Understanding processes of residential group care for children and youth: Constructing a theoretical framework

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Abstract

This study of staffed group homes was undertaken in British Columbia and involved 10 group care programs that were visited over a 14 month period. The grounded theory method was selected given the goal of uncovering and articulating a theoretical framework for understanding the processes of group home life and work. The core theme that emerged was 'congruence in service of the children's best interests'.

Three basic psychosocial processes were discovered as core to group home functioning: 'developing a sense of normality' that speaks to the desired lived experience for group home residents; 'creating an artificial living environment' that pertains to the instrumental task of the home; and 'responding to pain and pain-based behaviour' that represents the central challenge for staff. These are interwoven processes in the life of a group home, and can be linked together as follows: *the purpose of a group home is to create an artificial living environment that offers the youth residents an opportunity to develop a sense of normality while responding to their pain and pain-based behaviour.*

In addition, five levels of group home operation and eleven interactional dynamics were found to be significant in understanding 'the struggle for congruence' within the homes.

Key words: residential group care, framework, child and youth care

Introduction

The purpose of this study was to construct a theoretical framework that would offer an understanding of what makes a well-functioning group home for young people. The method selected as most appropriate to this task was the grounded theory method as articulated in a variety of texts by the co-founders of the method, Barney Glaser and Anselm Strauss (Glaser, 1978, 1992; Glaser & Strauss, 1967; Strauss, 1987; Strauss & Corbin, 1990). The development of grounded theory was influenced by the emerging tradition of 'symbolic interactionism' (Blumer, 1969; Strauss & Corbin, 1990, p. 24). The central tenets of symbolic interactionism are perhaps most succinctly conveyed in Blumer's own words: 'Symbolic interactionism rests in the last analysis on three simple premises. The first premise is that human beings act toward things on the basis of the meanings that the things have for them. (...) The second premise is

that the meaning of such things is derived from, or arises out of, the social interaction that one has with one's fellows. The third premise is that these meanings are handled in, and modified through, an interpretative process used by the person in dealing with the things he encounters' (Blumer, 1969, p. 2).

The emphasis on personal meanings, social interactions and interpretative process characteristic of a symbolic interactionist perspective is also evident in the formulation of grounded theory (Glaser, 1992, p.16). The basic aim of grounded theory is to generate theory from social data derived inductively from research in social settings (Strauss & Corbin, 1990, p. 23). Critical to the accomplishment of this purpose is a systematic gathering of data through the active participation of the researcher in the phenomenon of interest. The process of immersion in the data is sometimes referred to by sociologists as 'indwelling', and most aptly so in relation to a study of group homes. Such data gathering techniques as participant observation, semi-structured interviews, informal conversations and document analysis are typical of a grounded theory inquiry (Chenitz & Swanson, 1986). Thus, this study was undertaken with a spirit of discovery in pursuit of a contemporary, grounded and theoretical understanding of group home life and work.

In other words, the research was focused primarily on *theorizing* group home life and group home work rather than on *describing* them.

The first step was to select a small number of staffed group homes with which to engage in order to formulate tentative theoretical hypotheses on the basis of which further sampling could be done. While the field work involved participant observation, interviews and review of documents, the purpose of these research activities was not to offer a description of group home life, but rather to develop a theoretical account of how group homes function. Thus, this study was rooted in certain conceptions of the relationship between theory and practice that will now be articulated.

The relationship of theory and practice

The influential social psychologist Kurt Lewin has been credited with the maxim: 'There is nothing so practical as a good theory' (Hunt, 1987, p. 4). This assumption provides a basic rationale for this study of group homes. However, this maxim seems to fly in the face of the 'common wisdom' in the child and youth care field. Many practitioners in the human services, including child and youth care workers, react almost viscerally in a negative way whenever theory (or anything that even sounds like theory) is presented or discussed. Those who react in such a way appear to hold a belief that the nature of child and youth care work is first and last hands-on, immediate, concrete, and practical. In contrast, theory is often thought to be by its very nature too abstract, irrelevant, generalised and therefore eminently unhelpful for such practical work with individuals in unique situations. Therefore, to maintain not only that theory can be relevant and useful, but that there is nothing *more* practical than a good theory may call for some explanation.

Lewin's provocative statement that 'there is nothing so practical as a good theory' recognizes and articulates the fact that our psychosocial reality as human beings has an inherent sense of order and purpose to it. Our everyday social world is constructed by purposive action based in the meanings that objects, processes and other persons have for us. The order within human interaction and human life is founded in the systematic organization and interrelation of such human realities as beliefs, values, ethics, thoughts, intentions, purposes, feelings, actions, behaviours and responses. Identifying and clarifying how these complex entities are systematically inter-connected in human experience is a task for theory building. Having an articulated theoretical framework (i.e. a systematic way of thinking) about these elements and dynamics of human action that is coherent, informative and grounded in actual experience is to possess a

powerful tool that can have very practical uses and implications for responding to concrete situations, and the individual and collective actions of others.

A second basic assumption underpinning the approach adopted for this study is the converse of the first, namely: 'There is nothing so theoretical as good practice' (Hunt, 1987, p. 30). What this assumption implies is that in order to develop a substantive theory, one must have access to instances of good practice. Thus, an effort was made to select primarily 'well-functioning' group homes, recognizing that where the complex work of residential care is being done well, important lessons can be learned about the key elements and processes of the work and the inter-relationships between them. Put another way, this approach holds that work that is consistently being done well is being done in accordance with good theoretical principles, *whether or not the practitioners are aware of them or can articulate them*. This phenomenon is explored in considerable detail by Polanyi (1958, pp. 49-65) in his explication of 'tacit knowing'. One everyday example illustrating this point and cited by Polanyi is that 'the principle by which the cyclist keeps his balance is not generally known' (Polanyi, 1958, p. 49). He goes on to outline the quite complex physical principles at play when someone achieves the balance necessary to ride a bike, but of which very few bike riders are even aware, except in a tacit manner.

Much of the good practice exhibited by child and youth care workers is the result of such tacit knowing. It is well known that skilled crafts people and athletes often cannot articulate precisely how they do what they do. It sometimes takes a less skilled but highly observant and experienced teacher or coach to be able to articulate with some precision the elements and dynamics of an expert activity or performance. 'Knowing *how*' and 'knowing *that*' are two different forms of knowledge (Benner, 1984, p. 2). This study is concerned with examining the 'know how' and tentative articulations of good practitioners, as well as the experiences and perceptions of young people and their parents, as a foundation (or the ground) for developing a theoretical framework in order to more fully understand and be able to account for the nature of residential life and residential child and youth care practice.

This difference in focus and purpose from more descriptive studies also leads to a major difference in the approach taken to the analysis of data. Rather than merely analyzing descriptive data for themes, the theorizing approach requires moving the analysis from a descriptive level to a theoretical level by 'raising the data' to categories, psychosocial processes, dynamics and propositions that then form the elements of a theoretical framework (Glaser, 1978, p. 84).

Central to the grounded theory method is the search for a main theme, often referred to in the research literature as a 'core category' or 'core variable', in relation to which most other aspects of the phenomenon of interest can be understood and explained. As Glaser states, 'the goal of grounded theory is to generate a theory that accounts for a pattern of behavior which is relevant and problematic for those involved' (1978, p. 93). Similarly, Strauss comments that 'the analyst constantly looks for the 'main theme,' for what appears to be the main concern of or problem for the people in the setting...' (1987, p. 35). Typically, many compelling themes and categories emerge over the course of a study; some almost immediately and some at various points along the way. A category's full integrating significance may not become evident until somewhat later in the research process after a great deal of analysis is done. Over a period of many months, a number of themes may vie in the researcher's mind for the ultimate status of 'core', and the analytic challenge is to sort through the pretenders to the title and to continue the search until a 'true' core is found. A key test for a core category is its ability to integrate the other major categories into a coherent and dense theoretical framework (Glaser, 1978, pp. 120-123).

In the grounded theory method, the researcher is searching the data on a continual and comparative basis in order to discover a core category, or core variable, that will serve to connect and place in perspective virtually all of the elements of the phenomenon being studied. Glaser (1992, p. 79) and Strauss (Strauss & Corbin, 1990, p. 121) both acknowledge that there can be several almost equally compelling candidates for selection as the core category. In fact, several theoretical formulations could be constructed, each beginning with a different variable as

central, and the other major elements being included as sub-categories of the one selected as core. What is important is that relevant data are gathered and that the categories that emerge within a research study indeed fit the data and help to explicate important problematics for participants engaged within these phenomena.

In this research study of group homes, several variables emerged as vitally important to understanding group home life and group home work. To some degree, these variables related to the various core problems encountered by participants at different levels and occupying different roles within the home. For a period of time, it appeared that no one variable could adequately encompass the other major variables and be deemed 'core', and that several variables would need to be given equal weight and emphasis. However, eventually it became apparent that one concept indeed did occupy an overarching position in relation to the others, and through its integrating power, it could make clear the linkages between all of the identified key categories. Thus, the three remaining categories, while central to an understanding of specific problems identified in group home life and work, became sub-categories, and their systematic inter-relations and relationship to the core category could then be readily defined. As stated by Glaser (1998, p. 190), 'the smaller the amount of concepts that account for the greatest variation in substantive behavior resolving the main concern is the goal.'

The basic elements of the theoretical framework resulting from the application of the grounded theory method in this study will be presented in summary form. (A more complete presentation of this research study and resulting framework can be found in Anglin, 2002.)

The core category or theme

Congruence

The category that was found to permeate the data across all of the homes and which encompassed the other major categories was *congruence in service of the children's best interests.* This core variable provides both a theoretical and practical touchstone for understanding and assessing virtually all other group home elements, their significance and their patterns of inter-relation within group home life and work.

A group home may demonstrate congruence or incongruence to varying degrees across its elements, processes and overall operation, and it may do so with a variety of *congruence orientations*. For example, there may be an orientation toward operational efficiency, to the preferences of the staff, or to reducing the budget. In actuality, there are always competing interests and intentions within an organisation as complex as a group home, and *full congruence* throughout an organisation can best be understood as an ideal state never actually achieved in reality.

In this study, each home was found to be engaged in what could be termed a *struggle for congruence*, and what was discovered to be at the centre of most of the struggles was the intention to serve 'the children's best interests.' Related and virtually synonymous terms such as 'child-centred' and 'child-oriented' were also used by research participants to express this notion, but *the children's best interests* wording seemed most precise and evocative of the ideal being sought in practice. At the same time, while most of the homes in this study gave at least some evidence of holding this goal as an ideal, some of the homes clearly were not being guided in their work by such a focus. Further, no home was fully consistent in making all decisions on this basis (nor could one expect them to be), given both the competing interests that form the reality of group home operation and the natural variability of staff in their understandings and abilities to achieve congruence in their actions.

Children's best interest

The concept of *children's best interests* has become a widely accepted notion in international instruments such as the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (United Nations, 1989) as well as in the child welfare and child protection literatures in North America and the United Kingdom (Alston, 1994; Goldstein, Freud and Solnit, 1973, 1979). It is interesting to note that even the first book on residential child and youth care published in North America by August Aichhorn (1935) includes the notion of acting 'in the child's interest' (p.194) as a touchstone for child and youth care practice. Therefore, it should not be too surprising that this longstanding and currently dominant concept was echoed in the words of some of the supervisors and managers of homes and agencies within the research sample.
Other major competing interests observed within the homes, and present in all homes to varying degrees and in various manifestations, included cost containment, worker preferences, and maintaining control. For example, in one home *maintaining control of the youth* was a dominant theme, whereas in another the focus was on a *manager's efforts to maintain control* of the staff and the mode of operation of the home. In both instances, these efforts to *maintain control* were seen to be competing in multiple ways with serving *the best interests* of the residents, resulting in a strong sense of incongruence within the culture of these two homes.

In summary, the core challenge for the group homes studied was to achieve *congruence in service of the children's best interests*. The specific processes and interactions found to be most significant in creating such congruence will now be outlined.

Basic psychosocial processes

In grounded theory, the terms *basic social process* (BSP), and *basic social psychological process* (BSPP) are used to designate those processes that have considerable explanatory power in relation to the phenomenon being studied (Chenitz & Swanson, 1986, p. 134; Glaser, 1978, p. 102). The more common and compact term 'psychosocial' will be used here in lieu of 'social psychological' to refer to processes that combine in an integral manner both individual and collective elements. The ongoing comparative analysis of the data generated in this study revealed three dominant and pervasive psychosocial processes related to the central problematic of the *struggle for congruence in service of the children's best interests*. While each process is subsidiary to the main theme, each could also be viewed as a core category in its own right in relation to a sub-problem within group home life and work.

Creating an extrafamilial living environment

The most general, or pervasive, psychosocial process identified pertains to the overall development and ongoing operation of a group home, namely *creating an extrafamilial living environment*. The notion of an extrafamilial living environment, or 'extrafamilial home,' captures a fundamental tension inherent in this form of setting and helps to clarify the group home's unique nature in juxtaposition to foster care and institutional care on the continuum of residential services. As its name implies, a group home strives to offer a home-like environment not attainable within an institutional setting while removing the intimacy and intensity of a family environment. Much of the ongoing confusion and disagreement concerning the need for group homes can be attributed to a lack of appreciation of the importance of the 'extrafamilial home' dimension. Group home managers and staff members themselves frequently do not grasp the significance of this defining aspect of group home life, and they often feel the need to proclaim the 'family-like' nature of their settings.

Responding to pain and pain-based behaviour

At the level of the carework staff, the primary challenge was found to be *responding to pain and pain-based behaviour*. While the residential child and youth care literature frequently mentions the 'troubled and troubling' nature of the youth in care (for example Hobbs, 1982), and acknowledges their traumatic backgrounds, there is a tendency to 'gloss over' the deep-seated and often long-standing pain carried by these youth. The term 'pain-based behaviour' has been coined to remind us that so-called 'acting-out' behaviour and internalising processes such as 'depression' are very frequently the result of a triggering of this internalised pain. Perhaps more than any other dimension of the carework task, the ongoing challenge of dealing with such primary pain without unnecessarily inflicting secondary pain experiences on the residents through punitive or controlling reactions can be seen to be the central problematic for the carework staff. One of the observed characteristics of a well-functioning home is a sensitivity to the need to respond effectively and sensitively to both the youth residents' behaviour, and the staff's own personal anxieties. At the same time, few managers, supervisors and staff in this study demonstrated an understanding of the underlying pain in the residents and within themselves. This intensive psychosocial process, and its frequent repression, makes acting in the best interests of the residents very difficult, and represents perhaps the greatest potential barrier to achieving a high level of congruence within the home in service of the children's best interests.

Developing a sense of normality

At the level of the residents, a third basic psychosocial process was identified, namely *developing a sense of normality*. This psychosocial process not only captures the central task, or goal, to be accomplished by the residents, it also serves to define a key element of what constitutes the resident *children's best interests*. There is an apparent paradox at the heart of this process that can be confusing and worrisome to critics of group home care. How can an 'abnormal' (or 'artificial') living environment such as a staffed group home foster the development of normality? Won't the residents simply become institutionalised in such an extrafamilial context? This study suggests that what a well-functioning group home can offer residents is *a sense of normality*, thus providing a bridging experience in terms of the residents' readiness to engage successfully in more normative environments.

As has already been emphasised, each of these three psychosocial processes is closely interrelated with the others, and in reality they exist co-terminously as three interwoven threads or interrelated facets of the overall struggle for congruence within a home. To illustrate this point, a significant factor in a resident's experience of developing a sense of normality will be the manner in which staff respond to his pain and pain-based behaviour in the course of creating and shaping the extrafamilial living environment. Further, these pervasive psychosocial processes are made up of many moment-by-moment interactions between individuals, and some of the most pervasive and pivotal of these interactional dynamics will be outlined next. These interactional dynamics provide an important means for understanding and assessing the degree of congruence throughout a group home organisation and its functioning.

Interactional dynamics

On the basis of a comparative analysis of the interpersonal interactions occurring within the homes as noted during the on-site visits and discussed in interviews, eleven dynamics emerged as most pervasive and influential. This category of *interactional dynamics* identifies the most significant modes of relation between persons within and connected to the group home. These

interactional dynamics can be understood as the key relational ingredients of group home life and work and as elements of the larger psychosocial processes already identified. Briefly stated, the dynamics include the following:

(a) listening and responding with respect;
(b) communicating a framework for understanding;
(c) building rapport and relationship;
(d) establishing structure, routine and expectations;
(e) inspiring commitment;
(f) offering emotional and developmental support;
(g) challenging thinking and action;
(h) sharing power and decision-making;
(i) respecting personal space and time;
(j) discovering and uncovering potential; and
(k) providing resources.

Each of these interactional dynamics can come together with various others in a single moment or episode, much in the same way as various ingredients combine in the preparation of different culinary preparations. The creation of a *residents' best interests* environment can be seen to be largely a matter of combining these interactional ingredients in a highly congruent manner, while sensitively addressing the three major and intertwined psychosocial processes of *creating the extrafamilial living environment, responding to pain and pain-based behaviour,* and *developing a sense of normality.*

Finally, one additional category was also found to be important in completing the framework for understanding group home functioning; namely the *levels of group home operation.*

Levels of group home operation

Organisations such as group homes are not simply assemblages of people, paper, procedures and premises. As the term 'organisation' suggests, these elements must be brought together in an organised fashion. As with most such settings, group homes consist of a hierarchy of operating levels, or domains, each with its defined set of roles and responsibilities. In this study, five such levels were clearly evident as reflected in participants' ongoing thinking and action within the homes.

1. Extra-agency level (contracting, funding, liaison, etc.);
2. Management level (administration, budgeting, resource allocation, personnel management, etc.);
3. Supervision level (overseeing careworkers, team development, programming, resident care, etc.);
4. Carework and Teamwork level (working individually and collectively with youth and family members, completing reports, linking with community agencies, etc.); and
5. Youth Resident and Family level (daily living, visiting, etc.).

The word 'levels' rather than 'domains' will be used to reflect more explicitly the hierarchical nature of these operational dimensions. The notion of a *flow of congruence* from the higher levels of the group care organization to the lower levels was also identified as an important aspect of the core category of *congruence in service of the children's best interests,* and how it comes to be realised (or not) in actual practice.

Summary

The core variable, or central theme, that permeates the research data in this study, and which is therefore central to the theoretical framework being articulated here, is *congruence in ser-*

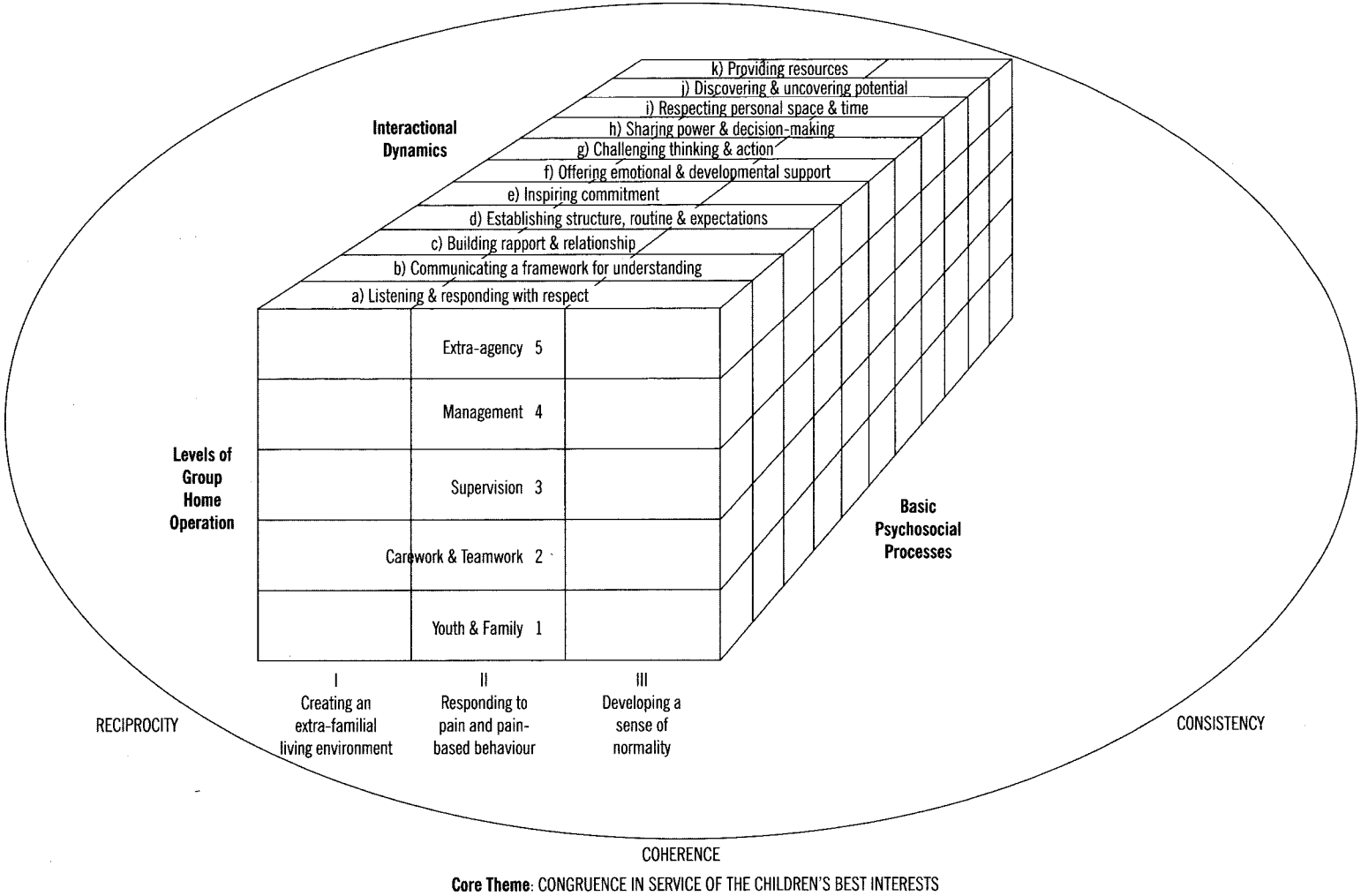

Figure 1
Framework Matrix for Understanding Group Home Life and Work

vice of the children's best interests. Three basic psychosocial processes have been identified as being importantly and systematically linked to the actualisation of this variable, namely *creating an extrafamilial living environment, responding to pain and pain-based behaviour,* and *developing a sense of normality.* Further, eleven *interactional dynamics* emerged from the comparative analysis as constituting these processes in the moments, episodes, and relationships of group home life and work, and all of these dynamics were evident within and across each of the five levels of home operation as experienced by the participants; namely the *extra-agency level, management level, supervision level, carework and teamwork level,* and *youth residents and families level.*

The degree to which a group home is functioning well or poorly can be examined by viewing these elements and their various juxtapositions through the lens of the central theme: *congruence in service of the resident children's best interests.* A home may be characterized by high levels of congruence, but may be primarily focused on the needs or preferences of the staff or the interests of the organization. Alternatively, staff in a home may have the intention of meeting the best interests of the residents but may encounter or create an insufficient degree of congruence throughout the organization to achieve this goal.

It is proposed that this theoretical framework can assist not only in determining the degree to which a group home is well-functioning or poorly functioning but also in identifying areas of specific strength and weakness. Thus, it offers a theoretical tool grounded in the realities of group home life and work to assist in enhancing practice, drafting sensitive policies, targeting standards, ensuring the relevance of education and training, focusing research, and guiding evaluation. Figure 1, *Framework Matrix for Understanding Group Home Life and Work,* graphically illustrates the theoretical elements of the theoretical model and suggests, with its rectangular cube and sub-cubes, encompassed within an oval design, the degree of their key linkages and inter-relations.

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