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Conceptualizations of Love in Social Work Practice: A Naturalistic Inquiry

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Background

- An abbreviated literature review yielded five research studies on love in social work.
- Commonly cited authors outside of social work included Fromm (1956), Freire (1970), Peck (1978), and hooks (2001).
- In her study with critical social workers, Butot (2004) identified a "principled critical practice" that spanned three primary concepts: "love as spirituality, love as a mode of being in intersubjective relationship, and love as critical practice" (p. 58).
- Taken together, Godden's participatory co-inquiries among community workers (2016, 2018, 2021) exemplified an applied love ethic in practice. Godden (2017) outlined a love ethic that is active, engaged, critical, and emancipatory.
- Gates et al. (2021) presented love as a mode of social work pedagogy. The authors articulated the responsiveness, mutuality, and reciprocity of loving practice among faculty and students during times of crisis.

Research Question and Objectives

How do licensed clinical social workers (LCSWs) conceptualize love in practice?

- Nurture concepts of love in social work practice.
- Identify the manner and/or ways in which participants come to know love in practice.
- Learn concepts of love that participants know in their practices.

Methodology and Methods

Naturalistic inquiry operates across five axioms: (1) "realities are multiple, constructed, and holistic"; (2) "knower and known are interactive, inseparable"; (3) "only time- and context-bound working hypotheses (idiographic statements) are possible"; (4) "All entities are in a state of mutual simultaneous shaping, so that it is impossible to distinguish causes from effects"; (5) "inquiry is value-bound" (Lincoln & Guba, 1985, p. 37).

- Recruitment**
 - Blended convenience and purposive sampling
- Data gathering**
 - 30-minute semi-structured responsive interview
 - 1-hour dialogical interview
 - 5-minute prompted reflection
- Data analysis and interpretation**
 - In vivo coding
 - Abbreviated pattern coding
 - Theming

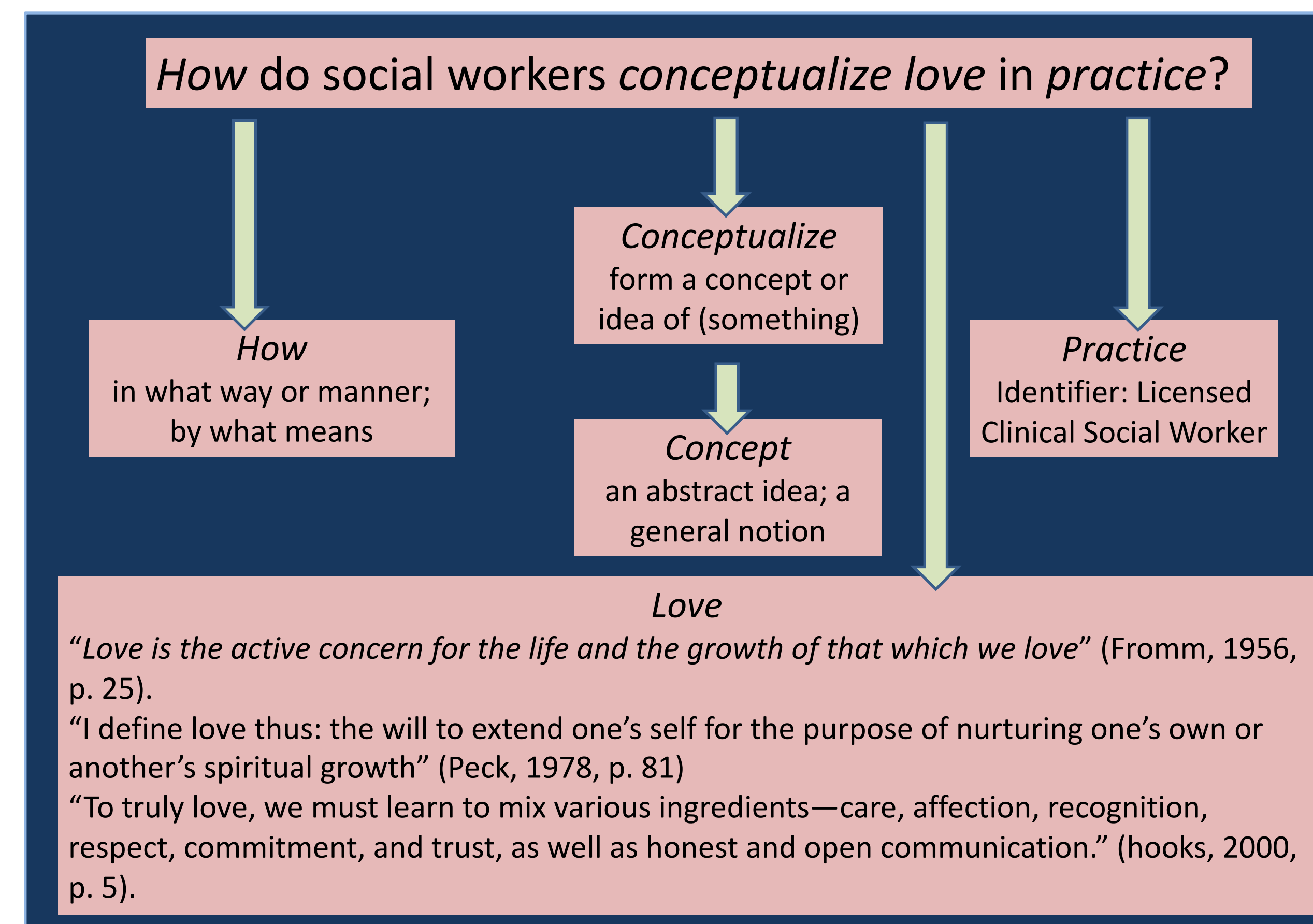


Figure 1. Research question operationalized

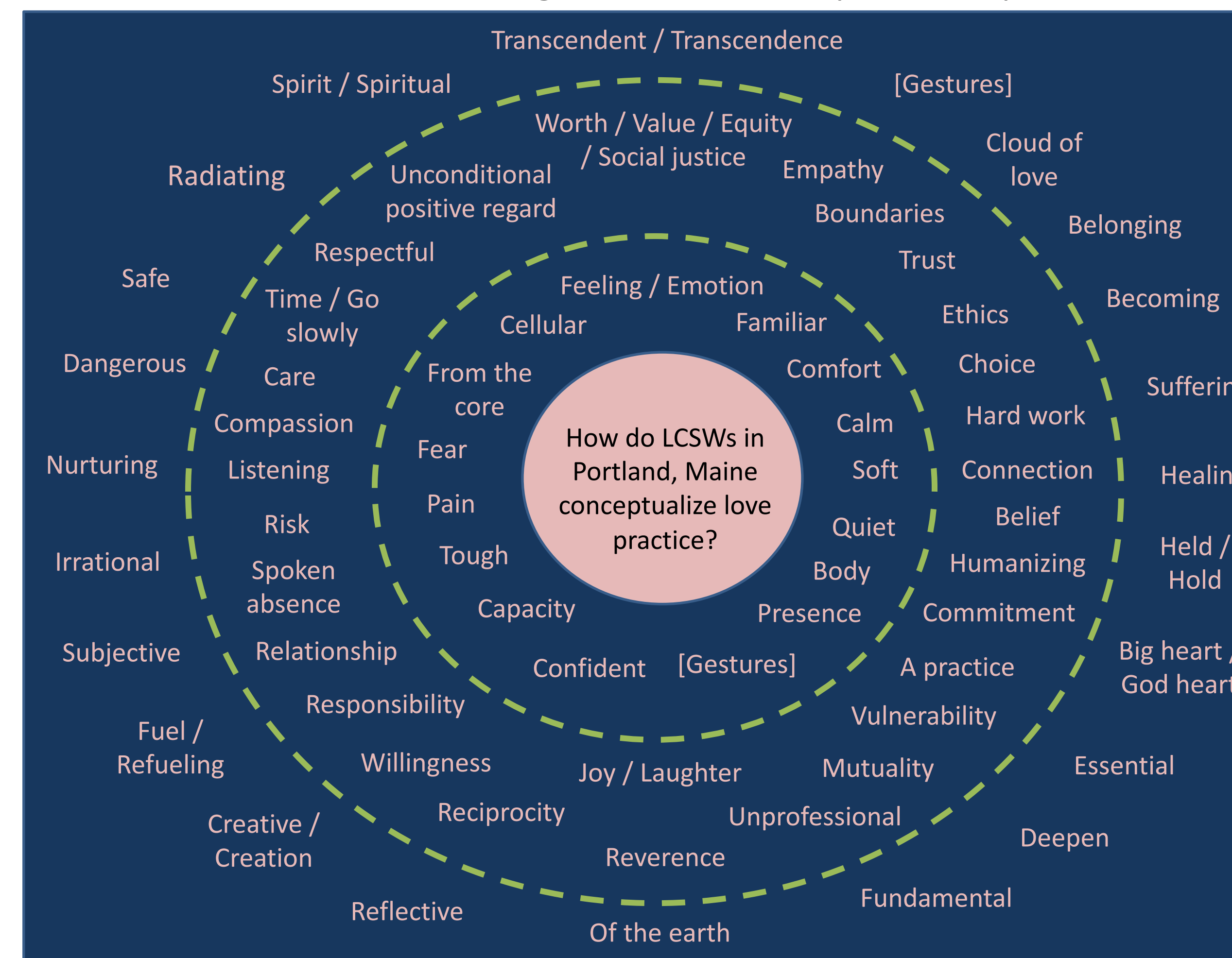


Figure 2. In Vivo codes for concepts of love in practice

"I think [love is] just that familiarity that I don't actually remember developing. I don't have lived memory. I don't have memory of the early days, but once I do have memory of it, it was already really true. **It was already very known and familiar to me, so I think I know love when it feels familiar.**" - Casey

"It's having an understanding about something that's outside yourself, and **I think that's what love is. Yeah—it's transcendence.**" - Michael

"Love in social work practice is already happening whether we call it that or not. . . I am extending myself for the purpose of **nurturing** someone else's growth, but I'm getting compensated with money. It's weird. **That is there and love is there as well.** It's a very strange - I don't know. **There's a lot of feelings about that that I haven't fully metabolized.**" - Sonya

"I wrote, "For me it's complicated, but [love] has the potential to really **deepen** the work for both the client and the clinician." So, for me, it's really about being really—open is not the right word, but to be—present with the idea that **the work is deepened** [. . .] **it's about deepening; deepening in a way that's really respectful and quiet and healing.**" - Jane

"[. . .] when I think about **love and compassion**, and I think about social work and the **ethics of social work**, and, really, **the foundation of social work, I think they go hand in hand.** And I really don't see how we can have conversations in social work, related to social work as a practice, and who we want to be as a social worker, without talking about love or having love as part of that dialogue." - Allegra

Figure 3. Participant interview and reflection excerpts

Findings

- Theme 1: Active concepts of love within social work practice**
 - Participants asserted that increased awareness of and attention to love deepens practice for clinicians and clients.
 - Participants identified love as motivation for entering and continuing their social work practices.
- Theme 2: Convergence and divergence among concepts of love**
 - In the absence of shared concepts of love in social work, participants suggested personal experiences influence their conceptualizations of love.
 - Participants demonstrated intrapersonal, interpersonal, and transpersonal conceptualizations of love.
- Theme 3: Barriers to conceptualizing love in social work practice**
 - Participants identified structural and cultural barriers within social work and outside of social work.
 - Participants suggested love can guide ethics, and they reported ethical dilemmas in their experience of love in practice because of the knowledge gap that exists in the absence of shared context.
- Theme 4: Expressed interest to learn how practitioners conceptualize love**
 - Participants suggested they would like to engage in group dialogue with other practitioners.

Discussion and Next Steps

Intrapersonal, interpersonal, and transpersonal concepts of love mirror Butot (2004), Godden (2016, 2018, 2021), and Gates' et al. (2021) findings. Though, participants varied in their understanding of love as critical practice, suggesting differences in concepts across social work disciplines or an underdevelopment of the concept in this study.

Given the unanimous acknowledgement of love in practice among participants, future studies would benefit from exploring other practitioners' hesitations, questions, and opposition.

Participant engagement in the project and expressed interest in collaborating with others on concepts of love in social work indicates group dialogues among practitioners as a path for future research.

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