ORIGINAL ARTICLE

U and I: Synthesizing Life Design and Self Narrative

Gian-Louis Hernandez[1*]

[1]Amsterdam University of Applied Sciences, Amsterdam, the Netherlands
*Corresponding author: Gian-Louis Hernandez g.hernandez@hva.nl

ABSTRACT

This paper explores the construction of self-narratives through a synthesis of two frameworks: Designing Your Life (DYL) and Theory U. Using close reading methodology, it analyzes how these approaches inform personal and professional development. The study highlights three key dimensions: doing (prototyping life choices), believing (leveraging intuition), and empowering (considering broader impacts). While DYL emphasizes rapid experimentation in career design, Theory U focuses on systemic change through "presencing." The integration of these perspectives reveals that self-narratives are intricately linked with social systems and future generations. This synthesis advances the discourse on life design by encouraging researchers to consider the role of the Self in historical and future-oriented contexts and by prompting exploration of intuition and narrative co-creation in fields like education and organizational change. The paper concludes that conscious narrative shaping, informed by both action and reflection, is crucial for meaningful personal development in an interconnected world.

Keywords: Narrative; theory U; Life Design, Self.

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INTRODUCTION/DOWNLOADING/ EMPATHIZING

Self-narrative is a multifaceted concept that requires careful definition and exploration. At its core, self-narrative can be understood as the ongoing process through which individuals construct their identities by weaving together personal experiences into coherent stories that reflect their evolving sense of self. This aligns with the assertion that "The Self is a relation that relates to itself" (Kierkegaard et al., 2013, p. 9). Rather than viewing the Self as a static entity, contemporary psychological perspectives emphasize that it is constructed through contextual and emergent processes, wherein individuals express their authentic selves in relation to their environments and social contexts (Chen, 2019). This dynamic construction of the Self is particularly evident in the framework of narrative identity, which posits that individuals create a cohesive narrative that integrates their past, present, and future selves, thus providing a sense of purpose and continuity (Habermas & Köber, 2015).

This relational/temporal aspect underscores the idea that identity is not merely an individual construct but is deeply embedded in cultural and communal narratives, which serve as a backdrop against which personal stories are told (Lemmetty, 2024). The interplay between personal and collective narratives allows for a flexible expression of the Self, enabling individuals to adapt their self-conceptions as they encounter new roles and contexts (Down, 2006; McAdams & Cox, 2010).

In organizational contexts, the significance of self-narrative becomes even more pronounced. The construction of identity through self-narration is crucial for individuals as they transition between roles within organizations. Self-narratives help bridge the gaps that arise during these transitions, facilitating a smoother integration of new identities while maintaining coherence with past experiences (Ibarra & Barbulescu, 2010; Maitlis, 2022). This process of narrating the Self is not only a personal endeavor but also a collective one, as individuals' narratives are influenced by and contribute to the larger organizational narratives in which they participate (Loseke, 2007). Thus, self-narrative serves as a vital mechanism for individuals to articulate their identities within the complex tapestry of social and organizational life.

The structure of this paper is as follows. First, I present an overview of Life Design literature, centering *Designing your Life* (DYL) (Burnett & Evans, 2016) juxtaposing it with *Theory U* (Scharmer, 2016) to highlight useful perspectives introduced by this school of thought. Next, I describe the rationale and methodology of close reading. Then, I synthesize three dimensions presented by Life Design and Theory U, highlighting parallels and differences between the two bodies of literature. Finally, I argue for a novel perspective on self-narrative construction, integrating the synthesis that presents intuitive decision-making, reflective practice, and systemic thinking to guide personal and professional development. This paper's narrative is positioned between a metaliterature review (i.e., providing insight

into and recommendations for/from the literature) and a theoretical/practical contribution.

A final note on structure: the headings of this piece integrate steps taken in the Design Thinking process, the theoretical framework suggested by Theory U and the standard IMRAD (Introduction, Method, Results, and Discussion) format of an academic paper. This is not to equate these steps but to highlight the arc one moves through when attempting to realize any intellectual endeavor.

BACKGROUND/SEEING/SENSING/DEFINING

As Burnett and Evans say about the process of beginning, this section "builds a compass" toward our goal of a greater understanding of this literature (2016). The Theory U approach understands this process of orienting as a means of seeing/sensing the issue at hand from multiple perspectives.

Overarching schools of thought within the Life Design literature have shifted away from a "career-centric" approach, allowing for a holistic acknowledgment of the multiplicity of identities within each of us: teacher, student, worker, family member, etc. Ironically, life has flowed back into what we now call Life Design. Drawing on the psychology of career design, the career development literature began to incorporate more complex views of the self; self-development and self-knowledge from a psychological perspective have become the focus of advancing one's life (Duarte, 2009).

Life Design relies heavily on restructuring the role of work in one's life. For example, drawing on Super's (1984) assertion that work is but one of the many roles a person plays in life, Savickas suggests learning and adaptation as an integral building block of career development theory (1997). Savickas and colleagues' work guides us in moving through our careers (Savickas et al., 2009), but can also help us relate to new sources of information, challenges, and intellectual provocations. As such, this article presents a miniature opportunity to do the kind of "identity work" suggested by Sveningsson and Alvesson to situate our Selves within a broader narrative (2003).

The notion of designing one's life, which "concentrates on contextual possibilities, dynamic processes, nonlinear progression, multiple perspectives, and personal patterns" (Savickas et al., 2009, p. 239) has now become a staple in the literature. Following the narrative turn in counseling (McLeod, 1996)), designing the narrative of one's life has emerged as a popular topic within career studies (Gunz et al., 2020) as well as psychology (Maree, 2017) and other adjacent fields. Narrative takes center stage in how life —with a focus on career development— has come to be understood. In sum, the Life Design field has moved from a focus on career intervention in the form of vocational counseling and education, to a broader focus on individuals within the context of grand societal challenges (Duarte & Cardoso, 2018). Many scholars and practitioners have responded by adapting and innovating, seeing the challenges faced by contemporary workers as opportunities for growth.

A prominent strand in the literature relies on concepts of life narrative to advise those seeking career advice on how best to craft a specific identity within one's life story. Since various identities are constructed through discourse and communication (Benwell & Stokoe, 2011), we can understand the multiplicity of components that make up the Self as constituted through discursive narratives. Narrative plays an integral role in understanding both Self and discourse.

One useful distinction in understanding narratives is between "big stories" and "small stories." Big stories entail "a significant measure of reflection on either an event or experience, a significant portion of a life, or the whole of it" (Freeman, 2006, p. 132). In contrast, small stories can be "tellings of ongoing events, future or hypothetical events, and shared (known) events," (Bamberg & Georgakopoulou, 2008, p. 381) and are therefore reflective of the scattered and chaotic way humans tell stories in everyday life. It is helpful to think of the narratives that we encounter in the literature in relation to our own "big stories" (i.e., our semester, our career or just a phase of it, our lives, etc.) and our "small stories" (i.e., the relevant moments in which we find ourselves self-narrating). Self-narration, i.e., the relationship between small stories, big stories, and the Self, is integral in attending to one's own position and how that position develops over time. These insights from narrative methodology have highlighted the role of the individual as an active participant in the construction of a narrative (Bamberg, 2006).

Related to the narrative approach to bridge the divide between vocational counseling and Life Design, an additional prominent thread of research has emerged. Otto Scharmer, a senior researcher at MIT, and other prominent researchers have come together to create the u.Lab, an institute focusing on "'presencing:' the deepest source of knowing and being, from which we navigate our way forward in situations when all other navigation instruments have failed" (Scharmer, 2016, p. 344). Presencing suggests a narrative of moving beyond individualized notions of the Self, relying on the interconnected nature of individuals and knowledge.

I extend the approaches of Theory U and Life Design literature by arguing that we are all researchers/learners within our own life narratives. Now, even while reading this article, you create a small story that must be positioned into the relevant big story (i.e., your life, your academic career, the research field as a whole, etc.). The following section will suggest systematic ways this process may already be unfolding.

METHOD AND DATA /PRESENCING/CRYSTALLIZING/IDEATING

Methodology sections exist for several reasons: to allow other researchers to follow the analytical process, to be transparent about findings, and to allow other researchers to replicate the process by which knowledge is gained (Smagorinsky, 2008)). In this tradition, this paper presents methodological steps for reading and understanding literature in Life Design and adjacent fields. The methods section provides two main points: first, it outlines the data from which I drew my conclusions. Then, it outlines the steps taken to arrive at the findings presented in the following section.

Data

The primary texts analyzed in this study are *Designing Your Life: Build the Perfect Career, Step by Step* by Bill Burnett and Dave Evans (2016) and *Theory U: Learning from the Future as It Emerges* by Otto Scharmer (2016). *Designing Your Life* by Bill Burnett and Dave Evans and *Theory U* by Otto Scharmer are exemplary texts for exploring Life Design due to their practical frameworks, focus on self-reflection, and interdisciplinary foundations. DYL, a New York Times bestseller translated into 24 languages, draws on design thinking to offer tools for navigating career and life changes, while Theory U, widely embedded in the academic community, incorporates insights from over 150 interviews with leading experts and has been translated into 20 languages. Both texts have been incorporated into leadership courses across the world. Both emphasize adaptability, personal agency, and the construction of self-narratives, key elements in Life Design theory. Their adjacent strategies for dealing with uncertainty and fostering collective change, combined with broad applicability across various life stages and contexts, make them ideal for analyzing how individuals can shape personal and professional trajectories through intentional narrative construction.

Analysis

The analytical framework employed in this study is grounded in the practice of close reading, defined as "the mindful, disciplined reading of an object with a view to deeper understanding of its meaning" (Brummett, 2018, p. 2). This approach is essential for scholars, practitioners, and students engaged in the study of Life Design, as it cultivates a deeper engagement with the texts (Bean & Melzer, 2021).

To guide the close reading process, I utilized four specific questions proposed by Brummett (2018):

1. What should the audience think or do?
This question prompts an exploration of the intended impact of the texts on the reader's perceptions and actions regarding their own Life Design and personal development.

2. What does the text ask the audience to assume?
This question explores underlying assumptions that audience makes of the text, which can reveal perspectives that shape the narrative.

3. How does the audience know what the text claims?
This question encourages an examination of the evidence and reasoning presented in the texts, allowing for a critical reflection on our knowledge during/after reading.

4. Who is empowered or disempowered?
This question highlights power dynamics within the narratives, revealing how particular experiences are privileged or marginalized.

This process entailed a consistent "zooming in" and "zooming out" to link the use of the narratives into the larger context (Petintseva, 2023), and represents a narrative form of the systematic application of the constant comparative method found in grounded theory approaches (Lal et al., 2012). By systematically applying the guiding questions, I have established an analytical framework that connects the dimensions of doing, believing, and empowering.

RESULTS/PROTOTYPING

Given that the structure of this article follows the action steps of DYL and Theory U, this section fulfils the promise in the introduction to provide concrete parallels and differences between the two schools of thought that can be implemented both during the reading of this paper and beyond. The results presented here are the outcome of my close reading. Where appropriate, I draw on supporting literature to more deeply illustrate points highlighted by the juxtaposition of these fields of literature. Table 1 also provides an overview of the analysis conducted for this paper.

Table 1. Analysis overview

Close Reading Question	Dimension	Example
What should the audience think or do?	Doing	Speak fearlessly, make mistakes, fail quickly and cheaply
What does the text ask the audience to assume? *How does the audience know what the text claims?*	Believing	Intuition is important, ask the right questions
Who is empowered or disempowered?	Empowering	Remember your relation to ancestors and descendants

Doing

This first dimension emerges as an answer to the question "What should the audience think or do?". The practice of prototyping is the first clear parallel between the two schools of thought. Life design and Theory U present individuals having multiple ideas, projects, or even lives as a strength that one can draw upon in constructing a meaningful life. The principle of "fail quickly, cheaply, and often" when designing a project, a career, or one's overall purpose plays an integral role in both schools of thought.

An example that I often use in my classroom is one of language learning. When teaching a foreign language, the students who make the most mistakes usually become the best speakers. Why? Because they are the least afraid of making many mistakes. In contrast, the students who wait to silently construct each sentence perfectly before speaking rarely reach the level of their more verbose peers. Drawing on this example, I invite readers to think of similar learning processes where it costs very little to make mistakes and to tap into the part of the brain that allows us to learn languages: the youthful, intuitive aspect of our inner Selves.

Believing

This dimension provides a combined answer to the questions "What does the text ask the audience to assume?" and "How does the audience know what the text claims?". Assumptions (i.e., implicit beliefs) and knowledge (i.e., explicit ones) are deeply intertwined with recognizing the life path upon which one finds oneself.

Furthermore, intuition plays a huge role in the aspect of believing. The texts acknowledge that you have to "listen to your knee, or your gut, or your heart, too" (Burnett & Evans, 2016, pg. 145). To do so, Scharmer advocates that "you educate and mature your access to and awareness of your emotional/intuitive/spiritual ways of knowing" (Scharmer, 2016, p. 131). However, Scharmer also extols us to "trust your own perception as the fundamental starting point of any investigation – but then follow that train of observation all the way back to its source" (Scharmer, 2016, p. 1). This represents a difference in Life Design's and Theory U's understandings of the Self: Theory U tends to have a broader scope of historical narratives and their impact on present and future moments, while Life Design is more contemporary in its focus. The implications for this understanding are based on assumptions around individual versus collective agency and responsibility (i.e., the answer to the second close reading question).

Another interesting finding in this juxtaposition of these excerpts emerges from an example in Theory U. In his work with doctors, Scharmer describes a meaningful interaction between a doctor and a woman at a public forum, drawing parallels between this exchange and the parable of Parsifal. Speaking from an open heart, the woman asked the doctor the archetypal question, "Physician, what ails you?"

Considering this question in light of the Life Design principle of "asking the right questions," I am reminded of another instance in the medical context. Dr. Gabor Maté, in his groundbreaking work on addiction, has made breakthroughs in understanding the human condition of addicted people by asking "not what is wrong with an addiction, but what is "right" about it. What benefit is the person deriving from their habit? What does it do for them? What are they getting that they otherwise can't access (Maté & Maté, 2022), p. 216). In other words, Maté asks the right questions and seeks to answer what assumptions are made behind the text (the second question of close reading) as well as who is empowered/disempowered (the fourth question). This line of thinking exposes not a fundamental weakness in character or individual but an understanding of what leads an individual to seek out potential negativity (i.e., substances/behaviors) to compensate for a lack in other areas of life.

We can take from this example a particularly useful strategy: thinking and asking questions not from a place of lack, but rather from a place of trying to acknowledge potential alternatives. For example, when faced with difficult problems, this way of thinking suggests we might engage in the Design Thinking technique of imagining the worst/best-case scenarios and how we might arrive at those scenarios. Taking this idea of polarity further, however, we might also imagine how the scenario in which we find ourselves might actually be better or worse than initially believed (i.e., something is indeed "right" with our problem).

Empowering

One difference between the two texts emerges as a response to the question, "Who is empowered and disempowered?". Theory U emphasizes listening and working for those who are not there. This can mean future generations (i.e., our or others' children) or those structurally absent from a given context (i.e., marginalized people(s)). This can be self-serving; simply put, working for others brings individuals the most happiness (Seligman, 2011). However, this line of thought suggests something broader than acting in an atomized form of self-interest. Instead, this philosophical move aligns with the spiritual notion in Buddhism that we are all spiritual forefathers of the people yet to exist, and we are connected to those from whom we think ourselves isolated (Hanh, 2020). Orienting ourselves in this way can remind us to be happier by doing meaningful work in service of our Selves and recognizing the interbeing of the Self and the collective. This approach emphasizes knowing the text (and our Selves) in ways that are potentially beyond the "rational" ways suggested by Western epistemologies. Searching for these answers also answers the question "How does the audience know what the text claims?"

As Scharmer might say, all of this may take place in a context in which the way for the future to be born is obstructed. The dysfunctional beliefs that limit this future, as Burnett and Evans would say, require a strong energy and orientation to overcome the "habit energy" marked in the Buddhist tradition (Wu, 2014). Habit energy is characterized by status quo thinking, explanations that argue, for example, "this is the way I do things" (i.e., a dysfunctional belief). As a potential antidote to this belief, the combined perspectives of Theory U and Life Design suggest imagining alternate realities that avoid falling into the same patterns that hinder transformation and impede us from true change.

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSIONS /PERFORMING/TESTING

This synthesis of Designing Your Life (DYL) and Theory U offers valuable insights into constructing self-narratives by integrating two complementary frameworks. While DYL focuses on life and career choices using design thinking, Theory U explores a deeper, intuitive process of learning from the future and co-creating new realities. By comparing these approaches, this paper offers a novel perspective on navigating personal and professional development through intentional narrative shaping.

One key contribution of this paper is its focus on the central role of intuition and reflective practice in both frameworks. Intuition informs decision-making and connects personal goals to broader collective change, showing that self-narratives are intertwined with social systems, communities, and future generations. Both DYL and Theory U encourage individuals to consider the ripple effects of their actions, framing Life Design as a collective, not just individual, pursuit.

This synthesis also reveals that while DYL emphasizes rapid prototyping and experimentation in life choices, Theory U encourages systemic change through "presencing"—being fully aware of the emerging future. This perspective adds depth to Life Design by suggesting that the future is not only to be shaped but also sensed and co-created through collective awareness. Narrative formation, then, becomes a dynamic process involving both action and contemplation.

Integrating these schools of thought advances the discourse on Life Design in several ways. First, it encourages researchers to consider the role of the Self not just in contemporary contexts but also in historical and future-oriented ones. Second, it prompts further exploration of how intuition and narrative co-creation can be applied in fields like education, leadership, and organizational change. By synthesizing DYL's actionable approach with Theory U's reflective methodology, this paper provides a foundation for future research on how individuals and organizations can consciously design their lives in an interconnected world.

Engaging with these texts through close reading offers nuanced insights into how the Self can be shaped through iterative, reflective practice, highlighting individual journeys as part of broader societal transformation. Future research could apply close reading to other interdisciplinary frameworks, expanding our understanding of Life Design in diverse, dynamic contexts. This discussion underscores the transformative potential of integrating design thinking and systems thinking in constructing meaningful self-narratives.

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