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APPLICATION OF GROUNDED THEORY TO PUBLIC POLICY: SOME THEORETICAL APPROACHES

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ABSTRACT

Purpose – The paper aims to explore the application of Grounded Theory (GT) in public policy research, demonstrating how this qualitative methodology can generate explanatory models and uncover hidden dynamics of governance and policymaking.

Methodology – The study employs a theoretical and comparative analysis of the historical development, epistemological diversity, and methodological innovations of GT. It synthesizes insights from classical, Straussian, constructivist, and situational approaches, highlighting their relevance for governance and policy contexts.

Originality / Value – The research contributes by positioning GT as a valuable framework for bridging academic inquiry with practical policymaking. It emphasizes the importance of GT in capturing lived experiences, addressing social justice issues, and constructing inclusive governance models, areas often overlooked in mainstream policy studies.

Findings – The results indicate that GT, through its inductive and flexible orientation, offers significant potential for policy research. It allows the development of context-sensitive theories that reveal institutional practices, discursive patterns, and power relations. The paper concludes that GT not only advances theory-building but also provides tools for responsive and participatory governance.

Keywords – Grounded theory; Public policy; Policy research; Governance studies; Social justice; Qualitative methodology

INTRODUCTION

Grounded Theory Methodology (GTM) is gaining increasing prominence in public policy research, particularly given the field's inherent complexity and interdisciplinary demands. According to Morse et al. [1], grounded theory is now the most frequently used qualitative research method in the social sciences transnationally. Its widespread adoption across disciplines (such as psychology, sociology, medicine, social work, management, marketing and education) is a confirmation of its methodological flexibility and strength to advance the experiences of research participants while constructing context-specific explanations.

Grounded Theory (GT) has also demonstrated its ability to adapt to contemporary research challenges, such as social justice inquiries [2] and interdisciplinary frameworks involving discursive and visual data [3]. While GT has historically occupied a peripheral position in public policy studies, it now offers a distinctive and valuable approach for constructing explanatory models, particularly in understudied or emergent policy areas.

By definition, GT is a qualitative research methodology grounded in the inductive analysis of data, aiming to formulate theories directly from systematically gathered and meticulously examined empirical evidence. Unlike methodologies that test pre-established hypotheses, GT facilitates the organic emergence of theoretical constructs from the data itself, unencumbered by predefined frameworks [4; 28].

A core component of GT is *theoretical sampling* (a process of selecting participants, cases, or data sources based on their capacity to enrich and refine the emerging theoretical structure). This dynamic sampling is guided by theory development, continuing until *theoretical saturation* is achieved (that is, when additional data no longer yield novel insights or categories [5]).

Another aspect of GT is *data integration* which entails synthesizing and organizing various data segments to construct a coherent theoretical framework. This process involves iterative analysis aimed at identifying patterns, categories, and relationships that underpin theory generation. The central tenet of GT is reaching theoretical saturation, which signifies that the collected data are sufficient to support a robust theoretical interpretation [5].

Another crucial principle is *theoretical sensitivity*, which denotes the researcher's capacity to discern and interpret meaningful elements within the data in light of emerging theoretical insights. This involves intellectual openness, conceptual flexibility, and an awareness of contextual factors shaping the data [6]. Thus, GT accommodates diverse data collection techniques, including in-depth interviews, focus groups, participant observation, document analysis, and media content analysis, thereby enriching the analytic depth and breadth of qualitative inquiry [5].

The remainder of this paper is structured as follows. The next section examines the historical development and key trajectories of Grounded Theory (GT). This is followed by a discussion of epistemological diversity within GT, after which its application in public policy research is explored. The subsequent sections address the theoretical strengths of GT in the context of public policy, the extension of GT in governance studies, and finally, the conclusion.

HISTORICAL DEVELOPMENT AND KEY TRAJECTORIES

Grounded Theory was developed in the 1960s by sociologists Barney Glaser and Anselm Strauss, who aimed to bridge the gap between empirical data and theoretical development. Their seminal publication, *The Discovery of Grounded Theory* [7], laid the foundation for a methodology rooted in theory-building directly from field data [4].

However, foundational disagreements soon emerged between the two authors. Glaser advocated for an objectivist and positivist interpretation, arguing that researchers should enter the field without preconceived theoretical notions to prevent bias and distortion of findings [8]. In contrast, Strauss supported a more interpretivist stance, recognizing the value of existing theories in sensitizing researchers to complex phenomena and guiding data interpretation [9].

Over time, GT has evolved significantly, giving rise to four primary schools of thought: the Glaserian, Straussian, Constructivist, and Situational Analysis approaches. Each approach embodies distinct epistemological and methodological orientations while preserving the core strategies of GT such as coding, memoing, theoretical sampling, and constant comparison).

- The Glaserian School emphasizes minimal structure, and discourages excessive formalization to preserve inductive reasoning and analytical creativity. A hallmark of this approach is the use of basic social processes, which aim to integrate observed actions and changes into coherent theoretical models [10].
- The Straussian School was developed by Anselm Strauss and Juliet Corbin and introduced a more systematic analytic procedure comprising open, axial, and selective coding. Their model also includes conditional matrices to articulate the interplay between context, causal conditions, action strategies, and consequences [11]. Though more structured and accessible (especially for novice researchers) this approach has been critiqued by Glaser for “forcing” data and undermining the inductive foundation of GT [1].
- The Constructivist Approach, pioneered by Kathy Charmaz, reframes GT as an interpretive process in which theory is constructed through the interaction between researcher and participants. By emphasizing reflexivity, Charmaz encourages engagement with existing literature to develop conceptual sensitivity, advocating for a fluid and context-sensitive analytic process. The constructivist approach often focuses on amplifying participant voices and is particularly well-suited for research on marginalized populations and social justice issues [12; 26].
- Situational Analysis was introduced by Adele Clarke and expands GT to include discursive, visual, and situational elements. Drawing from feminist post-structuralist perspectives and extending Strauss's legacy, Clarke proposes mapping techniques (such as social worlds/arenas maps, positional maps, and

situational maps) to analyze the complexity of contemporary social environments [13; 11]. Her approach is particularly effective for interdisciplinary studies involving multifaceted actors, institutions, and technologies.

A more recent innovation is *Temporal Grounded Theory (TGT)*, which emphasizes the generation of provisional and exploratory concepts rather than definitive theories. Rather than pursuing universal theoretical closure, TGT prioritizes the development of *sensitizing concepts* that stimulate ongoing inquiry into the temporal dimensions of social life. It invites further empirical refinement and opens pathways for deeper theoretical elaboration in future research [13].

Despite their epistemological and procedural differences, all four major strands adhere to GT’s foundational elements (iterative data analysis, theoretical sampling, coding, and constant comparative methods). Table 1 offers a comparative summary of these approaches in terms of epistemological stance and analytical strategy, assisting researchers in selecting the most appropriate variant for specific public policy research contexts.

Table 1 - Summary of GT Approaches

Strand	Epistemology	The role of theory	Coding	Literature review
Glaserian	Positivism	Theory “emerges” from the data	Open, selective	After analysis
Straussian	Postpositivism	Theory is constructed according to a scheme	Three stages (including axial)	Before and during analysis
Constructivist	Interpretativism	Theory is constructed	Flexible coding	Allowed before analysis
Situation analysis.	Poststructuralism	Theory maps the context	Situation mapping and analysis	Integrated into the process

Note – compiled by the authors based on the source [1]

EPISTEMOLOGICAL DIVERSITY IN GROUNDED THEORY

An alternative and influential classification of Grounded Theory (GT) has been proposed by Antony Bryant in the *Handbook of Current Developments in Grounded Theory* [14], offering a typology distinct in its structural, methodological, and epistemological orientation. Unlike the traditional lineage-based classifications, Bryant’s framework emphasizes *epistemological pluralism*, recognizing GT as a constellation of diverse methodological approaches rather than a monolithic school. His typology identifies five primary strands: *Classical GT* (Emergent Design), *Straussian GT* (Systematic Design), *Constructivist GT*, *Feminist and Critical GT*, and *Postmodern/Situational Approaches* [14, pp. 3-6].

This classification underscores the theoretical heterogeneity of GT by situating each strand within broader philosophical foundations and research purposes. Notably, it integrates critical and post-structuralist perspectives (traditionally marginalized in canonical GT discussions) thereby expanding the methodological landscape, and affirming GT’s relevance to contemporary interdisciplinary, justice-oriented research [14].

The distinctiveness of Bryant’s classification lies in its comprehensive and inclusive theoretical scope, encompassing both foundational variants and emergent approaches that incorporate feminist theory, critical theory, and poststructuralism. This makes it particularly valuable for scholars engaged in interdisciplinary and emancipatory research agendas, including those focused on social justice, decoloniality, and policy transformation. Thus, Bryant asserts that GT has moved beyond the original model to become a tool for analyzing complex social situations in new epistemological contexts [14].

GROUNDED THEORY IN PUBLIC POLICY RESEARCH

Despite its conceptual richness, Grounded Theory has historically seen limited application within public policy research. However, recent empirical studies illustrate how various strands of GT can be effectively adapted to investigate public administration, governance processes, and institutional dynamics. This section presents selected case studies aligned with various GT approaches (Classical, Straussian, Constructivist, and others), demonstrating their utility in revealing hidden mechanisms of governance, developing novel theoretical models, and improving contextual sensitivity in policy analysis.

Applications of Classical Grounded Theory in Public Policy

Although Classical Grounded Theory (CGT), developed by Glaser and Strauss [7], is infrequently employed in public policy research, its emphasis on discovering latent social processes renders it particularly suited for institutional analysis. Notable applications include Hafer's [15] study of forest administration practices in Pennsylvania and Castle, Broome, and Russell's [16] research on civilian oversight of police in the United States.

Hafer [15] employed the full methodological repertoire of CGT (including theoretical sampling, constant comparison, memo writing, and theoretical sorting) to investigate everyday administrative practices within the Pennsylvania Bureau of Forestry. His study culminated in the development of the *Theory of Pragmatic Governance*, centered on the core category of *Mission-Driven Management*, with four interrelated subcategories: *balancing*, *value advocacy*, *adapting to uncertainty*, and *prudent collaboration* [15, pp. 47-60]. These categories operate within broader organizational conditions, capacities, and discretionary structures [15, pp. 64-68], resulting in a middle-range theory potentially generalizable to other domains of public administration.

Conversely, Castle et al. [16] applied CGT to explore police officers' perceptions of ineffective civilian oversight across various U.S. municipalities. Their study, based on interviews with 10 current and former officers, developed a theory that links the absence of effective oversight with authoritarian tendencies, declining public trust, and the entrenchment of corrupt organizational cultures [16, p. 239]. Methodologically, the authors utilized core CGT principles (open coding and constant comparison) albeit in a more streamlined form than Hafer.

While both studies adhere to the principles of CGT and rely on semi-structured interviews to surface institutional logics, their theoretical contributions differ in scope. Hafer's model aims at systemic generalization and is philosophically grounded in *pragmatism*, whereas Castle et al.'s [16] work offers a more *critical analysis* of organizational culture and governance in a specific administrative setting.

Despite these differences, both studies illustrate CGT's capacity to uncover latent power dynamics and develop empirically grounded theoretical frameworks in the analysis of public institutions. As Glaser [17] emphasized, CGT is designed to "discover" theory rather than verify it, a principle both authors uphold by resisting the imposition of preconceived frameworks.

Straussian Grounded Theory in Governance Studies

Straussian Grounded Theory, particularly in its evolved form as presented by Strauss and Corbin [18], has also been applied in public policy research. An illustrative example is the study by Madani, Zarandi, and Javadi Sheikh Ahmad [19], which investigates the concept of "sound governance" in the context of sustainable public policy development.

Employing the systematic coding process characteristic of the Straussian approach (open, axial, and selective coding) the authors distilled 103 open codes into 39 axial categories and ultimately 10 core selective categories. These categories were derived from interviews with 12 experts from academia and government institutions, selected through purposive sampling until theoretical saturation was achieved. The study identifies key governance dimensions that enhance trust in government, transparency, citizen rights, and service delivery. Importantly, it incorporates both institutional and societal dimensions of governance, thereby capturing the complex interplay between structure and agency.

The value of this study lies in its ability to create a multi-level conceptual model of effective governance, grounded in empirical data and reflective of the real-world complexities of public policy. It also showcases how Straussian GT can be deployed to build theory that is not only explanatory but also practically relevant for policymaking.

Constructivist Grounded Theory in the Analysis of Policy and Society

Constructivist Grounded Theory (CGT), as formulated by Charmaz [12], is increasingly employed in public policy research due to its emphasis on co-construction of meaning, reflexivity, and attention to multiple social realities. Two recent studies, Horne [20], and Zhang et al. [21] demonstrate the versatility of this approach.

Horne [20] examined how Christian faith is integrated into the professional lives of government employees in the United States. Using semi-structured interviews with 30 participants, he developed a *taxonomy of faith–work integration* based on two analytic axes: *motivation* (devout vs. instrumental) and *locus* (individual, intra-collective, public). This framework yielded six ideal types or “personas,” such as *privately pious*, *virtuous worker*, and *agent of public prosperity*, each representing different modes of integrating religious belief with public service. Horne’s findings revealed how perceptions of religious liberty and the secular–sacred divide influence civic professionalism [20, pp. 113-115].

In contrast, Zhang et al. [21] applied CGT to analyze online public opinion during the COVID-19 pandemic in China, using digital texts from WeChat, Weibo, and other platforms. Employing NVivo software, they identified six conceptual categories (*social facts*, *civic demands*, *subject behavior*, *control measures*, *citizen evaluation*, and *government governance*) forming a dynamic model of online opinion as a feedback loop that shapes and is shaped by state policy [21, pp. 9-10].

Despite divergent data sources (narrative interviews vs. digital corpora), both studies demonstrate core tenets of constructivist GT: attention to participant perspectives; contextual nuance; and the co-construction of meaning. Zhang et al.’s structural model emphasizes macro-level feedback systems, while Horne’s work offers micro-level insights into value integration in public life. Together, these studies illustrate CGT’s methodological flexibility and relevance in both textual and human-centered data contexts.

The principal contribution of both studies lies in their demonstration of how CGT can illuminate the complex and informal dynamics of political processes. Horne, for example, introduces a novel theoretical framework that facilitates a nuanced understanding of how personal faith can be ethically and productively integrated into public service without contravening secular principles. This framework holds significant implications for the development of ethical codes and educational curricula in public administration.

Zhang et al. [21] propose a model with practical applications in crisis management, digital public opinion monitoring, and political risk forecasting. This model is particularly relevant in authoritarian and hybrid political systems, where effective governance increasingly hinges on the timely interpretation of digital signals. Despite their differing political contexts—democratic and authoritarian—both studies underscore the capacity of CGT to generate empirically grounded models that reflect the underlying mechanisms of political interaction.

Situational Analysis in Public Policy Research

Situational Analysis (SA), developed by Adele Clarke [13] as an extension of constructivist GT, offers a robust methodological approach for examining complex sociopolitical contexts. By incorporating human and non-human actors, discursive formations, and institutional elements, SA is particularly suited for public policy research. Clarke, Friese, and Washburn [3] present several compelling case studies in *Situational Analysis in Practice*, including “Using Situational Analysis for Critical Qualitative Research Purposes,” “Governing through (In)Security,” and “Leveraging the 'Living Laboratory'.” These cases illustrate how SA can uncover power relations, governance logics, and the unintended consequences of policy decisions.

For example, Pérez and Cannella [22] investigated educational programs targeting marginalized girls. Although framed as empowerment initiatives, these programs often reflect neoliberal ideologies that encourage individual adaptation over systemic change. Using positional and social mapping, the authors reveal how such policies reproduce dominant discourses while excluding girls as epistemic subjects:

“The policies ostensibly supporting girls were found to replicate dominant ideologies and elide the structural inequities these programs claimed to address” [22, p. 224].

SA enabled the authors to identify silenced and excluded positions within policy discourses, leading to a call for ethically engaged research and the direct involvement of marginalized communities in knowledge production and policy-making.

Similarly, Gagnon, Jacob, and Holmes [23] critically analyze a Canadian public health campaign premised on fear. The campaign’s visual and rhetorical strategies portrayed patients as threats, thereby normalizing surveillance and discipline. SA revealed that:

“The campaign deployed fear and blame to govern conduct and responsabilise patients” [23, p. 273].

The study highlights how fear functions as a governance technology, reinforcing medical dominance through the strategic omission of patient voices.

In another case, French and Miller [24] examine the transformation of an oncology hospital into a “living laboratory” for innovation in Canada. Through social worlds/arenas mapping, they identify conflicting interests among actors (physicians, IT specialists, administrators, and patients) revealing tensions between commercialization and public healthcare objectives:

"The entrepreneurial hospital emerges not only as a site of care but as an organisational hub of knowledge production and innovation commodification" [24, p. 297].

Together, these case studies demonstrate how SA facilitates an understanding of policy not as isolated decisions, but as power-laden situations shaped by discourse, institutions, and diverse actors. Unlike traditional GT, SA foregrounds contextual complexity, making it particularly useful in environments involving multiple stakeholders and contested agendas.

Innovations in GT for Policy Research

Recent contributions by Richards and Farokhnia [25] and Aslipour and Zargar [26] offer distinct but complementary enhancements to GT for policy research. Richards and Farokhnia propose “*optimized GT*,” a knowledge-building framework designed to interpret complex policy documents, such as WTO e-commerce agreements. They critique traditional GT for its limited transferability and superficial theorizing and introduce a pyramidal model that progresses from research questions to keywords and key concepts, bridging micro- and macro-levels of analysis. Their method facilitates semantic mapping and fosters a shift from knowledge accumulation to theory generation.

In contrast, Aslipour and Zargar [26] argue that Strauss and Corbin’s systematic GT lacks the analytical depth needed for policy research. They propose expanding the axial coding categories to six: context and discourse, content and ideas, participants, structure, political process, and outcomes. This modified framework more accurately captures the complexity of policy environments. Integrating soft systems methodology, they conceptualize public policy as a fluid and ambiguous social system. While Richards and Farokhnia's [25] approach is grounded in constructivism and focuses on textual interpretation, Aslipour and Zargar [26] adopt a pragmatic and systems-oriented view, aiming to make GT more accessible to novice researchers.

GT AS PART OF MULTI-METHOD DESIGNS

GT has also proven valuable as a component of mixed-method research designs. For instance, Bullock et al. [27] employed GT within a Critical Interpretive Synthesis (CIS) to construct a theoretical framework for policy implementation. Their design synthesized insights from implementation science, knowledge translation, and policy studies, grounded in data from 34 empirical cases. GT served as a secondary but integral method for inductive reasoning and constant comparison, enhancing the depth and validity of the findings. Their study revealed that policy is often mistakenly treated as context rather than a dynamic and multi-level actor in implementation processes. The authors identified six policy roles: context, focus, object, instrument, barrier/facilitator, and outcome. They emphasized the significance of political actors at various levels (from legislators to street-level bureaucrats) in shaping implementation outcomes.

THEORETICAL STRENGTHS OF GT IN PUBLIC POLICY

Despite its utility, GT remains underutilized in public policy research. Timonen [28] contends that GT’s pragmatist and interactionist underpinnings align closely with the goals of public policy analysis. He highlights GT’s value in inductively investigating complex and under-theorized policy domains as follows:

“The GT methodology is the ideal methodological choice when approaching topics or ‘fields’ (for example, specific policies, the rationale for their introduction, or their consequences) that are inadequately understood or under-theorized” [28, p. 2].

GT’s flexibility enables researchers to incorporate theoretical sampling, abduction, and memoing, even in contexts where participant access is constrained. Furthermore, its user-friendly nature supports iterative theory development and enhances research productivity from the earliest stages.

Timonen provides practical illustrations of GT's potential: analyzing reforms in nursing practices, assessing failures in fossil fuel policies, exploring anxieties surrounding social benefits distribution, and studying discourses on public debt. These cases exemplify GT's capacity to generate explanatory hypotheses, capture lived experiences, and adapt to the emergent contours of political phenomena [28].

EXTENDING GT METHODOLOGY TO GOVERNANCE STUDIES

Building on Timonen's arguments, Meléndez et al. [29] emphasize GT methodology's role in shaping new paradigms such as "public administration" and "open government." They stress that GT is not merely a methodological tool but a theoretical platform that bridges governance theory and practice. Their work demonstrates how GT can uncover the meanings attached to traditionally immeasurable phenomena (trust, identity, and power relations) thereby facilitating more inclusive and participatory governance models.

GT methodology enables the construction of governance frameworks that reflect citizens' lived realities, cultural contexts, and perceptions, contributing to more meaningful and responsive public administration. By fostering interpretive understanding and systematization, GT methodology integrates public managers, citizens, and researchers into collaborative governance networks.

CONCLUSION

Grounded Theory (GT) offers substantial promise as a methodological and theoretical framework for public policy research. Its inductive, flexible, and context-sensitive orientation makes it particularly suited to analyzing dynamic, multi-level, and weakly theorized policy phenomena. The multiplicity of GT approaches (varying from classical and Straussian to constructivist and situational) allows scholars to align methodological choices with philosophical responsibilities and research purposes. Empirical applications demonstrate that GT is not limited to academic theory-building but can actively inform and transform governance practices. It provides tools to identify power structures, discursive patterns, and the lived experiences of policy actors, enabling researchers to generate actionable, contextually grounded insights. As such, GT serves not only as a means of analysis but also as a participatory method for policy innovation, social justice, and inclusive governance.

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ПРИМЕНЕНИЕ ОБОСНОВАННОЙ ТЕОРИИ В ГОСУДАРСТВЕННОЙ ПОЛИТИКЕ: НЕКОТОРЫЕ ТЕОРЕТИЧЕСКИЕ ПОДХОДЫ

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АННОТАЦИЯ

Цель – Цель статьи состоит в том, чтобы показать возможности применения методологии обоснованной теории (ОТ) в исследовании государственной политики, раскрывая её потенциал для построения объяснительных моделей и выявления скрытых динамик управления и принятия решений.

Методология – Работа опирается на теоретический и сравнительный анализ исторического развития, эпистемологического разнообразия и методологических инноваций ОТ. Рассматриваются классический, штрауссианский, конструктивистский и ситуационный подходы с акцентом на их значимость для управления и политики.

Оригинальность / ценность – Исследование вносит вклад в развитие теоретико-методологической базы публичной политики, позиционируя ОТ как инструмент, соединяющий академическую науку с практическим государственным управлением. Особое внимание уделено социальным аспектам справедливости и включенности.

Результаты – Показано, что ОТ благодаря своей индуктивности и гибкости позволяет вырабатывать контекстно-чувствительные теории, выявлять институциональные практики, дискурсивные модели и властные отношения. Сделан вывод о том, что ОТ не только развивает научную теорию, но и предоставляет инструменты для более инклюзивного и ответственного управления.

Ключевые слова: Обоснованная теория; Государственная политика; Политические исследования; Управление; Социальная справедливость; Качественная методология.

МЕМЛЕКЕТТІК САЯСАТАҒЫ НЕГІЗДЕЛГЕН ТЕОРИЯНЫ ҚОЛДАНУ: ТЕОРИЯЛЫҚ ТӘСІЛДЕР

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АҢДАТПА

Мақсат – Мақаланың негізгі мақсаты – Мемлекеттік саясаттағы негізделген теория (НТ) әдіснамасын қолдану мүмкіндіктерін көрсету, оны түсіндірмелі модельдер құруға және басқару мен шешім қабылдаудың жасырын динамикасын ашуға бағыттау.

Әдіснама – Зерттеу НТ-дің тарихи дамуын, эпистемологиялық әртүрлілігін және әдіснамалық жаңалықтарын теориялық және салыстырмалы талдау арқылы жүргізілді. Классикалық, штрауссиандық, конструктивистік және ситуациялық тәсілдердің мемлекеттік саясат пен басқару саласына маңызы қарастырылады.

Оригиналдылық / құндылық – Зерттеу НТ-ді академиялық ғылым мен практикалық мемлекеттік басқаруды байланыстыратын құнды құрал ретінде ұсынады. Ол әлеуметтік әділеттілік, инклюзивтілік және азаматтардың тәжірибесін ескеретін басқару үлгілерін құрудағы маңыздылығын көрсетеді.

Нәтижелер – НТ-дің индуктивті және икемді сипаты контекстке бейімделген теорияларды әзірлеуге мүмкіндік беретіні дәлелденді. Ол институционалдық тәжірибелерді, дискурстық үлгілерді және билік қатынастарын анықтайды. Қорытынды: НТ тек теориялық үлесті арттырмайды, сонымен қатар жауапты және қатысымдық басқаруға арналған практикалық құралдар береді.

Түйін сөздер – Негізделген теория; Мемлекеттік саясат; Саяси зерттеулер; Басқару; Әлеуметтік әділеттілік; Сапалық әдіснама

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