

Professionals Who Make The Most Difficult Decisions and Empathy: The Example of Tolstoy's "Death of Ivan Ilyich"

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Abstract

Some professionals make radical decisions that could change the lives of others. These professionals are required to work according to the procedures required by their job. It is crucial that they also demonstrate empathy while doing so. Empathy has held a significant place in organizational and social life since the dawn of humanity. Classic novels, as fictionalized versions of real life, are tools that present the important dynamics of human life within a pattern of events. This study examines the concept of empathy within the framework of Lev Tolstoy's novel The Death of Ivan Ilyich. Data obtained through document analysis was evaluated through descriptive and thematic analysis. The themes and coding revealed that Ivan Ilyich only began to empathize after he contracted a terminal illness. An empathic awakening began as soon as he began his illness. This awakening was attributable to the fact that the people around him, including his family and colleagues, did not alter their routines. Almost none of them showed concern for him. The difficult situation this situation places a dying person in is clearly evident. Ivan Ilyich was not only distressed by the suffering of his illness but also by the lack of empathy and understanding from those around him. He was even more distressed by the fact that, in his pre-illness life, especially in his professional life, he had never considered anyone beyond his professional behavior. The study's findings suggest that classic novels serve as a simulator for understanding the present. Furthermore, empathy requires intensive analysis and a systematic, in-depth thinking. Therefore, it becomes clear that it is a type of intelligence necessary for an individual's entire life and that must be developed.

Keywords: Empathy, Emotional Intelligence, Lev Nikolayevich Tolstoy, The Death of Ivan Ilyich

Introduction

A profession refers to a job with established rules, acquired through specific training, based on systematic knowledge and skills, designed to produce useful goods, provide services, and earn money in return (Turkish Language Association Dictionaries (TDK)). Many factors, including an individual's characteristics and abilities, play a role in career selection. The focus of this choice is the status and income generated by the job (Ensari and Alay, 2017: 413). Individuals are also defined by their chosen professions. In this respect, some professions have long served as model professions, such as medicine (Demir and Demir, 2010: 26) and judiciary (Akcan, 2016: 272).

A profession opens the way to utilizing individual talents, developing oneself, and fulfilling oneself. Therefore, using the capacities bestowed by nature and witnessing this development brings pleasure. Certain qualities are considered when choosing a career, such as the ability to think abstractly, write fluently, perceive shape relationships, perceive spatial relationships, mechanical aptitude, finger-hand dexterity, eye-hand cooperation, muscle coordination, color perception, creativity, and the ability to understand others (Kuzgun, 1994). Certain professionals are equipped with specific skills and have control over their own actions and their environment. The fundamental dynamics of these behaviors are attempted and articulated within the framework of social cognitive theory. Similarly, social learning theory plays a role in career decision-making (Yılmaz, 2020: 20). Therefore, some professions require critical decisions. Decisions are made regarding a person's life or health. In addition to professions such as medicine and judgeship, military service, piloting, and scientists can also be considered. For those pursuing such professions, understanding others is crucial. These jobs require more people skills than others, one of which is empathy. Empathy requires intense analytical skills and the ability to think in detail (Tatarlar and Cerit, 2016: 1).

The root of empathy is self-awareness. Not understanding what others are feeling is a significant deficiency and failure in emotional intelligence. This intelligence stems from the ability to cultivate emotional harmony and empathy, which are the foundations of care and compassion. This ability is needed in many different areas, and a lack of empathy is a significant indicator. The word empathy originates from the Greek word *empaheia*, meaning the ability to understand the subjective experience of others (Goleman, 2006: 137). One theory of empathy is Moral Development Theory, pioneered by Hoffman (2000). This theory explains empathy through five mechanisms: imitation, classical conditioning, direct association, instrumental association, and role-taking. In imitation, the observer obtains the

target's emotional state through imitation and provides feedback. In classical conditioning, cues to the emotional state are obtained internally and a prediction is made based on these. In direct association, the observer compares the target's emotional expression or state with their own experiences and interprets it. In instrumental association, the target's emotional experience is expressed in words, transformed into knowledge, and imitated. Role-taking, on the other hand, begins with observers imagining themselves in the target's shoes and is then transformed into active behavior. Imitation, classical conditioning, and direct association develop spontaneously. Instrumental association and role-taking, on the other hand, require more advanced cognitive abilities (Wondra and Ellsworth, 2015).

Neurologically, empathy has been found to be linked to the limbic system in the cerebral cortex. Thus, its biological basis was revealed by Leslie Brothers (Goleman, 2006: 137-145). The discovery of mirror neurons in the brain in the 2000s is significant in this regard. Located in the premotor cortex, mirror neurons have been a driving force in physiologically guiding contemporary empathy research. This crucial insight reveals that two distinctly different systems, the perceptual system and the motor system, can be interconnected (Wondra and Ellsworth, 2015: 413). This can be interpreted as the physiological projection of today's Bluetooth applications.

This ability to experience and recognize another's emotional experiences has been categorized as instinctive, intellectual, cognitive, and affective over the past 200 centuries. Understanding how emotions arise is particularly important from an emotional perspective. The cognitive aspect, on the other hand, is characterized by perceiving others' emotions as if they were one's own (Davis, 1980: 3). Thus, according to Rogers (1980), empathy is the process of accurately perceiving a person's feelings and thoughts related to a specific situation, sensing their feelings, and communicating this to that person. Close connections have been established between the ability to empathize and the concepts of leadership, helpfulness, and interpersonal relationships (Dökmen, 1987: 184-191).

Understanding others, building trust, and building relationships are key elements of scientific and professional life. The ability to listen to and understand others is essential for this. This fosters a sense of trust. Establishing trust doesn't mean agreeing with the person you're meeting. Furthermore, listening carefully to each other and trying to understand how others feel and what they want to achieve are crucial for developing these skills (Ioannidou and Konstantikaki, 2008: 120). When considering the concept of empathy in terms of

professions, some professions require a high level of skill in effective communication, understanding people's needs, and empathizing (Tatarlar and Cerit, 2016: 3).

The theoretical framework for empathy demonstrates that empathy is a sign of intelligence. It requires intensive analysis and a systematic approach to in-depth thinking. It is anticipated that individuals who have not developed empathy in their professional work experience both the problems created by these problems and the distress of not understanding those they have previously encountered in their professional lives with whom they have been unable to empathize. In this context, we will explore how professionals, particularly those in professions that make decisions about others, such as their health, survival, or freedom, demonstrate empathy. What dynamics influence whether this is the case or not? Furthermore, classic novels are simulations of real life, providing guidance by depicting the entire network of relationships in real life from ages past. Based on this, we attempt to demonstrate the importance of empathy through the experiences of Ivan Ilyich, a judge who later falls ill and is forced to await death.

Method

This study investigates the impact of professional roles and social relationships on empathy capacity. In this context, this is a qualitative study that examines the construction of concepts in classic novels within a literary narrative framework. Data were obtained through document analysis. The sample was Tolstoy's novel *The Death of Ivan Ilyich*. The study was structured within the framework of Yin (2018)'s qualitative case study principles and Braun and Clarke's (2006) thematic analysis method. Within this framework, the reasons and consequences of the lack of empathy are revealed through discourses within the novel. These discourses and their relationships with other characters are evaluated through descriptive analysis and thematic content analysis. Using the obtained data, themes and codes are created using the novel's textual content and event patterns. These codes are interpreted by providing appropriate exemplary quotations and establishing theoretical connections. Validity assesses the consistency of the selected quotations with the theoretical framework regarding empathy capacity and professional/social roles. Reliability is achieved by structuring the coding process in a transparent manner and ensuring interpretative consistency (Braun and Clarke, 2021).

Findings

This section contains themes, codes, and sample quotations. The concepts expressed through codes are elements of a lack of empathy. In particular, the inability to understand another person's emotions and the extent to which their circumstances affect them is considered an indicator of a lack of empathy. The protagonist, Ivan Ilyich, demonstrates his understanding of others during his routine and healthy work and social life, as well as the realities and opinions he perceives during his illness, incapacity, and debilitated periods. The novel's novel, *The Death of Ivan Ilyich*, was written by Lev Nikolayevich Tolstoy in 1886 and translated into Turkish by Mazlum Beyhan in 1948 (Tolstoy, 1886). The themes and codes within the novel are presented below with sample quotations.

Theme 1. Lack of empathy

Codes: Objectification, contempt, indifference to other lives, egocentrism, insensitivity, stereotyped discourse.

“While this death led to the survivors' calculations of a possible promotion in the civil service and a change of location, it also created a joy stemming from the feeling of 'it wasn't me, it was him/her', as is almost always the case when the deceased was a close friend” (p.3).

The thought, "I'm not dead, he/she's dead," ran through the minds of everyone left behind. Another thing that made Ivan Ilyich's circle of close acquaintances, called his friends, think was the tedious duties they had to perform out of politeness, such as attending funerals and offering condolences to his friend's widow" (p. 3).

"To writhe in agony day and night for three days, and then death... This could happen to me at any moment..." he thought with horror. But then, without even understanding how, he was aided by the familiar, ordinary thought that all this was happening not to him, but to Ivan Ilyich, that such things could never happen to him, could never happen to him... that such thoughts were nothing but torture to him, and that Schwartz's expression was a clear proof of this... Reassured by these thoughts, Pyotr Ivanovich began to ask detailed questions about Ivan Ilyich's death with great interest: as if death were a phenomenon specific to Ivan Ilyich, something he alone would experience, as if it did not concern him at all (p. 9).

Ivan Ilyich saw that he was slowly dying and was devastated. However, he could not get used to it, nor did he understand this truth. The syllogistic example in Kiesewetter's Logic, "Gaius is human, humans are mortal, therefore Gaius is mortal too," had always seemed true to him throughout his life, but always in the context of Gaius; without any connection to

himself. Yes, Gaius was human, and therefore this proposition was completely true for him; but Ivan Ilyich was not Gaius, nor was he an ordinary human; he had always been a special being, different from everyone else. Let Gaius preside over a trial like his own (pp. 49-50).

His friends and subordinates watched with astonishment and anger as he, a competent and successful judge, confused the case with incompetence unbecoming of him. He tried to shake himself up and pull himself together, concluded the hearing more or less, and headed home, filled with the heavy sorrow of realizing that the court's affairs had failed to keep him away from what he had once wanted to distance himself from, and to rid him of it. (p. 51)

Theme 2. Emotional distance and bureaucratic approach

Codes: Emotional blindness, work focus, inability to understand people.

“As an interrogator Judge, Ivan Ilyich could bring before him anyone without privilege, including the most important and proud people; as soon as he wrote a certain sentence or two on a piece of paper with a certain title, the most indifferent people had to come before him as defendants or witnesses and answer the questions he asked, standing before him until he gave permission” (p.17).

“Even the most complex case was on paper with only its main lines, and in this scheme, in which there was not even the slightest trace of his personal thoughts, nothing was included except the issues that had to be included there, with all official and formal requirements fulfilled” (p.17).

“For all the business of his official life to flow smoothly, he had to avoid mixing it with his everyday affairs. There should be no contact outside of official contact. For example, suppose someone came to him wanting to learn something. If Ivan Ilyich wasn't directly involved in the matter, he shouldn't have any contact with him. But if the man had an official letter on letterhead and he had to present it to him as a member of the court, Ivan Ilyich would do his best, showing the other person the friendliness and tact required in such circumstances. When the business relationship ended, all other relationships ended as well. His ability to separate the business and the personal aspects of his life, through his long work experience and his special talent in this field, had reached such a high level that sometimes, like a virtuoso, he would mix them up just for fun “(p. 29).

“Ivan Ilyich went to the famous doctor. Everything was exactly as he expected, as it always was: the waiting, the affected seriousness that Ivan Ilyich knew so well from his court appearances, the air of a pompous doctor... the tapping... the listening... all of it was obvious

in advance and, in any case, unnecessary questions asked for unnecessary answers... the air of a great man who doesn't care a thing about himself: It doesn't matter to us who the person is knocking on our door; we do what our job requires, we act the same way no matter who it is, our practice doesn't change according to the person! Everything was just as it was in court. The famous doctor treated the defendants the same way he treated them in court.” (p. 35)

“The doctor looked at him sternly over his glasses as if to say, ‘ If you ask questions that go beyond the scope of your judgment here, I will have to ask you to be removed from the courtroom. ’” (P. 36).

Theme 3. Lack of empathy in close relationships

Codes: Familial insensitivity, indifference, rational logic, lack of criticism of mistakes.

"After deciding that her husband was bad-tempered, unbearable, and that he was making her life miserable, she began to feel sorry for herself. Sometimes she wished he were dead, but she didn't want that to happen because her wages would be cut. The realization that even Ivan Ilyich's death wouldn't save her increased her resentment towards her husband and tormented her" (p. 34).

"The conclusion Ivan Ilyich drew from the doctor's summary of the verdict was this: her condition was bad, and her condition was of no concern to the doctor or anyone else, because she was the one who was bad. This touched Ivan Ilyich deeply; she felt terrible pity for herself, and her heart was filled with anger at the doctor for her indifference and indifference in such an important matter" (p. 35).

"When he came home, he told his wife what had happened. While his wife was listening, in the middle of the story, his daughter entered with her hat on: obviously, the mother and daughter were getting ready to go somewhere. The daughter did not want to listen to this boring story and reluctantly sat down for a while, but she could not stand it and got up. His wife did not have the patience to listen to him to the end" (p. 36).

“No matter how hard they tried to hide it, Ivan Ilyich was aware that they saw him as a hindrance” (p.39).

"None of them know, and they don't want to know, and they don't even feel sorry. Hit them, let them play and dance! (he listened to the distant melodies and cheerful voices coming from behind the door.) They don't care, yet they too will die. How stupid. I will die first, they later, but the same thing will happen to them. Yet they are laughing and having fun" (p.46).

Theme 4. Awareness that comes with the disease

Codes: Empathic awakening, regret, criticism, blame, surrender.

"It seemed to Ivan Ilyich that they were treating him strangely in court as well. They looked at him as if his place would soon be vacated. His friends were sweetly mocking his fears and misgivings, as if it were something to be mocked for that he was afflicted with a terrible misfortune that was constantly creating new troubles for him and irresistibly dragging him towards unknown places (p. 40).

"It was not possible to say how he had come to this situation, since everything had developed gradually and without being noticed, but in the third month of his illness, his wife, daughter, son, servants, all his acquaintances, doctors, and most importantly himself, knew that the only question was when he would leave them and stop making life miserable for his relatives with his presence, and thus be relieved of their own suffering" (p. 53).

"Other people's health, strength, vigor and vitality would have offended Ivan Ilyich and caused her to resentment" (p.56).

"He knew that no matter what was done, it would not be wonderful at all, and on the contrary, everything that was done in this way would only cause his greater pain and bring his death closer" (p.56).

"One of the things that pained Ivan Ilyich was that no one pitied him the way he wanted. He wanted them to kiss him, caress him, and shed tears at his bedside, just as they caressed and comforted children. As a grown man of the court with a silvery beard beating on his chest, he knew such a thing was impossible for him, but he still wanted it (p. 58).

"And Ivan Ilyich began to pick out in his mind the best moments of a good life. But—oddly enough—none of the moments he had once considered so beautiful no longer seemed so. Except for his earliest childhood memories. The moment what would become the Ivan Ilyich of today began, everything that had once made him so happy, everything he had once considered beautiful, vanished like dust, turned into nothingness, and often even became banal. The further he left his childhood behind and approached the present day, the more his joys became worthless and dubious. You could say it started in law school. That soulless work, the greed for money—it was all the same for a year, ten, twenty. A growing soullessness! 'Running downhill while thinking I was climbing the hill. That's exactly how it was. The higher I rose in people's eyes, the more life itself was receding from under me, slipping away from under my feet. So, be prepared to die!" (p. 71)

“So what is it that you want? Life... to live?... What kind of life? A life like the one in court when the bailiff shouts, ‘The judge is coming!’ He repeated to himself several times, ‘The judge is coming... The judge is coming...’, then he shouted angrily: ‘Here it is, judge! But what is my fault? Why all this?’ He stopped crying, turned his face to the back of the court, and kept searching for the answer to the same question: What is all this for? What is this terror for?” (p. 72).

The reason for the spiritual pain that tormented Ivan Ilyich was a thought that suddenly occurred to him that night as he looked at Gerasim's sleeping face, with its prominent cheekbones, its pure and innocent face, knowing no evil: "What if I haven't lived as I should have lived? What if the life I have consciously chosen is wrong?" His job, his family, all the relationships he had with his official and private circles, the entire life he had built and led, could all be wrong. "If that's the case," he thought to himself, "I leave life knowing that I have squandered everything that was given to me; I also know that it is impossible to correct this situation"... "(p. 78).

"He pictured his servant in the morning, then his wife, then his daughter, then his doctor; every movement, every word they uttered confirmed the terrible truth he had come to the night before. He saw himself and his experiences in them; he realized that everything was a great, terrible lie that encompassed both life and death" (p. 79).

Discussion

The other individuals mentioned in the work, especially the novel's character Ivan Ilyich, are unable to understand the situation that befalls another. Such understanding seems to have no place in their own routines. They are distant from and avoid the idea that the emotions and situations that any other person might experience in life could happen to them. It is clear that they lack the self-awareness of what others might feel (Goleman, 2006, 137).

Approaching every task with bureaucratic and emotional distance actually keeps people from taking responsibility. However, empathy is used in every aspect of daily life. Workers in professions that require intense human interaction, in particular, frequently encounter situations requiring empathy (Dökmen, 1987: 189). When performing these professions, the professionalism required by the profession must be maintained. A member of the judiciary must apply the law uniformly. Furthermore, they must listen to their conscience, hold themselves accountable, view those they encounter as their mother, father, sibling, or child, and avoid isolation from society (Akcan, 2016: 277). This can also be applied to

another professional group, namely physicians. According to Gezergün et al. (2006: 141), patients often lack the courage to ask questions or talk about their illnesses with doctors and often fail to understand what is being said to them (Kutlu et al., 2010: 141). Every encounter a patient has with a nurse or doctor is an opportunity to receive comforting information, soothe, and find solace. When mistreated, they become hopeless. Mistreatment means neglect or indifference (Goleman, 2006: 221).

Not everyone is willing to empathize in close relationships. According to Freud, humans are selfish and act out of primitive impulses. According to him, a person never exhibits empathic behavior at any point in their lives because their behavior is rational. When helping someone, they act based on the perceived gain or loss. However, empathic values can be learned during personality development (Bar-Tal, 1986; Atak, 2024: 292). When empathy is expressed as altruism, it means self-sacrifice and voluntary behavior. It is helping someone with a problem. According to Tanbe and Shanker (2014), when it is used in the sense of conscientiousness, it means being selfless even when a behavior is not being monitored or controlled (Urgan and Erdoğan, 2021: 551-552). Therefore, understanding another person is also based on self-awareness. People who can understand their own emotions can only understand others. Those who have no idea how they feel are completely incapable of understanding what those around them are feeling. Not being able to register what others are feeling is a major shortcoming. The roots of care and compassion stem from emotional harmony and empathy (Goleman, 2006: 137).

How empathy occurs may address the problem in the fourth theme. One way to understand another is to experience that situation beforehand. Empathy theorists suggest that empathy occurs automatically but requires certain minimum conditions. People empathize more with in-group members with whom they have close relationships than with out-group members because they live interdependent lives with this in-group. This mechanism is mediated by experiences other than imitation or mirror neurons. If the observer lacks experience, these processes fail, and empathy cannot be established. Here, if the observer lacks experience, they remain emotionless. In another approach, Adam Smith (1759/2002), in his theory of moral sentiments, proposed that empathic feelings are related to how the situation of others is interpreted. He suggested that this is related to the experience of suffering and other experiences experienced (Wondra and Ellsworth, 2015: 416).

One of the most important factors in achieving success, especially in business, is related to being a mirror and a role model. According to the teachings of Rumi, an individual's

personality development occurs through self-transformation. Therefore, to empathize, an individual must first know and understand themselves. This is followed by the process of understanding their environment and other people (Atak, 2024: 293). Therefore, it is crucial for a person to have certain experiences to know and understand themselves and subsequently understand others. These processes also parallel the codes of the last theme.

Conclusion

"Who taught you all this, Doctor?"

The answer came instantly.

"Suffering."

-Albert Camus, *The Plague* (Goleman, 2006, 221)

Historical and literary anecdotes guide understanding the complex events of the day. Novels are also simulations of real life. Themes are expressed through an artistic narrative. The changing conditions of the day do not occur suddenly but emerge as a result of a process. When literary works written years ago are examined, it is seen that many concepts related to the individual are addressed within the working conditions of the relevant period (Urgan, 2025: 10). These concepts have existed throughout human existence. In this study, the concept of empathy is examined through the writings of Lev Nikolayevich Tolstoy, with its slices of organizational and social life set approximately one hundred and forty years ago, within the framework of his novel *The Death of Ivan Ilyich*.

The main character, Ivan Ilyich, received a good education and fulfilled every step required by his time to achieve a career, becoming a judge. He achieved a satisfactory standard of living thanks to his profession. However, his circumstances changed with his illness. His illness was incurable, and his general condition deteriorated rapidly. During this period, he faced a terminal illness, but received no genuine support from his family or colleagues. No one understood him or his suffering. In fact, they did not alter their routines in any way. This indifference confronted him with the reality that he himself lacked empathy, especially in his professional life. In fact, he adopted a definite stance, particularly in his impersonal and bureaucratic behavior. This confrontation with his lack of capacity and inadequacy further exacerbated the suffering he was already experiencing due to his illness.

The empathy that can only be achieved when experienced independently is presented through themes and coding within the framework of the event patterns summarized above.

The discussion section also explains the themes and coding revealed with their theoretical foundations. When the results of all these patterns are summarized in key elements, the first main conclusion is that a certain level of empathy is necessary in both organizational and social life. When doctors view their patients as cases, or when lawyers or other professional groups view them merely as files and objectify them, this prevents empathy. As seen in the study, when experienced independently, understanding often takes time and disrupts peace. Another important conclusion is that professions require a certain level of intelligence and the ability to manage relationships. However, within this intelligence, the ability to empathize is crucial, as it can only be achieved through intensive systematic analysis and in-depth thought. Therefore, the ability to empathize is essential for every profession and should be developed.

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