Life design and design thinking: understanding the role of mindset

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Abstract (400 words)

Life Design got a lot of attention as a tool for self-development and life planning. The courses or workshops are guided by the design thinking process and supported by positive psychology interventions. The design thinking approach is mostly used for its process which guides the structure of the course and its tools which are used throughout the course. However, not enough attention is paid to the design thinking mindset. This article discusses first ideas on how far the design thinking mindset can be taken over from the traditional approach to life design. Nine mindset attributes are examined on their adaptability to life design. This is done by using an example of a life design course taught at the Technical University of Berlin. The article proposes several possible future research directions.

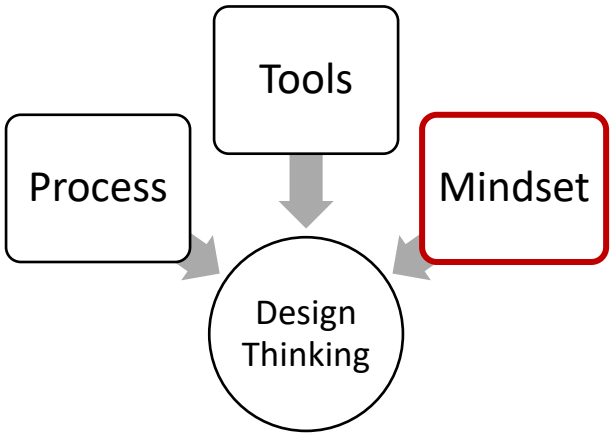
Keywords: Life Design, Positive Psychology, Design Thinking

Introduction

The idea of life design (Burnett & Evans, 2018) (LD) and its proliferation has grown quickly, especially via its application in workshops and educational courses. Alongside its application in practice, researchers have investigated the concept and its benefits in counseling. Many define LD as the application of design thinking (DT) to someone's life to improve it. LD finds its application in individual as well as group settings. Initially, LD focused firmly on DT processes, tools, and methods. However, due to the seamless fit of LD's purpose to improve an individual's life and boost their well-being with positive psychology, over time, positive psychology interventions (PPIs) found their way into the application of LD.

While DT offers a practical step-by-step process as well as useful tools and methods, we argue in this paper that there is more DT can offer for the effective application of LD. DT is associated with innovation mindsets which are individual and group-level attitudes and behaviours that enable design-led innovation efforts (Schweitzer, Groeger and Sobel, 2016; Sobel, Schweitzer, Malcolm, and Groeger, 2021). DT mindsets like *curiosity*, *resilience*, *human centeredness, taking action,* etc., bring DT processes and tools to life. While many LD practitioners and researchers focus on understanding the usefulness of DT processes, tools, and methods for LD, our objective with this research is to pay more attention to the idea of the DT mindset (Figure 1).

Figure 1: Components of Design Thinking



It's worth noting that DT was originally developed to innovate products, services, and processes, not an individual's life. Hence, LD researchers and practitioners have not adopted DT uncritically. While the adoption of DT processes and tools for LD seems straightforward, we believe a thorough re-evaluation of DT innovation mindsets is required to establish their suitability in the context of LD. Further confounding the conceptual discussion is the inclusion of PPIs, which - as we argue - may influence the presence and effectiveness of DT mindsets in LD.

Literature Review

We first review the theory on mindsets in general followed by the DT mindset. Next, we describe LD and the usage of PPIs within it.

Mindset and Implicit Theory

In this article, we elaborate on implicit theories also known from practice as mindset theory. "Implicit theories are schema-like knowledge structures that include specific beliefs regarding the inherent stability of an attribute, as well as a set of general principles concerning the conditions likely to promote personal change or stability." (Ross, 1989). Implicit theories are

defined as, “core assumptions about the malleability of personal attributes”. They are called ‘implicit’ because they are rarely made explicit, and they are called ‘theories‘ because, like a scientific theory, they create a framework for making for prediction and judging the meaning of events in one’s world.” (Yeager & Dweck, 2012).

This leads us to the discussion about the trichotomy of feeling, thinking, and acting as a three-dimensional view of human experience which originates with the Greek philosophers' (McGuire et al., 1969) and its introduction into research by Smith in the late 1940s where he distinguishes between the different aspects of attitude namely affective, cognitive, and conative in form of policy orientation (Smith, 1947). Consequently, we have the affective (emotional), cognitive (thinking), and conative (behavioral) aspects of human experience which need to be taken into consideration when talking about the attributes of a DT mindset.

The Design Thinking Mindset

DT is as much a mindset as it is a process and set of tools (Venkatesh et al., 2012). Both aspects have important implications for improvement and innovation. As a process and set of tools, DT informs and shapes practices for dealing with complexity and solving issues. Applying the iterative stages of a typical DT process includes deep empathy, reframing the problem area, ideation, prototyping, and testing. While the stages and the tools employed have varied in number and detail, it is this design thinking process that has proliferated in educational courses (Jakovich et al., 2012). However, unless learning and application provoke individual mindset change, e.g., acceptance of failure as integral elements, processes and tools will have limited tenure.

As a mindset, DT refers to the underlying values, cognition, and resulting behaviors that, over time, find their way into the beliefs of people. It has been argued that the notion of ‘design as a state of mind’ implies that true innovation is a phenomenon and should not be left to

marginalized functions within a company . While individuals and whole organizations can adopt the processes and tools of DT and learn new innovation practices over time, it is the mindset that helps innovation and change to be achieved at a deeper and more sustainable level.

Within the first step of measuring design thinking mindsets, Dosi, Rosati and Vignoli (2018) compiled a list of 17 papers on mindsets described in the literature. We use a DT mindset model that is based on Schweitzer et al. (2016) and has recently been articulated as a set of nine attributes to explain the cognitive dimensions of design innovation practice (Sobel, Schweitzer, Malcolm & Groeger, 2021). The model considers three mindset attributes each at the individual, contextual and actional levels. Individual-level attributes deal with self and building self-awareness, which enables people to intentionally assume a certain disposition in their design practice. Individual mindset attributes include **curious**: exploring knowledge, novel possibilities, and experiences to learn and make sense of the world, **resilient**: withstanding or recovering from difficult conditions and being hopeful and confident about outcomes, and **reflexive**: the ability to stand back and critically question own assumptions, actions, and impact on others to find ways for improvement.

Contextual mindset attributes are about how people respond to a situation to ensure they interact with people and things around them in a way that creates opportunities for innovation. They include **collaborate**: embracing diversity and working together toward a shared solution, **navigate uncertainty**: dealing comfortably with ambiguous and complex situations, and **human-centred**: ground and frame thinking and doing in the view of human needs and the experiences of others. Finally, actional mindset attributes to deal with adopting a more productive approach to drive progress and create innovative outcomes. They include: **make tangible**: externalizing information, ideas and concepts by activating all senses, **take action**: initializing activities and getting things done to improve a situation, and **play deliberately**:

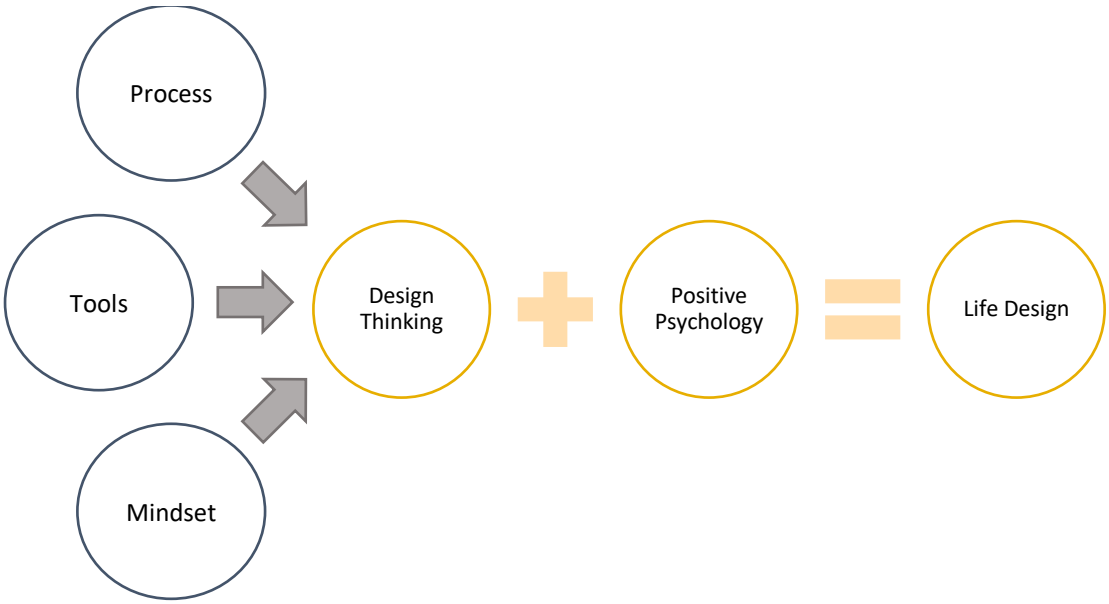
inspiring open, joyful, and fun engagements to build connection and momentum in a design process.

We argue that the model nine DT mindset attributes can inform the idea of LD explained below.

Life Design on the example of "Design your happy life"

The LD program is rooted in the application of DT for individual lives. Based on the LD course introduced by Burnett and Evans (2018) a course at the Technical University Berlin was developed which takes the DT approach and combines it with PPIs. Initially, only the process namely the five steps, and some of the DT tools found their way into the course used at Stanford with the "Design your life" course by Burnett and Evans (2018). In this article we want to bring attention to the DT mindset as shown in Figure 2.

Figure 2: Elements of Life Design



As shown in Figure 3 Positive Psychotherapy (PPT) follows a therapeutical approach and combines it with positive psychology (PP) by focusing on positive emotions, meaning, and engagement (Seligman et al., 2006). In this case, PP itself is used as a mindset that is applied to therapy.

Figure 3: Elements of Positive Psychotherapy

PPT can be seen as the counterpart of LD in the continuum of mental well-being programs whereas PPT is developed for people below zero and LD in contrast to that is developed for people above zero. However, PPT raises an important question: Does PP come with a particular mindset that needs to be considered when talking about LD Mindset? One article describes a positive psychology mindset as a perspective that concentrates "not only on an individual's ability to overcome adversity, but also the attributes that allow them to thrive and grow under all circumstances, which include self-belief, commitment, perseverance, and emotion management" (Slimani et al., 2016). Another article mentions numerous positive psychology mindsets namely life satisfaction, happiness, belief in good luck, and flourishing (Sierra et al., 2022). However, there are only a few papers discussing a positive psychology mindset which indicates a research gap that needs to be filled.

Positive Psychology Interventions

Over the past decades, researchers and practitioners in applied psychology have approached the promotion of well-being via positive psychology interventions (PPIs). Different definitions of PPIs can be found in literature such as PPIs as "treatment methods or intentional activities that aim to cultivate positive feelings, behaviors, or cognitions" (Sin & Lyubomirsky, 2009, p. 468). The goal of positive psychology interventions is to cultivate positive emotions, identify and focus on strengths rather than weaknesses and nurture virtues

with the aim of sustainable happiness (Shushok & Hulme, 2006). Biswas-Diener, and Parks (2013) synthesized definitions of positive psychology interventions and concluded that the definitions broadly describe one of the following three conceptualizations: (1) the intervention has a focus on positive topics, (2) the mechanism or outcome is positive, and (3) the aim is to promote well-being and not try to fix weaknesses. Despite the reasonability of every single concept each has also its drawbacks when used as a stand-alone method for the classification of PPIs. Therefore, the authors propose a set of criteria that need to be fulfilled in order to identify a PPI namely (1) "The primary goal of the intervention is to build some "positive" variable or variables", (2) "Empirical evidence exists that the intervention successfully manipulates the above target variable(s)", (3) "Empirical evidence exists that improving the target variable will lead to positive outcomes for the population in which it is administered". Interventions that fulfill this set of criteria are for example writing gratitude letters, practicing optimistic thinking, identifying character strengths, replaying positive experiences, to socializing (e.g., Fordyce, 1977; Seligman et al., 2005; Lyubomirsky et al., 2011)). Following the first criterion, LD itself could be identified as a multi-level-element PPI comparable to PPT with the difference of targeting people above zero levels of well-being and without any mental illnesses or disorders.

Towards a Life Design Mindset

Taking the course "Design your happy life" from the Technical University of Berlin that follows a DT process and applies DT tools as well as PPIs we investigate the appearance of the DT mindset used throughout the LD journey. The course is taught to international master students with diverse backgrounds in groups of 20 to 25 students.

Applying the Design Thinking Mindset to Life Design

Table 1 summarizes all steps of the DT process with the related attributes of the DT mindset developed by Sobel et al., (2021) that are applied to the LD course "Design your happy life".

As shown in the table all attributes are presented in the LD course. In the following, every attribute is discussed in detail in no particular order.

Table 1 Applying the Design Thinking Mindset to Life Design

DT Process	Curious	Resilient	Reflexive	Collaborate	Navigate Uncertainty	Human-Centered	Make Tangible	Take Action	Play Deliberately
Empathize	X	X	X	X	X	X		X	
Define	X		X	X		X		X	
Ideate	X		X	X		X		X	X
Prototype	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X
Test	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X

"Take Action" builds the core of LD since LD itself is already taking an action to take responsibility and become a proactive designer of her own life. Starting from the empathize phase where the life designer has to conduct interviews with relatives and friends, going over to defining a vision and mission for her own life, ideating possible future lives, developing prototypes as well as testing them the life designer applies a constant proactive approach. The next attribute is "Human-Centered" which is obvious due to the subject of the LD course namely the person whom life is designed for. In every single step of the DT process, the focus needs to be aligned with the needs and wants of this person which is for example done by highlighting this person's strengths and values and trying to keep away expectations from others and society. This is especially done by introspective "Reflection" which is without a doubt another important attribute that is used in LD. Not only in the empathize phase where the life designer runs a life review and reflects on one's past to understand and define the present and ideate for the future. When prototyping and testing ideas the life designer needs to be in a constant state of reflection in order to make sure to stay true to oneself. "Collaboration" is another vital attribute in LD where information/insights/reflections from others on one's own behavior is with the goal to get to know oneself better and expand self-awareness by getting to know more about one's own blind spot. This is done by using the Johari window introduced by Luft (1961).

The whole LD journey needs to be approached with "Curiosity" in every single step of the DT process by asking questions about the past, trying out new ways when defining the present or ideating the future, prototyping one's way forward, and testing out ideas with an open mind.

The DT attribute of "Make Tangible" is mostly needed in the prototype and test phase of LD when playing around and testing ideas from the ideation phase. A vision board or storyboard is a good example of something tangible created in the process of LD.

In the empathizing step of DT, the life designer is asked to practice intrapersonal as well as interpersonal emotional intelligence. Using the power of emphasizing the life designer is able to understand the reflected information and build an emotional connection with herself and also the social network in the life designer is embedded. In this stage, the PPI of identifying positive emotions and focusing on them throughout the whole LD journey helps to boost "Resilience". Positive emotions broaden cognition by 1) promoting unusual cognitive associations, 2) widening cognitive categories people create and use, and 3) strengthening creative thinking (Isen, 1999). Throughout positive reframing, the life designer learns to see life events from a different perspective by looking at what went well in his or her life and drawing psychological strengths in how one deals with the conflicted parts of one's life (Seltzery, 1986; Seligman & Csikszentmihalyi, 2000). Reframing is one of many cognitive techniques used to support people in diffusing or bypassing an unpleasant situation while boosting their self-esteem or focusing on action-oriented thinking. By appreciating personal strengths reframing increases one's confidence in dealing with difficult situations coming up in the future. These acts of self-compassion can promote resilience and provide a defensive emotional mechanism (Trompetter et al., 2017), and nurture the sense of authentic pride and perceived power which both mediate higher perseverance and lower depressive symptoms (Van Doren et al. 2018). Consequently, this builds "Resilience" and leads to accepting the past and presence while building a positive outlook for the future. Furthermore, resilience is

boosted by the validated PPI in LD of applying signature strengths in novel ways in daily life or work (Seligman et al., 2005).

“Navigate Uncertainty” guides the last two steps namely prototype, and test by taking ideas preparing prototypes, and testing them out to see if the vision of one’s future self is something the life designer should go for and possibly adapt her life design for a better fit.

Apart from some warming up games and having a lot of fun while discussing some topics with classmates in the empathize and define phase the attribute of “Play Deliberately” is mostly used in the following three phases. Where for example students have to come up with crazy ideas for their futures without restrictions to resources and the main goal of having as much fun as possible.

To sum it up, the DT mindset model that is based on Schweitzer et al. (2016) shows its applicability to LD.

Implications and Suggestions for Future Research

This article is limited in its focus on one course without the possibility of generalization to other courses. Furthermore, it is based on the developed mindset by Sobel et al. (2021), focusing on other mindsets would probably yield different results.

Despite these limitations, this article provides the first thoughts about the applicability of the DT mindset in LD. Especially educators can bring more attention to the way of teaching LD courses and make the mindset more present by visualizing the mindset, explaining and training the associated attributes.

Future research can investigate LD as a multi-level-element PPI. Moreover, researchers could look at the combination of PP and DT mindsets and see how they are intertwined in LD and if LD needs its own mindset model. Furthermore, measurements for mindset in LD need to be developed and empirically measured. Another interesting research question is how far the

attributes need to be present from the beginning or need to be developed and trained throughout the course of LD. As shown in the article the necessity of emotional intelligence raises the question of whether emotional intelligence is a required attribute of the mindset or part of the empathize phase.

Conclusion

The present article shows the applicability of the DT mindset to LD and brings examples of how the attributes are used throughout the LD program. This is the initial step of recognizing the DT mindset and its importance in LD. Furthermore, this paper brings attention to several research ideas that still need to be addressed.

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