Conceptual Analysis and Literature Review: Establishing Order and Clarity from the Ground Up
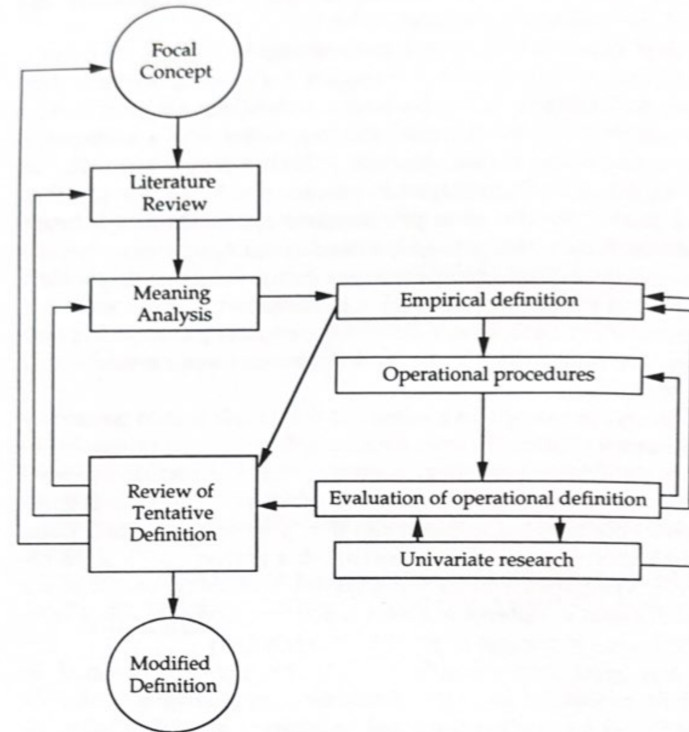
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Inference

- Social sciences always involve a certain degree of inferential thinking: social science constructs are abstract, and our interpretation of reality aims to go beyond mere appearances, beneath the surface of life, to comprehend "what is really going on" (e.g., Marx, Freud, etc.).

  - McLuhan (1964): television has restored Western though to a pattern of simultaneity after centuries of linear thinking patterns due to the dominance of print media.

  - Manifest (Empirical) –> *inference* –> Latent (Theoretical)

  - Data –> Meaning

Explication

- Explication is the intellectual process that links empirical research activities to broader theoretical propositions.

- The work heavily revolves around concepts, which establish the linkage between empirical observations and theories.
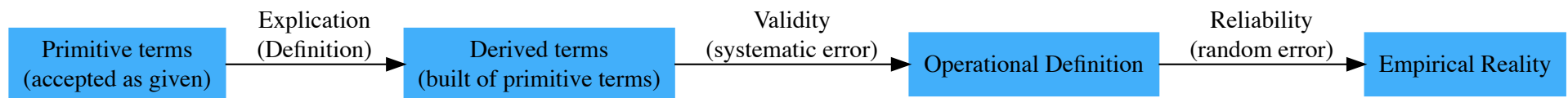
Explication

Concept Explication as an Iterative Process (Chaffee 1994, p. 6)

Theorizing consists of an interplay among ideas, evidence and inference.

Observations, as Charles Darwin remarked, «must be for or against some view if it is to be of any service»

Primitive and Derived Terms

Every conceptualization is based on primitive terms taken for granted, which can be used to define (explicate) more complex concepts (derived terms). The search then proceeds by seeking operational definitions that allow these complex concepts to be measured at the level of empirical reality (see Lazarsfeld).

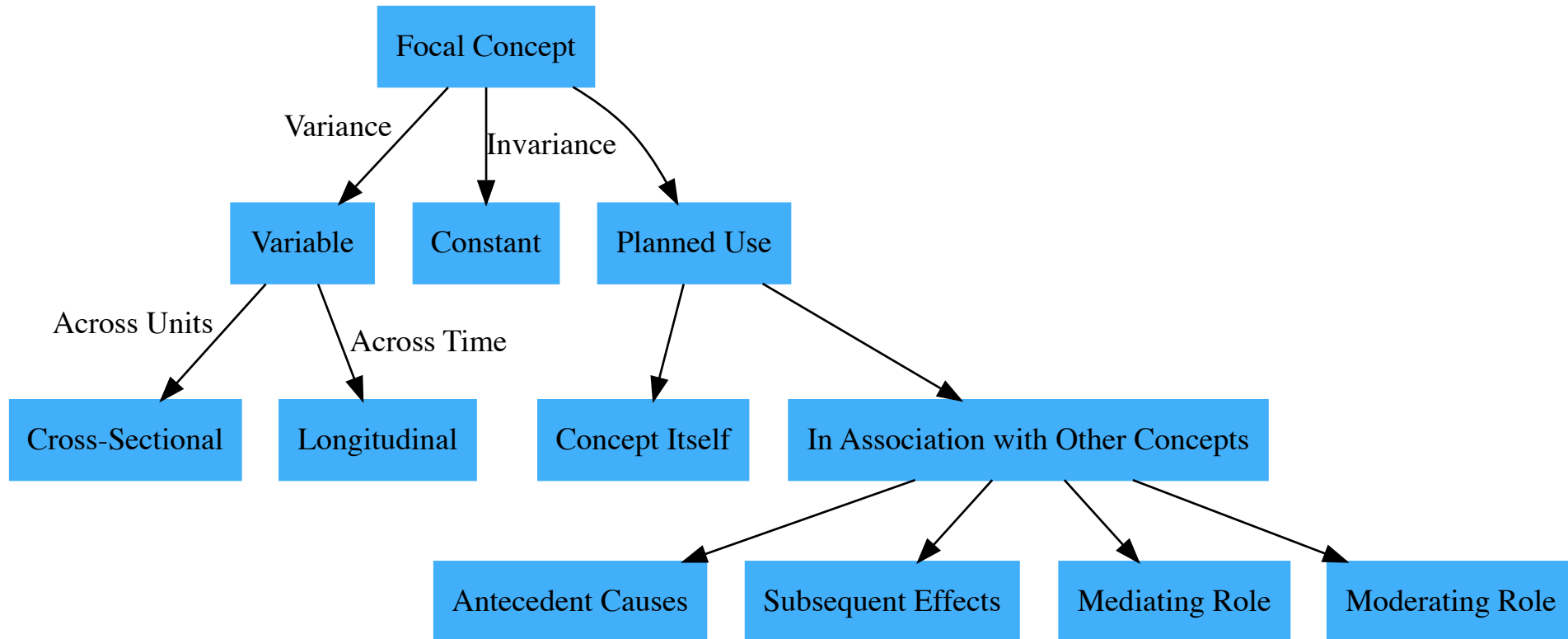| Primitive terms (accepted as given) | → Explication (Definition) → | Derived terms (built of primitive terms) | → Validity (systematic error) → | Operational Definition | → Reliability (random error) → | Empirical Reality |

Focal Concept

Most researcher begin by focusing in a preliminary way on one interesting condition and giving it a tentative name. This becomes a starting place, the "focal concept".

Focal concepts can assume various forms, either as constants or variables, and can be examined from multiple perspectives, such as individually or in conjunction with other concepts.
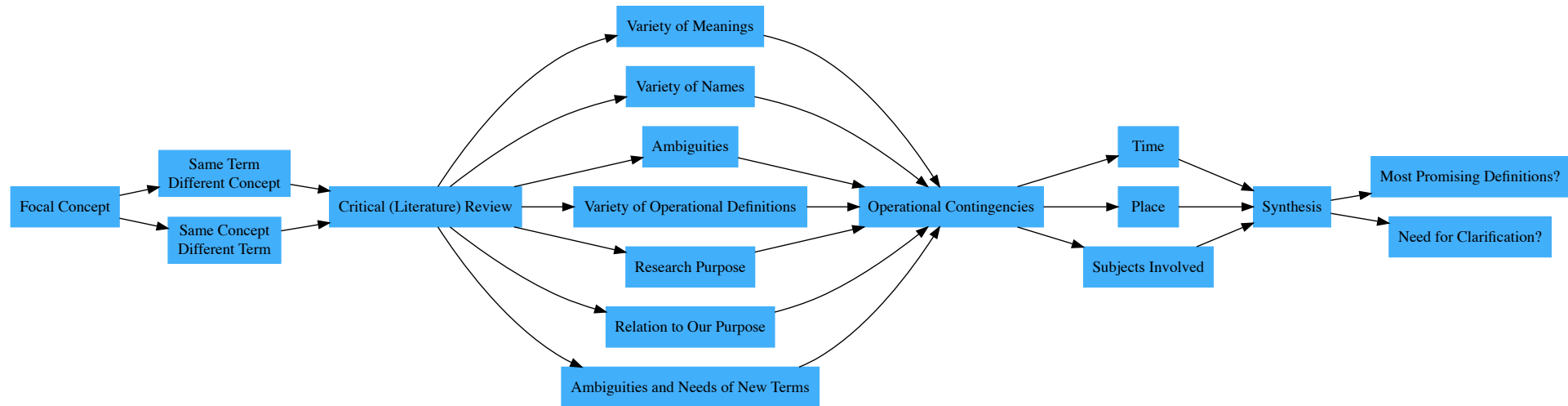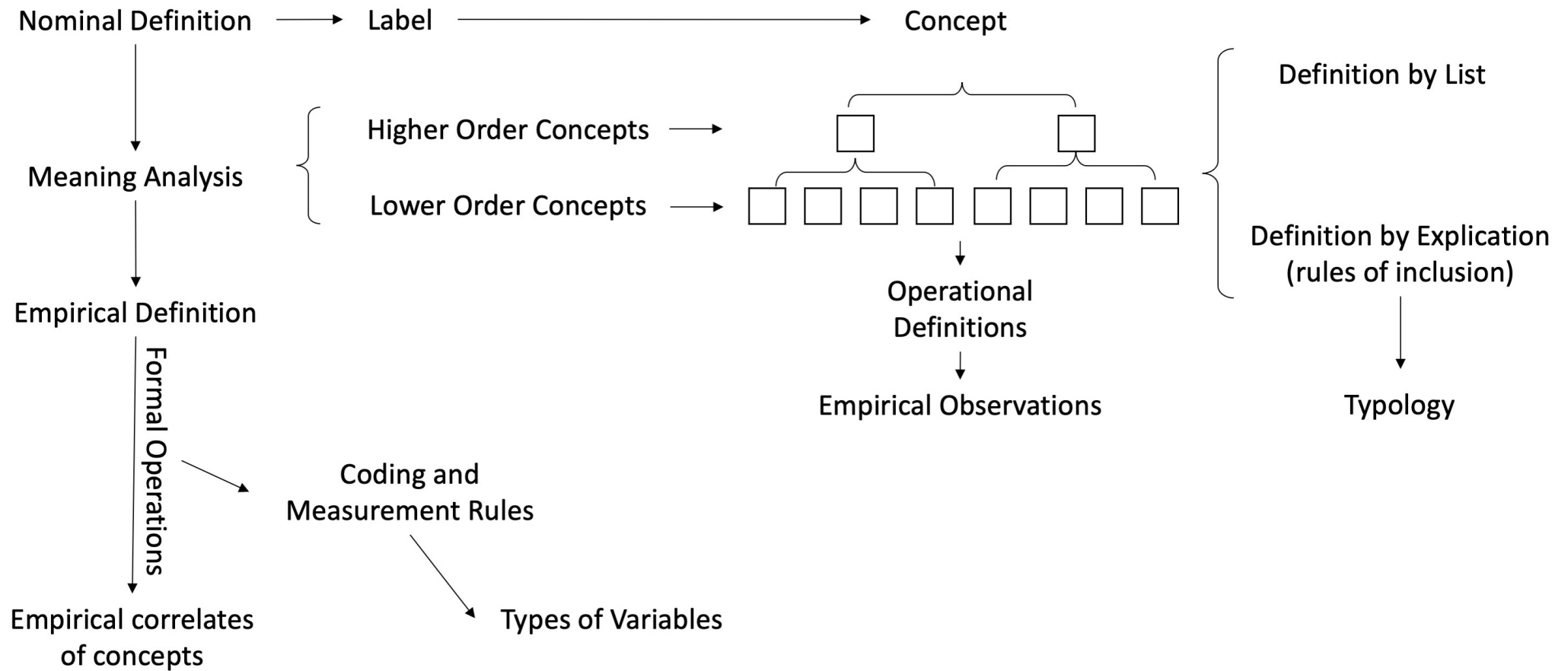
Focal Concept

Concept analysis using literature

The focal concept can be studied in light of the scientific literature to identify how it has been defined, from what perspectives it has been studied, and whether there are any ambiguities or conceptual gaps.

Concept analysis using literature

Levels of Definition

Nominal Definition → Label ──────────────→ Concept

Meaning Analysis {
Higher Order Concepts →
Lower Order Concepts →
}

Definition by List

Definition by Explication
(rules of inclusion)

Operational
Definitions

Empirical Observations

Typology

Empirical Definition

Formal Operations

Coding and
Measurement Rules

Empirical correlates
of concepts

Types of Variables

Review of Definitions

Criteria for reviewing definitions

Specificity → Specific definitions can be aggregated into general ones

Reification → Evidence of the existence of objects or attributes?

Invariance of Usage → Of concepts/terms within/between scholars

Possible Modified Definition