) intrinsic, concerned with future imagi-



nation for its own sake rather than to achieve some alternate goal. These last two orientations extend the control- and prediction oriented way of theorizing the future in theories of Adler and Bandura, and the more open, creative future time in the theories of Lombardo and Melges. Taken together, these four orientations and the myriad functions can each be considered a way of anticipating crisis and change.

As these functions indicate, the letters, as a specific form of narrative futuring can be perceived as 'treasury...into which we can enter' (Bruner 1990, 54). Stories 'can be tried on for psychological size, accepted if they fit, rejected if they pinch identity or compete with established commitments' (Bruner 1990, 54). Thus, they provide a way to creatively and concretely explore the consequences of future possibilities, and gain a lived understanding of which values we hold dear. An advantage of this process of narrative imagination is that it potentially counters the ethical repercussions mentioned in the introduction to this article: imposing values; fostering relativity; and reinforcing a one-sided moral obligation. It also provides a way to evaluate the multiple and alternative possibilities that arise in the course of futuring. Which future is desirable, and which one is of more value than another, instead of being an abstract question, becomes a very real and practical one in the letters.

The outcome of the prospective reflection facilitated by the letter is a personalized value-orientation. As such it is a projection into the future, but it is an act of imagination which matters for the here and now. As the overview of possible functions indicates, it is a powerful means to organize current identity, thought, and action, and foster prospective consciousness. The psychological function of imagining the future, then, is not so much about prediction. It allows us to make informed choices in the here and now, which might guide us towards a better future (Glen 2009), but, more importantly, imagining the future seems to have an all-over organising and motivating effect. As the content of the letters shows, the image of this better future could entail a nearby future for an individual person as well as a more distant future involving concerns beyond personal interests. Which one of these images corresponds to high levels of well-being, is part of our on-going analysis. It is important to acknowledge though, that our search for ways of enhancing resilience is not restricted to the immediate effects on personal well-being, but also on long-term, more sustainable effects on collective well-being.

The brief overview of possible functions outlined here is a first step to empirically study if, how, under what circumstances, for whom and for what purposes narrative futuring works. The diversity of the sample

will additionally be used to gain insight in patterns of sameness and difference in narrative futuring along intersecting axes of identity.

### **Conclusions and discussion**

In this article, we developed a narrative-psychological approach to futuring in order to address our question on becoming resilient in the face of crisis and change. We discussed the consequences of experiencing crisis and change on the individual level in terms of vulnerability to the precariousness of life. As the sense of vulnerability increases, the need for certainty might increase as well. We hypothesised that the higher the need for certainty, the higher the need and/or relevance for imagining the future. This would entail becoming more resourceful in times of crisis and change as a form of resilience. Narrative imagination could provide a powerful way of becoming resilient in this sense. Preliminary results from our letters from the future project indicate that there are a myriad of functions and stances toward the future involved in narrative futuring. The multitude of functions and stances - which all on a more general level perform the function of guiding current thought and action - open up a broad spectrum of resilience processes. Because there are differences in the extent to which people need or want certainty, and to the extent to which they have the capacity for narrative futuring, an important question for future em-

pirical research is if and how people with different personal, social, and cultural resources can become more skilled at narrative futuring as one way of developing resilience in the face of uncertainty.

When engaging in this project of studying empirically how to enhance narrative futuring, some critical remarks are needed. Not all people might want or need to increase their capacity to imagine the future. For some enhancing an already prominent skill might result in escapism. For others their imaginative capacity might be very well developed, but be insufficient or even frustrating in the face of structural barriers and inequalities. Moreover, enhancing narrative futuring runs the risk of reinforcing discourses in which being happy becomes a moral obligation (Ahmed 2010), and in which people are blamed for their illness (Lupton 1995; Sontag 1979). These and other possible negative effects provide arguments to be critical of the universalising tendency of especially the early psychological theories on futuring. The goal then should be to provide situated knowledge of when and how futuring takes place, and when and how it can be a way of enhancing resilience. Questions to explore are, for instance, when narrative futuring takes place spontaneously in the course of everyday life, who engages in this process, and how? The overview of possible functions of narrative futuring we described provides further direction

to study which type of function matters and, importantly, also when and for whom enhancing narrative futuring is not desirable or possible.

Our research into letters from the future thus provides a way to systematically address the question of how narrative futuring works and the work it does. The turn to a narrative approach in psychology, and an inclusion of different stances towards the future, affects the dynamics of the methodological and epistemological approach in psychology. First, a mixture of qualitative and quantitative methods is necessary to capture both an idiosyncratic understanding, and nomothetic explanation of narrative futuring. This implies that our methodologies should not only be mixed-method, but also interdisciplinary or even transdisciplinary, involving both hermeneutical and socio-scientific methodological repertoire. To increase the chances of success of this ambitious project, we follow the dreams of two leading narrative psychologists, Jerome S. Bruner and Donald Polkinghorne. We infer from Bruner's (1986, 1990) plea that psychologists and our colleagues in the humanities need to learn to productively communicate and cooperate with each other. We understand Polkinghorne's (1988) contribution as a wish to establish a fruitful cooperation between clinical psychologists (who have a lot of experience with forms of narrative futuring in actual practice) and academic psychologists who study how

narrative futuring works.

Second, we might have to acknowledge what it means for our methodologies when we move from prediction and control of the future as central focus in psychological research, to a perspective in which we recognize that choices in the here-and-now change the future unfolding. This perspective implies that patterns are not wholly predetermined from past to present to future, but that they can change. It also implies that asking people to imagine the future in a research setting already is an intervention that changes current and future affairs. The role of the researcher thus has to be taken into account. More specifically, this requires openness within psychology towards a revision of the still dominant idea of the neutral observing researcher. A critical attitude towards developing narrative futuring is also important; to make sure that stimulating narrative futuring does not become another control mechanism. Understanding the future runs the risk of doing just that, instead of allowing the gift of the future to unfold (Squire 2012).

Finally, if our search for proper psychological theorizing about the future has taught us one thing, it is the pervasive emphasis on retrospective temporal orientation in psychology. The emphasis on looking back, as well as the predominance of linear thinking in mainstream psychological theory, could be an indication of the value placed on predict-

ability and reliability in psychology. However, we encountered at least partly the same focus on linearity, and on retrospective temporal orientation in narrative psychological theory. Perhaps the difficulty to distance ourselves from linear temporal thinking is due to the pervasiveness of clock time in our Western society. Even the study of narrative imagination, which in principle involves both memory and looking forward, concerns more often imagining the past than the future. Whatever its causes, at this point, we tentatively conclude that, both theoretically and empirically, the future seems underdeveloped in (narrative) psychology.

### Endnotes

<sup>1</sup> Lombardo is one of the main representatives of future consciousness studies, an interdisciplinary field that developed from the 1970s onwards.

<sup>2</sup> Theories about psychological control, conceptualized as 'the ability to cause or influence intended outcomes by differential responding and results in a sense of effectiveness desired by the individual person' (Rodin 1986, 141), share his emphasis on prediction and consciously influencing future outcomes.

<sup>3</sup> In addition, Melges (1982) challenges linear-causal conceptions and experiences, by referring to cultural varieties in time experience

and conceptions of time. He notes the possibility of a cyclical ordering of time, and timelessness that can be found in some cultural contexts, in dreams, and in for instance Jung's notion of synchronicity. How these different time conceptions and experiences relate to psychological well-being is a research question that Melges left unanswered, perhaps due to his early death.

<sup>4</sup> The conditional sense is a grammatical construction in the English language. A conditional sentence shows that an action is reliant on something else (there's a condition). There are three types of conditionals: it's going to happen - it's only going to happen if something else happens - it's never going to happen (source <http://www.learnenglish.de/grammar/conditionaltext.htm>)

<sup>5</sup> Respondents were partly recruited among students (and their friends and family) from University of Twente, partly among other populations. Because of its geographical situation near Germany, the University hosts a considerable amount of German students. This accounts for the letters in German that we received.

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