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Document Analysis from the Perspective of ACT: Values Prominent in Tolstoy's What Men Live By

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Abstract

Acceptance and Commitment Therapy (ACT) is characterised by its focus on contextual change. This therapeutic approach places the clarification of individual values and the pursuit of a life aligned with these values at the core of the therapeutic process, emphasising elements such as acceptance, mindfulness, values, spirituality, and relationships. In this respect, ACT distinguishes itself from other third-wave therapy approaches. Although numerous studies in the literature support the effectiveness of ACT, it is noteworthy that research specifically addressing “values,” one of the fundamental components of psychological flexibility, and the pursuit of value-consistent living remains limited. This study examines the values embraced by the characters in Tolstoy’s “What Men Live By” and the deliberate actions they take in accordance with these values. Despite various adversities, it is observed that each individual in the family holds certain values and strives to live in accordance with them. The findings align with the existing literature. The analysis of such literary works is thought to reveal the intersections between literature and psychology, offering readers insights into values and how to live in accordance with them.

Key Words

Psychological flexibility • Values • What Men Live By • Tolstoy

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Introduction

In recent years, there has been a shift from cognitive behavioural therapies, which focus on altering individuals' thought content (Hollon & Beck, 1994), to mindfulness-based third-wave approaches (Bramwell & Richardson, 2018). Third-wave approaches aim to cultivate broad and flexible behavioural repertoires rather than merely eliminating symptoms, irrespective of diagnosis (Ruiz, 2010). These approaches emphasise awareness, acceptance, and therapeutic relationships, as well as the importance of re-evaluating one's relationship with thoughts (Kahl, Lotta, & Schweiger, 2012). Within this context, Acceptance and Commitment Therapy surpasses other third-wave therapies (A-Tjak et al., 2015). Unlike traditional cognitive behavioural therapies, the core therapeutic processes of ACT include acceptance (a willingness to experience pain or distress without attempting to control it) and value-based action (aligning behaviours with personally meaningful goals rather than focusing on eliminating unwanted experiences) (Hayes, Strosahl, & Wilson, 2006; 2011).

Research has demonstrated the effectiveness of psychological flexibility across a range of domains, including psychosis (Wakefield, Roebuck, & Boydan, 2018), anxiety disorders (García Pérez & Valdivia Salas, 2018; Soo, Tate, & Lane-Brown, 2011), body image (Griffiths et al., 2018), chronic pain (Feliu-Soler et al., 2018; Hann & McCracken, 2014), chronic illness (Graham et al., 2016), workplace mental health (Bond & Bunce, 2003), stress resulting from major life events (Farach et al., 2008), and borderline personality disorder (Gratz & Gunderson, 2006). Hayes, Strosahl, and Wilson (2011) described psychological flexibility as a construct consisting of six core processes: acceptance, cognitive defusion, present-moment awareness, contextual self, contact with values, and committed action guided by values. These processes function as interconnected mechanisms working in tandem to enhance psychological flexibility (Hayes & Hoffmann, 2017; Hayes, Luoma, Bond et al., 2006).

In the ACT framework, acceptance refers to confronting and openly approaching internal experiences such as painful or unwanted thoughts, feelings, and memories, rather than attempting to escape or avoid them (Hayes, Strosahl, & Wilson, 2004). This approach posits that one of the primary sources of psychological distress is experiential avoidance, which arises when acceptance is rejected (Hayes, Strosahl, & Wilson, 2011). By choosing avoidance, the individual attempts to change, suppress, or eliminate internal experiences. However, the rejection of acceptance and engagement in avoidance behaviour may lead to outcomes such as social withdrawal, emotional detachment, or behavioural restrictions, thereby negatively affecting the individual's quality of life (Hayes, Strosahl, & Wilson, 2011; Blackledge & Hayes, 2001; Hayes, 2004; Hooper, Saunders, & McHugh, 2010).

Cognitive defusion, in turn, aims to reduce the impact and influence of an individual's thoughts (Hayes, 2004). This process involves creating psychological distance from one's thoughts to better understand their context and function (Bond et al., 2006). By observing thoughts and emotions as mere verbal events, individuals can mitigate their destructive influence (Bramwell & Richardson, 2018).

Hayes et al. (2013) describe present-moment awareness, or flexible contact with the present, as the individual's voluntary, values-consistent engagement with current experiences. It entails full involvement in whatever one is doing at a given moment (Harris, 2008). According to the theory, this is referred to as the skill of attentional focusing

(Moran, 2015). Attentional focusing guides individuals by enabling them to perceive events as personal experiences and to engage in behaviours aligned with their values (Robb, 2007).

The concept of contextual self allows the individual to transition flexibly into different roles when the context changes, rather than defining oneself within a single fixed role or position (Hayes, 2012). This flexibility fosters the understanding that context-dependent changes are merely aspects of one's life, not definitive of the self (Harris, 2011). Awareness plays a crucial role in establishing the immediate connection between values and behaviour, highlighting the inherently reinforcing nature of value-consistent behaviour (Rahal & Gon, 2020).

Although verbally constructed values encompass traditional behavioural principles such as classical or operant conditioning and are based on behavioural language principles derived from Relational Frame Theory (RFT) (Lejeune & Louma, 2006), the concept was long ago introduced by Skinner as factors shaping individuals' behaviours. According to Skinner, values function as a form of reward for individuals.

While many therapeutic approaches have addressed values indirectly, ACT has made working explicitly with values a fundamental component. Indeed, living a value-driven life is a central goal of ACT (Wilson et al., 2010). A life misaligned with one's values is considered a primary source of distress (Gloster, Meyer, & Lieb, 2017). Such distress may arise not only from physical pain but also from internal experiences such as negative emotions, unwanted thoughts, unpleasant memories, impulses, and bodily sensations (Hayes & Smith, 2005). Values facilitate the process of acceptance by enabling the individual to act in accordance with broader goals despite painful internal experiences (Lejeune & Luoma, 2006).

The behaviours individuals engage in to achieve long-term life goals are accompanied and sustained by their values (Ciarrochi & Bailey, 2008; Hayes & Strosahl, 2005). Whereas goals refer to specific, concrete outcomes, values provide individuals with an ongoing sense of direction (Harris, 2011). Values are determined by choices made through free will, rather than being based on avoidance or fear, that is, when the individual is not under pressure (Lejeune & Luoma, 2006). Therefore, they function as a powerful source of motivation and guidance for individuals (Harris, 2009). Shaped by freely selected, verbally constructed, and evolving behavioural patterns, values play a direct role in facilitating engagement in meaningful behaviours through the reinforcers linked to these patterns (Wilson & Dufrene, 2009).

Recent research has sought to better understand which types of reinforcers are effective and how values contribute to motivation within contemporary behavioural frameworks (Lejeune & Luoma, 2006). Such studies help individuals identify their values across life domains (e.g., family, career, health) and guide their lives accordingly (Hayes, Strosahl, & Wilson, 2011).

Values that sustain motivation despite life's difficulties (Wilson & Murrell, 2004) can lead to enduring action, driven not solely by fear of punishment or adherence to rules, but by intrinsic reasons rooted in values (Lejeune & Luoma, 2006). Individuals who engage in value-congruent behaviours progressively expand their behavioural repertoires, enabling them to live in ways that serve their values (Hayes et al., 2004; Lejeune & Luoma, 2006).

Within the acceptance and commitment process, value interventions generally determine the course of therapeutic work by identifying the obstacles that hinder living a meaningful life (Hayes et al., 2004). Although the literature on this topic is rapidly growing (Coyne, McHugh, & Martinez, 2011), it is still in a developmental stage (Ost, 2008). Furthermore, many studies tend to emphasise committed action rather than highlighting the significance of values (Vowles & McCracken, 2008). A review of the literature reveals a relative paucity of research focusing on components such as values, values clarification, the importance of values, and value exploration. Experts in the field have also called for an increase in research on values (Forman et al., 2007). In this context, the present study aims to explore the values embraced by the characters in Tolstoy's short story *What Men Live By* and to identify the deliberate actions they take from the perspective of values. The analysis is conducted within the framework of Acceptance and Commitment Therapy (ACT), with the intention of illustrating how literary narratives can reflect the core ACT processes related to values-based action.

Method

Tolstoy, one of the Russian authors who carefully observed people's contemplation of eternity through everyday matters rather than focusing on inaccessible and irrelevant topics for the public transformed individuals' lived experiences into written form (Anemone, 2018; Whitehorn, 1971). One such work, *What Men Live By*, will be examined in this study through the lens of Acceptance and Commitment Therapy (ACT), particularly focusing on values and value-consistent action.

The selection of this work was motivated by its treatment of themes such as death, the meaning of life, and the prominent role of values in Tolstoy's writings. The book was analysed using document analysis, one of the qualitative research methods. Document analysis is a technique that enables researchers to examine written sources containing information about facts and events in detail and to construct a coherent whole from this information (Creswell, 2002). Although this method remains underutilised in research (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016), analysing existing texts can reveal insights that might otherwise remain inaccessible (Morgan, 2022).

The story was analysed using document analysis, a qualitative method that allows for systematic examination of written texts to extract meaningful insights (Creswell, 2002). The analysis focused specifically on the ACT constructs of values and committed action, as defined by Hayes et al. (2012). The text was read multiple times, and key passages involving the characters' value-oriented decisions and existential reflections were identified and coded based on ACT principles.

To ensure credibility, the researcher revisited the initial coding after a three-week interval to evaluate the consistency of interpretation. While no external coders were involved, the coding framework and emerging interpretations were discussed with a peer familiar with ACT to enhance confirmability. The study does not involve statistical inter-coder reliability, as it is based on interpretative textual analysis rather than empirical data from participants. However, attention was paid to dependability through detailed documentation of the coding and theme development process.

Certain literary texts, as significant written narratives reflecting human experiences, value systems, and social relationships, offer a meaningful field of inquiry within the scope of qualitative research. A theory-driven qualitative content analysis of such texts enables a deeper understanding of individuals' cognitive and emotional processes (Bowen, 2009; Prior, 2003). In particular, the systematic examination of written narratives through psychological frameworks serves as an effective method for interpreting characters' value-based actions and lived experiences.

Data Collection Tool and Data Analysis

Tolstoy's *What Men Live By* was selected as the primary data source for this study due to its rich exploration of existential themes such as death, meaning of life, and the centrality of values, which align closely with the constructs of Acceptance and Commitment Therapy (ACT). The decision to focus on this work followed a preliminary review of several literary texts that address similar themes; however, *What Men Live By* was chosen for its clear narrative structure and explicit representation of value-driven actions by its characters.

While other Tolstoy works and comparable literary texts were considered, many lacked either the direct focus on value-based decision-making or were too complex for in-depth document analysis within the scope of this study. Multiple editions of *What Men Live By*, translated by different publishers were reviewed to ensure consistency of the narrative (Tolstoy, 2012). Variations between editions were minor and did not affect the thematic elements relevant to the study.

The story was analysed through document analysis, focusing on ACT's values and committed action constructs. This qualitative approach allowed a systematic examination of the characters' personal characteristics, values, and social attributes. Data were organised under predefined thematic categories, with findings supported by illustrative excerpts.

Findings

The table below summarizes the main characters in the story, the values they embrace, and how these values are interpreted from the ACT perspective. The table provides a general framework for the findings and lays the groundwork for the detailed explanations of the characters' values and behaviors in the following sections.

Table 1

Overview of characters values and their interpretation within the ACT framework

Character	Embraced Values	Notable Behaviours/Characteristics	Relevant ACT Concepts
Simon	Trust, compassion, acceptance, resilience, helpfulness, honesty, inner peace	Taking in a stranger in need, showing tolerance and generosity	Acceptance, values-based living, compassion, psychological flexibility
Matryona	Kindness, tolerance, patience, acceptance, family devotion	Initially hesitant but later offers food and shelter to the stranger	Emotional awareness, value-consistent behavior
Michael	Loyalty, spiritual meaning, divine love, sacrifice	Learning about human nature, discovering the meaning of love	Spiritual awareness, present moment focus, acceptance
Woman (caretaker of twins)	Compassion, altruism, responsibility, affection, courage, kindness	Despite poverty and personal hardship, chooses to care for orphaned children; prioritizes their well-being over her own	Compassion-centered values, psychological resilience, meaningful living

Tolstoy's "What Men Live By" explores themes such as humanity, gratitude, compassion, the meaning of life, love, and cooperation, which are especially relevant when examined through the lens of acceptance and commitment therapy (ACT), particularly its focus on values and value-based action. In the story, Simon, a shoemaker, struggles to make ends meet and cannot even afford a new coat. Despite his difficult circumstances, he extends credit to customers who cannot pay, without demanding promissory notes or charging interest to safeguard his money. This behaviour highlights Simon's deep trust in people and his prioritisation of human values over material possessions. Despite the challenges he encounters, Simon is seen to endure his status, accept the difficulties, and consistently engage with his work. This acceptance involves recognising the present situation and conditions without resorting to avoidance, denial, or despair. Simon leads a life that corresponds to his limited earnings, and indeed, he lives under difficult circumstances. His acceptance of his situation, coupled with his compassionate and calm acknowledgment of the different struggles faced by those around him, demonstrates that acceptance is not a passive act but rather an active engagement in upholding his values and convictions in the face of life's hardships. This indicates that Simon focuses on his internal values rather than external circumstances.

Although Simon himself was in a difficult situation, he never attempted to evoke pity from any of his debtors in order to obtain repayment. This demonstrates that Simon, even in hardship, found the strength within himself to do what he considered to be the right and valuable action. From the perspective of compassion and altruistic values, when Simon first saw Michael in distress, he initially felt sorry for him but rationalised that, given his own difficult circumstances, he was not obliged to help. However, as he walked away, he became increasingly troubled,

reproached himself, and began to suffer because he had not acted in accordance with his values. This inner turmoil continued until he returned and offered help to Michael. When Simon returned home with Michael, his wife Matryona initially reacted negatively and refused to include him in their supper. In order to prevent a conflict between Matryona's values and her actions, Simon reminded her that Michael was a guest of God and that, while one might survive without parents, it is impossible to live without God. Because of her belief in a higher power, Matryona eventually offered food to both her husband and their guest, gave Michael clothes she had previously mended, and showed him a place to sleep. Although Matryona initially displayed a biased attitude towards Michael, she almost immediately began to believe that Michael had survived solely through love. Convinced that a person who harbours love is closer to God, and that God resides within such a person, Matryona gradually felt compassion and affection for Michael. Acting in line with her values brought her a sense of inner peace.

Another example comes toward the end of the story, involving a woman who cared for a pair of twins. Despite the fact that the twins' father died shortly before their birth and their mother passed away soon after, this woman, though not a relative, took the children under her care. She treated them with compassion, sought to prevent their suffering, and did not differentiate between them and her own child. Like Matryona, this woman also demonstrated determined actions aligned with her values, continuing to care for the children with unwavering commitment.

These behaviours by Simon and Matryona illustrate the acceptance process, a central element of ACT. Both are aware of their financial struggles and try to live in accordance with their reality. Even when Simon is upset about not being paid, he mutters to himself, "I don't need a coat, I'm forgetting my troubles. I can live without a coat." Rather than avoiding or denying his experiences, Simon acknowledges his feelings and thoughts, focusing on meeting basic needs and maintaining inner peace over financial gain or status.

When Simon asks Michael about his background, Michael remains silent. A similar situation arose a few years after they began living together, when a man brought leather to the shop and requested a pair of boots. After the man left, Michael cut the leather to make slippers instead. Although Simon remarked, "You are not someone who would make such a mistake," he did not scold Michael or question his actions. The respect Simon wished to receive himself was likewise shown to Michael, his co-worker. Soon after, a logical explanation for Michael's behaviour became evident, justifying his decision.

From a broader perspective, Simon's core values include peace, helpfulness, and honesty; Matryona's centre on security, order, material stability, and family; and Michael's encompass loyalty, spiritual meaning, and transcendence. Despite their hardships, all three characters accept their circumstances and act in accordance with their values. Although the family did not achieve their desired financial status in the short term, they ultimately attained their goals in the long run. However, even after reaching these goals, they continued to live in accordance with their values. This is because, while goals are tangible and achievable concepts, values are more abstract and persist throughout one's lifetime. This interplay aligns with the psychological literature, which suggests that acceptance, when combined with committed action towards personally valued goals, enhances overall psychological health and well-being. By maintaining this balance, Simon exemplifies the essence of living with purpose and

resilience, offering insight into how psychological flexibility plays a crucial role in fostering a more fulfilling existence.

Discussion, Conclusion & Suggestions

Human beings display tremendous courage, deep compassion, and the capacity to move forward despite their own difficult personal histories. They love despite the risk of being hurt, make plans for the future despite the inevitability of death, and choose to live in accordance with their ideals even when life seems meaningless (Hayes & Smith, 2005). When Tolstoy's "What Men Live By" is examined through the lens of psychological flexibility, the values component emerges as particularly prominent. Psychological flexibility, defined as the ability to act in line with one's values in the face of challenging life circumstances (Hayes, Strosahl, & Wilson, 2011), is embodied in the character of Simon. Through Simon, Tolstoy conveys a profound understanding of human resilience, underscoring that genuine satisfaction in life arises not from avoiding difficulties but from embracing them with a flexible mindset.

A study conducted with adolescents found a positive relationship between individuals' values and their positive coping skills (Kıyak, Seki, & Dilmaç, 2021). In other words, as in Tolstoy's work, values serve as a compass guiding individuals toward psychological flexibility. This can enhance both individual and social adaptability.

Viewing values as a conscious choice can help people develop new, healthier behaviours without remaining trapped in past hardships (McHugh, 2011). Simon exemplifies this by helping Michael on the evening he fails to collect his wages. Although Simon's wife initially resists acting in line with their values, she ultimately overcomes her negative reactions and behaves kindly toward their guest. While not all values between the husband and wife align perfectly, they manage to find a middle ground. Supporting this idea, a study with married couples found a positive linear relationship between spouses' values and marital harmony (Dilmaç & Bakırcıoğlu, 2019). Furthermore, research shows that value-based actions contribute to improvements in depression, pain, anxiety, and psychosocial disability (Fitzpatrick et al., 2016). For example, Lundgren et al. (2008) found that epilepsy patients' progress in living according to their values was linked to significant improvements in quality of life. It is also known that an increase in value-based actions reduces individuals' distress levels (Bramwell & Richardson, 2018). McHugh (2011), in his work on pain acceptance, found that individuals who accept their pain show increased engagement in value-driven actions. Additionally, values can make certain events more reinforcing or amplify the impact of already reinforcing events (Dahl et al., 2009; Hayes & Wilson, 1994). As a result, people can be influenced by situations whose outcomes will affect them far in the future, or even not at all during their lifetime (Wilson et al., 2010). Therefore, regardless of whether an individual has previously been affected by an event, values can shape their behaviour (da Silva Ferreira et al., 2019). As reflected in the literature, Simon and the other characters in the story actively accept their circumstances and continue to act in accordance with their values. Although their immediate desires are not fulfilled, in the long term Simon's life improves financially, Michael is forgiven and reconciled with God, and they all achieve a sense of peace.

Culture plays a significant role in the selection and enactment of values, as human beings are both biological organisms and products of their societies (Ulusoy & Dilmaç, 2018). Examining the era in which Tolstoy wrote,

Russian society displayed predominantly collectivist characteristics (Mamontov, Kozhevnikova, & Radyukova, 2014; Maslenikau, 2015). Social responsibilities such as family ties, social norms, hospitality, and neighbourly relations were strongly emphasised during this period (Swensen, 2024). Moreover, the work still reflects values attributed to Russian culture within Hofstede's (2001) six cultural dimensions framework, particularly the acceptance of power and inequality in society, avoidance of uncertainty, and long-term orientation (The Culture Factor Group, 2023). The work itself embodies these characteristics as well. The societal value of hospitality may have compelled Simon's wife to extend kindness to the guest, even against her initial will, either out of obedience to God or due to the influence of collectivist cultural norms. Despite lacking flour for the next day, Matryona plans to borrow bread from the neighbour and continue hosting their guest. Her insistence that Simon collect the money owed to them stems from her desire to avoid uncertainty, whereas Simon tends towards behaviours that promote long-term psychological flexibility.

This study explored values using a document analysis approach. However, researchers employ a variety of methods to study values. For instance, Reilly et al. (2019) focused on the importance and consistency of values rather than specific content. Lundgren et al. (2008) examined values across domains such as work-education, leisure, personal development, and relationships. In their study, Wilson and Dufrene (2009) examined values across dimensions such as likelihood, current pattern, general precaution, action, satisfaction with the level of action, and concern. Finally, Smout et al. (2014) aimed to explore values and their committed enactment through the dimensions of progress in values and obstruction of values. Although conducted with different methods, all the researchers have aimed to highlight individuals' values and their committed actions in pursuit of those values. In a study where the topic was addressed universally, it was stated that the common societal values include compassion, kindness, belonging, and being loving (Evans et al., 2020).

In conclusion, when focusing on psychological flexibility, values/living in accordance with values, and the work "What Men Live By", it is suggested that the identification and reformation of inner values will regulate individuals' lives and contribute to a relatively more peaceful existence. Despite existential challenges, it is emphasized that life can be lived in accordance with its meaning. Finally, it can be concluded that value-based actions support psychological flexibility, thus enhancing an individual's well-being in the long term.

Making value inferences from the behaviors of characters in the work is an interpretive approach within the framework of the literature, and it can be addressed in various ways by different researchers. However, such an approach can provide significant contributions to the literature, especially in terms of associating literary works with psychological theories. The themes conveyed in Tolstoy's stories, the conditions of the characters, and their emotional states are often intertwined with topics commonly found in psychology literature. For instance, concepts like infidelity can be explored in Tolstoy's Anna Karenina (Keleş, Kesici, & Ak, 2022), cognitive distortions can be addressed in The Devil (Keleş, Ak, & Kesici, 2024), and the character's turn toward values in The Death of Ivan Ilyich after experiencing inevitable pain can be analyzed (Simas, 2023). Based on these studies, it can be hypothesized that the intersection of literature and psychology is represented in these works. Offering valuable insights into the literary and psychological intersections of the work could encourage readers to reflect on and

explore values and living in accordance with those values. This may even serve as a driving force for further studies on the subject. Additionally, in some university departments, the relevant works could be analyzed for practical applications and illustrations, especially in courses related to character and values education.

Limitations

This study is limited to the narrative presented by the authors and the explicit values contained within the text. Although the research is framed theoretically, the findings are interpretative, as they are based on the authors' subjective analyses. Consequently, different readers may derive varying interpretations, reflecting the inherent subjectivity of qualitative document analysis. To enhance validity and reliability, the findings were reviewed and critically discussed with an external expert specializing in Acceptance and Commitment Therapy (ACT). However, the absence of external coders and the lack of statistical measures for inter-coder reliability remain limitations of the study.

Ethic

This study did not require ethics committee approval; therefore, no ethics approval was obtained.

Author Contributions

This article was written with the joint contributions of three authors.

Conflict of Interest

The authors declare that they have no conflict of interest.

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