

PROWEL PhD project outline:

1. Preliminary Title

Empowered to ACT?

A Critical Inquiry into the Foundational Concepts of Acceptance and Commitment Therapy (ACT), Examining Their Potential as a Innovative Approach to Theory, Research, and Practice in Social Work Within the Context of Current Societal Challenges

2. Research Question

How can the foundational concepts of Acceptance and Commitment Therapy (ACT) be critically examined, adapted, and expanded to serve as a transformative framework for theory, research, and practice in social work, enabling professionals and communities to navigate current societal challenges with greater agency, value-based orientation, and psychological flexibility?

3. Links to the Thematic Focus of PROWEL

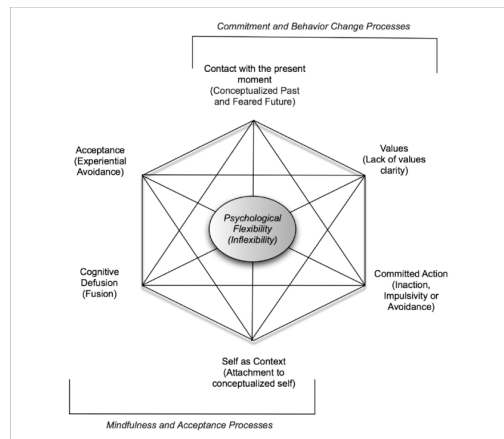
My project directly aligns with PROWEL's focus on well-being, resilience, and professional learning in times of societal transformation. By critically expanding ACT - a psychotherapeutic approach that increases psychological flexibility by fostering acceptance of difficult thoughts and feelings and promoting committed action toward one's personal values - for social work theory, research, and practice, the project addresses psychological resources, adaptive capacities, and reflective professional action under conditions of uncertainty and change. Furthermore, the emphasis on interdisciplinary collaboration, practice-oriented innovation, and open science principles resonates strongly with PROWEL's aim to foster research that bridges academic knowledge, professional development, and societal impact.

4. Research Goals / Abstract

This dissertation seeks to develop a conceptual and empirical framework for applying the fundamental concepts of ACT within social work practice. The project thus aims to bridge theory, empirical research, and practice by adapting ACT concepts to the specific challenges of social work in times of societal transformation. The goals are:

- **Conceptualization:** critically examine ACT principles as described in the hexaflex model (see image) below in relation to structural and social conditions, moving beyond

individualistic resilience and self-optimization approaches toward a context-sensitive, empowerment-oriented perspective.



Prevedini et al. 2011: A56

- **Empirical investigation:** explore the potential of ACT foundations to strengthen professional action and support clients in coping with current social transformation processes.
- **Practical transfer:** develop tools and training concepts enabling practitioners and researchers to integrate ACT principles into everyday professional settings.

5. State of Relevant Research / Research Gap / Originality

While ACT has been widely studied in clinical psychology, their application in social work remains largely unexplored; particularly in Switzerland. Preliminary research reveals scarce professional training initiatives but no systematic theoretical or empirical studies on integrating ACT into social work practice in Switzerland.

Moreover, most ACT research neglects structural inequalities, power relations, and sociocultural contexts, focusing instead on individual coping. This dissertation addresses this gap by:

1. Situating ACT principles within social, political, and ethical frameworks,
2. Exploring its potential for collective agency and empowerment,
3. Developing practice-oriented models for social work interventions.

In contrast to acknowledged approaches, which often emphasize individual well-being and resilience in ways that risk neglecting structural inequalities and power relations, this project adopts a critical perspective to ensure that psychological resources such as psychological flexibility are conceptualized within their broader social, political, and cultural contexts

In addition to exploring ACT principles as a transformative approach to navigating societal challenges, my dissertation focus on the integration of ACT principles into social work research Methodologically, I will follow an open science approach by making all research materials publicly available. This decision aligns with the principles of ACT, which emphasize openness,

transparency, and responsiveness to new information. By sharing data, code, and materials openly, I aim to promote greater reproducibility, foster collaboration, and allow for critical engagement with the research process. In line with ACT's focus on values-driven action, this approach contributes to a more inclusive and transparent scientific environment, enabling others to verify, replicate, and build upon the findings while advancing the field of social work research.

In summary, the critical expansion promises innovative theoretical contributions and practical tools for professionals navigating societal change. Thus my thesis aims to offer researchers a innovative methodological framework grounded in ACT principles to study complex processes of adaptation, uncertainty, and transformation in social work contexts.

6. Theoretical Frame

The project draws on:

- Acceptance and Commitment Therapy (ACT) and its Hexaflex model (Hayes et al., 2013) as a conceptual foundation
- Relational Frame Theory (RFT) as the underlying theory of language and cognition,
- Sociocritical and inequality theories (e.g., Bourdieu) to address structural conditions and power dynamics,
- Pragmatism as a philosophical orientation emphasizing context-sensitive, functional, and action-oriented knowledge production, aligning with ACT's epistemological foundations
- Social work theories such as Reflexive Professionalism, Empowerment, and Lebensweltorientierung to integrate professional ethics and practice orientations.

I aim to develop an interdisciplinary framework that enables a critical, context-sensitive adaptation of ACT principles, expanding the scope from individual resilience to transformative social practice.

7. Methodological Approach (Method, Sample)

The study will probably follow a mixed-methods design with three components:

1. Theoretical analysis: systematic literature review and conceptual development integrating ACT, sociocritical theories, and social work frameworks.
2. Empirical study:
 - Quantitative pre/post assessments in organizations implementing ACT-based interventions,
 - Qualitative interviews and focus groups with social workers and clients to explore experiences and perceived changes.
3. Practice transfer: co-creation workshops with practitioners to develop low-threshold tools (e.g., training modules, digital resources).

The sample will include social work professionals and clients in community-based settings, ensuring diversity in age, gender, and social background.

8. First Results

A preliminary literature analysis confirms:

- Psychological flexibility correlates with mental health, well-being, and adaptive coping in various contexts.
- There is no existing adaptation of ACT for social work practice in Switzerland.
- Practitioners express a need for value-based, reflective frameworks supporting professional agency under conditions of uncertainty.

These findings underscore the novelty and relevance of the proposed research.

9. Time Schedule

Year 1: Theoretical framework, literature review, development of research design.

Year 2: Data collection (quantitative + qualitative) and initial analysis.

Years 3 & 4: Integration of findings, development of practice-oriented tools, dissertation writing.

Open science principles will ensure continuous dissemination of intermediate results via workshops and online platforms.

10. Comments / Other Information / Collaboration

The project welcomes interdisciplinary collaboration with PROWEL partners in psychology, education, and social sciences. Potential synergies include:

- Comparative studies on well-being and resilience,
 - Methodological exchanges on mixed-methods designs,
 - Co-development of training concepts for professionals.
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11. Relevant References

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