

Mission Impossible: The discursive construction of grand challenges

Abstract

This article draws on Ernesto Laclau's social theory of hegemony to theorize the constitutive function of grand challenges as elements of discourse. In this perspective, grand challenges are not portrayed as denotations of pre-existing, objective phenomena, but emerge as *social facts* that are shaped, articulated, and perpetuated through discourse and the interplay of power dynamics among the involved stakeholders. The paper adopts a critical stance with a dual purpose. First, it serves as a reminder of the evaluative construction of grand challenges, making visible the inherently ambiguous relation between grand challenges and their political expression. Second, it contributes to existing literature by theorizing *how* and *why* a grand challenges discourse may emerge, develop and operate as situated in a specific organizational setting, research community, political or professional sphere. Specifically, it explores how the strategic ambiguity embedded in the grand challenges discourse may inform organizational processes in both constructive and destructive ways. The main propositions of the theoretical framework are briefly illustrated by an empirical case study of two governance networks in Sweden that operate in the policy field of social sustainability.

Keywords Grand challenges; Discourse; Ambiguity; Wicked problems; Social sustainability

Introduction

In the noble quest for meaningful contributions, and, perhaps, to atone for our past sins of aiding the very organizations that have contributed to current looming trends of climate change and rising income inequality, organization scholars find themselves under growing pressure to focus on issues of 'the real world'. The study of societal grand challenges has moved from a marginal concern to a mainstream issue within organization and management research^a (Gümüşay, Marti, Trittin-Ulbrich & Wickert, 2022; Rouleau, 2023), and by formulating grand challenges as problems that

^a Leading management journals have urged scholars to address grand challenges via editorial notes (e.g. Colquitt & George, 2011; Eisenhardt, Graebner & Sonenshein, 2016; Van Der Vegt, Essens, Wahlström & George, 2015) and special issues (e.g. Academy of Management Journal, 2014; Howard-Grenville et al., 2017; Voegtlin, Scherer, Stahl, Hawn & Siegel, 2019), resulting in a broad scholarly uptake of the concept that continues to grow over time (approximately exponentially, see Dorado et al., 2022).

can plausibly be addressed through coordinated and collaborative efforts, it seems we can finally announce our responsible exit from the ‘ivory tower’. Whether referring to problems such as war and migrant crises’ (Kaufmann & Danner-Schröder, 2022; Pawlak, 2022), climate change (Ergene, Banerjee & Hoffman, 2021), poverty (Peter & Meyer, 2023), and public health (Park, Montiel, Husted & Balarezo, 2022), the concept of grand challenges denotes multifaceted and interrelated challenges with far-reaching implications that supposedly demand multi-stakeholder solutions (Creed, Gray, Höllerer, Karam & Reay, 2022; Giamporcaro, Gond & Louche, 2023; Reypens, Lievens & Blazevic, 2021). Yet, there is an inherent contradiction in the presumption that organization scholarship can aid in tackling problems that we simultaneously cannot even articulate. Grand challenges are globally relevant but locally represented challenges that urgently ‘call(s) to action’ (Berrone, Gelabert & Massa-Saluzzo, 2016: 4) because they adversely affect human welfare and well-being (Ferraro, Etzion & Gehman, 2015). By definition, grand challenges are *uncertain* because they represent interrelated clusters of dynamic problems and they are *evaluative* because problem boundaries cannot be drawn without precluding some perspective on what constitutes the issue at stake (Reinecke & Ansari, 2016). Indeed, since there is no aggregate, non-partisan measure for the welfare of society, conflicting world views on what is perceived as the societal good will prevail (Rittel & Webber, 1973). In fact, the concept of grand challenges quite insightfully recognizes that the most intractable of problems is that of actually articulating a problem and knowing what distinguishes the present condition from a more desired one. The grand challenge thus arises from the need to name an object which is simultaneously impossible and necessary.

In this article, I provide a critique of the tendency in current scholarship to simultaneously acknowledge the constructed nature of grand challenges while portraying and analyzing them as possessing an ontologized, independent nature. I trace this analytical duality of grand explanations

back to their pragmatist roots and argue that the solutions-focused logic embedded in these conceptualizations presents barriers to both the handling of social problems and theory development. By contrast, the aim of the present study is to theorize the constitutive function of grand challenges as elements of discourse, particularly as performing the discursive function of ‘empty signifiers’. Empty signifiers are discursive elements that are themselves devoid of meaning but employed to represent an *ontological absence*; a necessary social imaginary to promote action on what is absent or lacking in a society (Chiapello & Fairclough, 2002; Laclau, 1990). This perspective offers a non-essentialist and post-structuralist lens that contributes to the current literature by unpacking the inherently ambiguous relation between grand challenges and their political expression. It portrays grand challenges, not as denotations of pre-existing, objective phenomena but as social facts that are shaped, articulated, and perpetuated through discourse and the interplay of power dynamics among organizational stakeholders addressing them. Furthermore, the conceptualization offered in this paper allows for the analysis of the conditions through which a grand challenges discourse may emerge, develop and operate as situated in a specific organizational setting, research community, political or professional sphere. I specifically elaborate on how the strategic ambiguity embedded in the grand challenges discourse may inform organizational processes in both constructive and destructive ways. The main propositions of the theoretical framework are briefly demonstrated by an empirical case illustration of two governance networks in Sweden that operate in the policy field of social sustainability. Finally, I discuss the key advantages of embracing analysis of the discursive construction of grand challenges in research, along with its relevance for policy considerations.

The Pragmatic Black-box of Grand Challenges

The intellectual foundation of grand challenges finds its roots in Rittel and Webbers (1973) seminal critique of rational approaches to addressing complex problems. However, unlike unsolvable ‘wicked problems’, grand challenges are commonly approached by organization- and management scholars as opportunities for progress and problem-solving (cf. George, Howard-Grenville, Joshi & Tihanyi, 2016; Kistruck & Slade Shantz, 2021). Grounded in a pragmatist perspective, scholars assert that addressing grand challenges should follow three interrelated and robust strategies (Ferraro, et al. 2015); the formation of *participatory architectures* to enable productive and prolonged interaction among stakeholders; *multivocal inscriptions* to enable coordination that sustains and engage diverse interpretations over consensus; and *distributed experimentation* that iteratively explores pathways that promotes small wins. This approach rests on the assumption that the synthesis of differences in capabilities, resources, and perspectives between organizations may result in a ‘collaborative advantage’ (Vangen, Hayes & Cornforth, 2015). However, central to the pragmatic (and treacherously satisfactory) move from unsolvable wicked problems to solvable grand challenges has thus been to transform the definition of rationality so that it simply encompasses the intricate dynamics of grand challenges, effectively moving the problem of defining rational criteria to the broader arena of multi-stakeholder solutions. This shift has inspired an optimistic and proactive stance, encouraging a solutions-focused logic that connects an appreciation of the highly uncertain and political nature of societal issues with hopeful strategies for strengthening multi-stakeholder partnerships.

However, recent publications have started to question its explanatory power regarding exactly how to identify instances of grand challenges in the empirical world (Brammer, Branicki, Linnenluecke & Smith, 2019). Notably, the rapid increase of arbitrary nominations of phenomena as instances or grand challenges (Seelos, Mair & Traeger, 2022) has rendered a lack of

analytical precision^b, aiding mere description rather than theory development. The concept of grand challenges is portrayed as an academic fashion (Carton, Parigot, Roulet, 2024), a tower of babel (Dorado et al., 2022) that relies on ceremonial signalling to produce a ‘rainbow washing effect’ (Gutierrez, Montiel, Surroca, Tribo, 2022). Indeed, by ‘surfing the grand challenges wave’ (Howard-Grenville & Spengler, 2022, p. 279), it appears that organization studies have welcomed an easy, off-the-shelf, motivation for research while at the same time giving rise to a normative stance of one-size-fits-all multi-stakeholder solutions.

The pragmatist pursuit of practical solutions has further reinforced the paradoxical inclination to acknowledge the constructed nature of grand challenges while simultaneously portraying and analyzing them as possessing an ontologized, independent nature. Although the original perspective presented by Ferraro et al. (2015) conceived grand challenges not as pre-existing problems arising from a vacuum, but rather emphasized their definition as an integral part of their resolution, a substantial portion of subsequent research has deviated from this viewpoint. Rather than viewing grand challenges as the lived experiences of organizational actors confronted by problematic situations, extant research instead explicitly states that grand challenges have a ‘nature’ of their own (Berrone, et al. 2016; George et al., 2016; Gray, Purdy & Ansari, 2022; Reinecke & Ansari, 2016). Scholars classify them by stating their heterogeneous presence of properties through typologies (Brammer, et al. 2019) and theorize their variation on degrees of ‘grandness’ (Colquitt & George, 2011). To ontologize problems in this sense build upon the presumption that problems ‘as such’ can be analyzed from above, as though existing a priori from the surrounding context or theory-dependence of the observer (Turnbull & Hoppe, 2019). By

^b Grand challenges are framed in the literature as fundamentally different classes of phenomena (cf. Seelos, et al. 2022); as the object of study, *the explanandum*, to explain the ‘nature’ of social and ecological problems and to identify possible interventions (e.g. Hamann et al., 2019); or the *explanans*, that characterize the ‘specific critical barrier(s) that, if removed, would help us solve an important societal problem’ thus explaining the persistence of certain problems (e.g. George, et al. 2016, p. 1881).

locating grand challenges in objective conditions, current conceptualizations have effectively managed to black-box their fluid, contingent and socially constructed character. The conflation of distinct intellectual traditions also comes at the expense of reflections on how certain problems are brought into existence as particular types of challenges. That is, the dynamics that antecede how and why organizations engage in constructing, labelling, and addressing grand challenges in the first place (Howard-Grenville & Spengler, 2022; Schwoon, Schoeneborn & Scherer, 2022) and whose interests this frame serves, ignore or misrepresent (Gray et al., 2022). Arguably, it is notable that a scholarship that acknowledges the discursive construction of societal problems has not yet effectively anchored this assumption in theories on discourse.

It is important to note that analyzing the discursive construction of complex societal challenges does not reduce these phenomena to mere rhetoric or deny that they may also indicate ‘real-life’ problems. The provocative title of this paper (referencing current endeavours in management research as serving alongside Tom Cruise in the imaginary ‘impossible missions force’) does not represent a means to ridicule anyone but highlights a genuine challenge. The theoretical approach presented here should not be construed as denying the value of conventional ways in which research may approach the topic of social problems. However, while such approaches may be sought for correcting misinformation, it is insufficient for effectively handling social problems and for theory development within the realm of organization studies. As highlighted by Howard-Grenville and Spengler (2022), organization scholars should position themselves not as content experts but as process experts, focusing on the organizational mechanisms that give rise to grand challenges while deferring their definitions to others. Our distinctive contribution lies in ‘exploring the processes of individual, organizational, and societal interactions that contribute to the formulation of what constitutes grand challenges, the efforts taken to tackle them, and the outcomes of these efforts’ (Howard-Grenville & Spengler, 2022, p. 283).

In management practice, any reference to an objective makeup of social problems is significant only to the extent that it enters into a process of collective definition that determines whether explanations of grand challenges arise, become legitimate, shaped, and addressed (Blumer, 1971). Furthermore, by failing to acknowledge what benchmark that, in fact, enables us to analytically identify instances of grand challenges in the empirical world (Seelos et al., 2022), research risks being confined to merely reflecting the government's, media's, or the general public's recognition of societal challenges. An approach that risks inadvertently reinforcing existing power structures while concealing the underlying agendas and interests that shape our understanding of various societal challenges. This view does not only take a blind side to the significance of reflecting on how problems are constituted or brought into existence as particular types of challenges but also restricts our ability to inform practice. As articulated by organizations and governments ranging from local to intergovernmental levels, grand challenges commonly represent a mission *in search* of a problem. They await being translated into issues that can be addressed in the local context; a process that entails the iterative representation of problems and solutions as part of a grand challenge (Dorado, Antadze, Purdy & Branzei, 2022). Arguably, this should urge scholars to not promote exclusive attention to methods of problem-solving, but the complex art of problem-raising.

The Grand Challenges Discourse

Although grand challenges are described as evaluative and shaped by the frames of the involved actors, surprisingly little effort has been focused on understanding their social and discursive construction (Howard-Grenville & Spengler, 2022; Schoeneborn, Vásquez & Cornelissen, 2022). In this paper, I suggest that future scholarship should take seriously, not only how grand challenges assume meaning as located within certain discourses but how the core assumptions of the grand challenges discourse in itself shape organizational processes. Here it is important to discriminate

between, on the one hand, grand challenges as a research concept and *analyst category*, and, on the other hand, grand challenges as an *actor's category* anchored within a particular discourse (Kaldewey, 2008). As a research concept, grand challenges point towards a certain scholarly enterprise and body of theories and research methods, for example, framing analysis (Snow & Benford, 1988), innovation ecosystems (Falcke, Zobel & Comello, 2023) or paradox theory (Smith, Erez, Jarvenpaa, Lewis & Tracey, 2017). Treating grand challenges as an analyst category assumes that they depict a special class of problems that exists irrespective of how we experience or describe them. By contrast, the coming sections of this text will examine grand challenges as *a social fact* and actor's category, constructed through language and discourse. Grand challenges, then, are no longer seen as denotations of a specific set of problems but are approached as a frame in itself. This perspective provides scholars with the means to analyze grand challenges, not as a particular type of problem, but as a shift in how policy-makers, researchers and other organizational actors frame and communicate their agenda. It allows for research to study the dynamics involved in constructing how, when, and why problems in the local contexts become seen as complex and grand (or not) and, most importantly, it allows for research on the subsequent organizational and societal consequences of a grand challenges discourse. Arguably, framing societal challenges as grand and in need of multi-stakeholder solutions has become increasingly manifested and embedded in a diverse set of institutions, visible not only in academic publishing practices but in funding programs, public policies, and organizational structures (Kaldewey, 2018; Dorado et al., 2022; Kanon & Andersson, 2023; Kanon, 2023). Scholarly literature often assumes that labelling a problem as grand can counteract unrealistic assumptions about policy interventions (Termeer, Dewulf & Biesbroek, 2019), acknowledge persistently problematic distances between stakeholders (Turnbull & Hoppe, 2019), or serve as a rhetorical device to call for more attention and resources to certain problems promoted by certain actors (Howard-Grenville & Spengler, 2022). However,

such assumptions of implications for management practice stand to be empirically investigated. Arguably, this raises questions about what happens when a grand challenges discourse is invoked in particular institutional settings.

In the following sections, I turn to the work of Argentinian-born political philosopher Ernesto Laclau alongside the literature on ambiguity in organizational processes to theorize the discursive construction of grand challenges. The central strength of this particular strand of discourse theory lies in its notion of empty signifiers and in offering a non-essentialist framework to shed light on the fluid, contingent and socially constructed character of grand challenges. Its post-structuralist perspective also encourages a critical examination of the underlying power structures that influence how certain representations of grand challenges gain prominence and dominance. Laclau (1990, 2005) ultimately builds his discourse theory on the assumption that the social realm is constituted by the discursive attempts to fix meaning and the inherent infeasibility – or impossible mission – of such attempts. While it takes distance from idealism, the material character of the world is seen to only assume meaning and become available for social analysis through discourse. From this standpoint, grand challenges are no longer seen as denotations of pre-existing, objective phenomena but as social facts that are shaped, articulated, and perpetuated through discourse and the interplay of power dynamics among various stakeholders.

Grand Challenges as Empty Signifiers

On the one hand, there is no one correct label that can define a grand challenge because they are experienced as ‘evolving sets of interlocking issues and constraints’ (Ferraro et al., 2015, p. 365) which makes them impossible to define as discrete economic, political or social problems. By definition, a grand challenge can be approached and understood in multiple ways (Dietz, Ostrom & Stern, 2003) and distinct problem boundaries cannot be drawn without precluding some

perspective on what constitutes the issue at stake and the type of values and knowledge that is required to understand it (Reinecke & Ansari, 2016). Yet, on the other hand, ‘the core of beginning to address a grand challenge lies in its articulation’ (George et al., 2016, p. 1887) and in building a narrative that can mobilize effort, resources, and attention for a broader impact (Brammer et al., 2019; Gümüşay et al., 2022). This means that the grand challenge arises from the need to name an object which is simultaneously impossible and necessary. Laclau (2005) explain such discursive operations through the notion of empty signifiers and the process of meeting ‘the need to express something that the literal term would simply not transmit’ (71).

Laclau (1990) views language as a system of differences and relations among *signs*, assembled by a *signifier* that represents a corresponding object, subject, or practice, i.e. the *signified*. Signs establish their positive identity through negative differential relations, for example, the word ‘good’ relies on its opposition ‘bad’ to achieve significance and meaning. Due to their antagonizing relation, a field of relational signs can never constitute themselves fully to represent reality. Instead, the language system is contingent, shaped by historical, cultural and social contexts, and a field of relational signs can only imply a specific meaning as located in a particular discourse (Laclau & Mouffe, 1985). Empty signifiers refer to signifiers that are not attached to any signified, but that represent the discursive center of a field of relational signs. Whereas other signifiers retain their attachment to a specific signified (subject, object, or practice), the empty signifier does not imply a concrete meaning but causes the discursive effect of *dislocation*, where the process of signification is interrupted because it highlights how existing discourses fail to represent a reality that evades them from within their existing signification system (Laclau, 1996). The empty signifier in this sense signifies the inherent limitation of language to fully capture the complex and multifaceted aspects of reality. The empty signifier is devoid of meaning in itself but

is employed to represent an ontological *absence* or ‘absent fullness’, defined as the ‘perception or intuition of a fullness that cannot be granted by the reality of the present’ (Laclau, 1990, p. 63). The articulation of an empty signifier in this sense disrupts existing discursive orders to represent a necessary social imaginary of ‘how things might or could or should be’ (cf. Chiapello & Fairclough, 2002, p. 195). However, the empty signifier in itself remains open to a multiplicity of contradictory demands, unable to become encapsulated by a single, fixed definition. Instead, it is the empty signifier’s ambiguous nature – an object that exceeds our grasp – that forms one of the preconditions of hegemony, making it powerful and an important tool for communication and persuasion. In this way, empty signifiers can become vessels for collective aspirations, evoked by a sense of purpose to spur action on unfulfilled ideals, all while never defining a singular meaning. By their capacity to evoke a sense of allure and significance, empty signifiers create the impression of alluding to something profound, complete, unfulfilled or urgent in society. They appear to hint at deeper meanings beyond their literal term but remain ambiguous, lacking a single fixed meaning.

Indeed, a significant element of the grandeur of grand challenges relates to its level of ambition – to achieve the seemingly unachievable (Brammer et al., 2019) while functioning as a powerful motivator for diverse communities to engage in a focal issue (Grodal & O’Mahony, 2017). When a perceived problematic situation is promoted to be grand it does not signify a specific object, subject, or practice, but functions as a carrier of particular kinds of knowledge. It ‘call(s) to action’ (Berrone et al., 2016, p. 4) signalling that change is urgently called for because something ‘significantly and adversely affect(s) human welfare and well-being’ (Ferraro et al., 2015, p. 365). The articulation of a grand challenge considers how current institutional settings continue to fail in addressing a current or future stance. By considering both the future and the present (Stjerne et al., 2022), the local and the global (Dittrich, 2022), and by linking them through bridging narratives,

grand explanations cause an interruption in existing discourses with claims of their long-term (sometimes even medium and short-term) destructive effects (Brown, 2016). Their formulation causes a dislocation of dominant beliefs (cf. Laclau, 2005) because it evades the frame of reference of current discourses that are unable to incorporate their own destructive consequences and adapt (Hossay, 2006) or to recognize the future and the global scale as a residual category.

Whether a grand challenge points towards the destructive effects of current institutionalized systems of organizing work and distributing labour (Kanon & Andersson, 2023), models of decision-making or legislation (Ferraro et al., 2015), demarcated levels of governance and national borders (Scherer & Voegtlin, 2020) or scientific disciplines (Lieberknecht et al., 2022), it reveals the equivalent relation of a system of antagonizing signs that can no longer incorporate their own destructive consequences and adapt. However, it concurrently constructs a hegemonic process where the inevitable antagonistic relation of the related signs becomes the very decisive factor for their redemption. Resonating the claim that the achievement of an innovative ‘collaborative advantage’ (Vangen et al., 2015) requires the simultaneous protection and integration of a multitude of stakeholders’ uniquely different resources, capabilities and expertise. The articulation of a grand challenge reveals such differences as simultaneously unsustainable and the very prerequisite for their innovation and, according to the most optimistic protagonist, their solution. The commitment to innovative synthesis, as embodied in the pragmatist ideal of multivocal inscriptions^c (Ferraro et al., 2015), thus offers a promise that simultaneously reveals and conceals unavoidable clashes and tradeoffs, while excluding alternative strategies for tackling the grand challenge. The political potency of the grand challenges discourse is thus grounded in its

^c Multivocal inscriptions are defined by Ferraro, et al. (2015) as ‘discursive and material activity that sustains different interpretations among various audiences with different evaluative criteria in a manner that promotes coordination without requiring explicit consensus’ (375), this includes scripts, routines, processes, norms, guidelines and other inscriptions designed to allow for multivocality.

ability to represent an ‘absent fullness’ or generalized desirable state towards which society should aspire, while hegemonized via the solutions-focused logic represented in the ideal of multivocal inscriptions and multi-stakeholder partnerships.

Collective Action between the Particular and Multivocal

Grand challenges can be perceived as empty signifiers because they hold together several heterogeneous discursive elements as equal contributions to a certain discourse. However, the price of empty signifiers is that they are so overloaded with meaning that they cannot be concretely articulated. Despite the sense of fullness that empty signifiers suggest they ultimately represent an *impossible mission* because they are constitutively unreachable in their entirety (Laclau, 2001). The empty signifier, by definition, offers a promise that cannot be concretely articulated within the currently institutionalized discursive reality. Instead, any effort to fix or define the meaning of the empty signifier inevitably reveals conflicting interests and interpretations. To act on grand challenges, they must inevitably become rationalized to iteratively represent specific problems that are possible to intervene in the local context (Reinecke & Ansari, 2016; Dorado et al., 2022). Acting collectively upon a grand challenge entails narrowing its remit to select a course of action among several alternatives and the effort of temporarily fixing the discursive function of the grand challenge. The grand challenge, then, ceases to perform the discursive function of an empty signifier. Instead, Laclau (2005) describe ‘floating signifiers’ as the state in which signifiers move between fixation and non-fixation, particularity and universality. A signifier can have an identical form (linguistic representation) whether it is fixed, floating, or empty, but its functions will be different and its signified will not be identical (Madsen, 2018). A grand challenge will thus represent different functions in the language system but only the empty signifier can represent an ‘absent fullness’ and the state in which a society fully reconciles with its own destructive effects.

Indeed, when acting upon a grand challenge, it seizes to be grand – or empty – and is fixed to assume concrete meaning that can take very different forms. Here we can retain Blumer’s (1971) attention to the processes that prefigure social problems. Such processes may for example frame hunger as either an inequality problem or a poverty problem, which may compel different sets of actors and actions (Dorado et al., 2022). Efforts to achieve sustainability may involve policies that prioritize the protection or regeneration of ecosystems. They may also encompass policies aimed at ensuring continued economic prosperity through green innovation, job creation, and increased production. Organized crime may be fixed as a problem of criminal justice, with action focusing on law enforcement measures vis-à-vis preventive efforts aimed at reducing structural inequalities. While this analogy is at the core of explanations of grand challenges, little research effort has been put forward into the inherently ambiguous relation between grand challenges and their political expression, and the mechanisms at play as the discursive function of the grand challenge move between fixation and non-fixation, between particularity and multivocality, in situated organizational contexts. This warrants closer examination, particularly because the multivocal ideal inherent in the grand challenges discourse explicitly encourages strategies that are often described as synonymous with the strategic use of ambiguity (cf. Gehman, Etzion & Ferraro, 2022). Organization scholars define ambiguity as a lack of clarity regarding a situation or phenomenon, or the coexistence of numerous, sometimes contradictory interpretations of the same phenomenon (Cappellaro, Compagni, & Vaara, 2023). In the next section, I elaborate on the possible organizational impacts of the grand challenges discourse and how its core assumptions may shape organizational action. I draw upon the literature on ambiguity in organizational processes to explain how the strategic ambiguity embedded in the grand challenges discourse (perpetuated through the concept of multivocal inscriptions) can inform organizational processes in both constructive and destructive ways.

The Constructive and Destructive Ambiguity of Grand Challenges

In line with the ideal of multivocal inscriptions, the use of ambiguity in communication within and around organizations is depicted as a constructive strategy to accommodate diverging interests and values (cf. Eisenberg, 1984). Research on strategic ambiguity recognizes the role of ambiguous language, or vagueness, to facilitate multiple interpretations while creating a common ground across a diverse set of actors (March, 1994; Leitch & Davenport, 2007; Jarzabkowski, Sillince & Shaw, 2010; Sillince et al., 2012). Likewise, the ambiguity promoted in grand explanations is seen to successfully mobilize diverse stakeholders (Grodal & O'Mahony, 2017; Feront & Bertels, 2021). For example, by creating accountability and commitment in the context of CSR (Trittin & Schoeneborn, 2017; Christensen, Morsing & Thyssen, 2021), generating pressures of change through 'creeping commitment' (Haack et al., 2012). Laclau (2005) recognizes how empty signifiers can be used strategically as a rhetorical tool to unite diverse groups under common aspirations on unfulfilled ideals, forging a sense of shared purpose while constructing bridges between different perspectives. What I refer to here as the *constructive ambiguity* embedded in the grand challenges discourse thus lies in its representation of a necessary social imaginary to propel discussions of what is absent in society. In essence, what makes the grand challenges discourse pervasive is that it enables us to articulate what may be threatening or lacking here and now, representing 'a generalized aspiration for an alternative' (Brown, 2016, p. 124), while unifying various stakeholders around a problematic situation. Because multiple interpretations are inevitable in all social systems, constructive ambiguity can allow for agreement in the abstract and the preservation of diverse viewpoints to promote what the scholarship on ambiguity calls a 'unified diversity' (Eisenberg, 1984) which is crucial to the process of organizing and for systemic change. When the dislocating effects of grand challenges take on a universal character, it ceases to concern a specific set of consequences which, in turn, creates the potential for expressions of radical politics

(cf. Brown, 2016). The empty form of the signifier enables diverse critiques to be rendered equivalent which means the grand challenge can perform as a ‘quilting function’ (Gunder, 2006) and unifying force among various stakeholders acknowledging their shared concerns and aspirations in a problematic situation. Furthermore, when the grand challenge manages to represent systemic failure with respect to the future, incremental solutions are rendered insufficient, thereby fostering a push for systemic change.

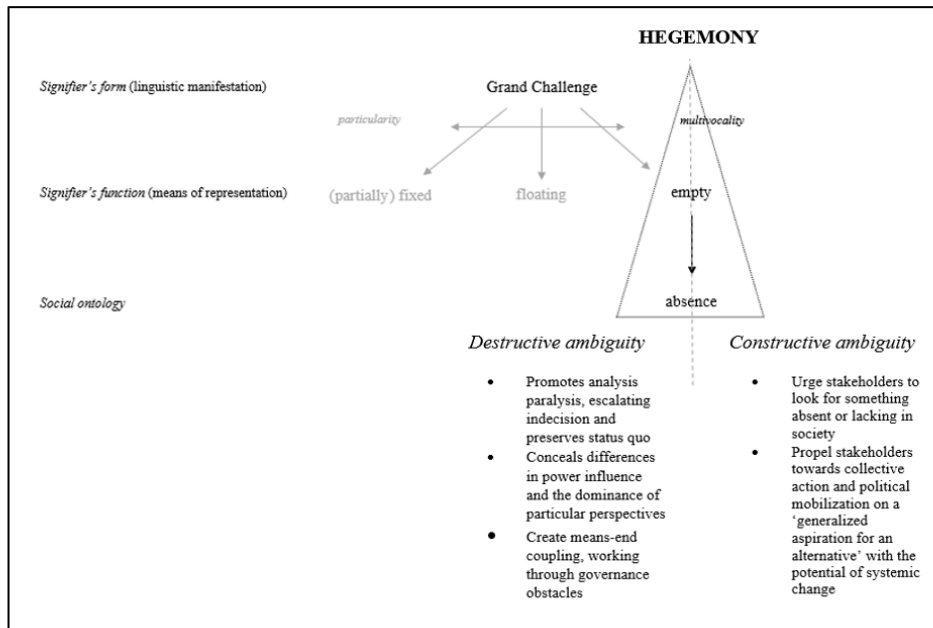
However, the literature on ambiguity reflects contrasting viewpoints on whether ambiguity influences organizational processes in constructive or destructive ways (Chliova, Mair, & Vernis, 2020). On the one hand, ambiguity is described as a strategic tool that enables organizational action. On the other hand, the proliferation of fragmented and conflicting interests and interpretations is seen to obscure the path to collective action. That is because when a grand challenge comes to serve as an empty signifier, it can no longer serve a distinguishable critical or analytical purpose. The grand challenge means everything and nothing at the same time. The literature on ambiguity concludes that the use of strategic ambiguity in organizational processes often results in analysis paralysis (Langley, 1995) or path dependency (Sydow et al., 2009), instilling caution in decision-making (Denis et al., 2011), while displacing it with less ambitious goals (Wright & Nyberg, 2017). Which, in turn, legitimizes the status quo and slows down action to address grand challenges (Benschop, 2021; Gehman et al., 2022). Moreover, Couture, Jarzabkowski and Lê (2023) illustrate how strategic ambiguity makes actors prone to means-ends coupling. Namely, how stakeholders’ attention becomes directed towards navigating governance obstacles, such as coordinating and collaborating challenges, rather than making progress towards addressing the problem at stake. Other studies conclude that the openness of grand challenges may lead to symbolic and superficial negotiations where already existing activities are simply rebranded

as part of a grand challenge (Ludwig, Blok, Macnaughten, & Pols, 2022). The strategic ambiguity embedded in the grand challenges discourse can thereto have destructive effects on organizational processes if it promotes a romanticized ideal of multivocal inscriptions while concealing the actual practices and logics at play in fixating the content of the grand challenge. The promise of multivocality represents a forward-looking and seductive aspiration of reaching a common solution that risks concealing conflicts and the unequal relations of power that privilege the dominance of one particular perspective over others. That is when differences in power influence (derived from position, coalition, information, expertise, resources, and/or morals) among stakeholders in multi-actor partnerships influence how the involved parties understand the issue at stake (Brummans et al., 2008). Such power asymmetries enable certain partners to design the partnership and to 'shape the rules of the game' (Gray et al., 2022) or to graft the grand challenge onto their existing interests (Grodal & O'Mahony, 2017). Laclau (2005) also recognizes how empty signifiers can be used strategically by dominant groups or ideologies to construct and control meaning, using open-ended symbols to tap into a range of interpretations and emotions to give the impression that their agendas align. Furthermore, the promise of multivocal inscriptions may generate strong expectations that, if not fulfilled, shape stakeholders' beliefs about whether they can enact their desired futures and undermine the motivation of parties to engage further in the issues (Gray & Purdy, 2018). The *destructive ambiguity* embedded in the grand challenges discourse thus represents the concealment of the signifying practices and logics at play in forming collective action towards an alternative future, generating either paralyzed action or action based on preserved privileged positions. Figure 1 illustrates the analytical distinction between a signifier's form (*linguistic manifestation*), function (*means of representation*) and ontology, alongside the destructive and constructive ambiguities embedded in the grand challenges discourse. The grey arrows in the model illustrate the emptying and filling processes of the signifier and the movement between multivocality and particularity.

Moving from ‘particularity’ to ‘multivocality’ thus implies a loss of meaning, and the opposite direction represents the move in function when signifiers (the grand challenge) gain particular content to promote organizational action.

FIGURE 1

The Constructive and Destructive Ambiguity of the Grand Challenges Discourse



The strength of applying Laclau’s discourse theory lies in the deconstruction of hegemony which makes visible the inherently ambiguous relation between grand challenges and their political expression, explaining their representation as an articulatory practice moving between fixation and non-fixation, particularity and multivocality. This perspective allows for research to consider the signifying practices and logics at play in the game of forming current aspirations of an alternative future. Indeed, to identify the forms of language or practices used to create, maintain or reduce ambiguity in the context of proposed actions towards grand challenges and to identify the signifier’s (grand challenge) function between fixation and non-fixation, between particularity and multivocality, in situated organizational contexts.

Case illustration: Social sustainability as grand challenge

In this section, I present a brief empirical illustration of the concepts of constructive and destructive ambiguity, drawing upon recent studies conducted on Swedish public organizations within the field of social sustainability policy. The depiction centres on two governance networks, denoted as Case A and Case B, comprising politicians representing both municipal and regional tiers of government, alongside varying compositions of public managers and cross-sector strategists. The work of each governance network is regulated by a collaboration agreement in which local public health work and initiatives for social sustainability are co-financed between the respective municipality and regional level of government. One of the main purposes of the collaboration agreement is to facilitate the establishment of multi-stakeholder partnerships aimed at addressing challenges of social sustainability. Both of the cases were subject to an in-depth inquiry conducted by the author of this article, involving data collection spanning from 2020-2021, including a policy document review, 35 interviews (50-90 min duration) with key stakeholders, 23 participant observations (>50 h) of network meetings and 7 focus group discussions (>20 h). The illustration briefly depicts how the grand challenges discourse bears down on a situated organizational context, informing organizational processes in both constructive and destructive ways. The studied cases demonstrate elements of both constructive and destructive ambiguity, albeit in distinct ways. The coming text initially outlines constructive ambiguity in both cases combined, followed by an examination of destructive ambiguity analyzed sequentially for each case. Table 1 summarizes the empirical manifestations of the theoretical propositions regarding constructive and destructive ambiguities embedded in the grand challenges discourse.

TABLE 1

The Constructive and Destructive Ambiguity of the Grand Challenges Discourse

	Theoretical proposition	Manifestation Case A	Manifestation Case B
Constructive ambiguity	Urge stakeholders to look for something absent or lacking in society.	Social sustainability does not represent a concrete referential meaning but indicates a shared reference point for bringing together diverse actors to identify, define, and address problems that current institutional settings have failed to treat.	
	Propel stakeholders towards collective action and political mobilization on a 'generalized aspiration for an alternative'.	The semantic openness of social sustainability allows for the incorporation of a multiplicity of demands, functioning as a unifying force to establish a permanent participatory structure, bridging the gap between otherwise separated actors, ensuring long-term decision-making and resource allocation.	
Destructive ambiguity	Promotes analysis paralysis, escalating indecision and preserves status quo.	Social sustainability takes on a universal character that ceases to concern a specific set of visible consequences, inducing abstract discussions, high degrees of frustration and attitudes of defeatism. Grand ambitions become displaced by the micro-management of 'simple' issues or preexisting professional and political agendas.	
	Conceals differences in power influence and the dominance of particular		The idealization of pursuing multivocality conceals the underlying mechanisms that fix the content of social sustainability to enable organizational action.
	Create means-end coupling, working through governance obstacles.	Work is characterized by <i>a solution in search of problems</i> with simultaneous expressions of the necessity to initiate multi-stakeholder solutions to grand challenges and experiences of unnecessary collaboration.	The challenge of quantifying or evaluating the attainment of social sustainability results in its conflation with the achievement of cross-sectoral organizational manageability.

Social Sustainability as an Empty Signifier: Constructive Ambiguity

The studied governance networks view social sustainability as an umbrella term that captures and holds an indefinite possible amount of interconnected problem constellations that need to be addressed locally. Ranging from basic needs, employment issues, crime prevention, physical, and mental health, to more intangible concepts such as well-being and safety, the concept is viewed to encompass an interrelated cluster of problems that lack a single root cause, making them impossible to solve in isolation from one another. In the quotation below, one of the studied politicians describes how social sustainability does not function as a representation of a concrete referential

meaning but serves as a shared reference point for bringing the municipal organization and regional actors together around one strategic policy area:

You cannot ask me what social sustainability is. There is no target that I can point toward and tell you that, yes, we have achieved 10 per cent or 57 per cent of what we wanted. [...] Social sustainability is about people's family situation, people's finances and work situation, how children are doing in school, the safety of our neighbourhoods and whether people trust our public bodies. We cannot continue to work in counterproductive, isolated silos because people and problems are falling between the cracks of our organization. If we want future welfare, we must take joint action. (Politician A, Case A)

Social sustainability does not signal anything concrete and cannot be unambiguously implemented or quantified. Instead, the meaning of the term is made explicit based on how the involved actors succeed in linking the concept to continuously changing local conditions and perceived needs rather than claims of a universal definition. Social sustainability indicates a certain direction towards which present and future action can be projected and is dependent on the specific values and norms considered desirable in the local context. For the studied actors, social sustainability covers a range of interconnected issues, explained by their cross-cutting character and the perceived inability of single organizations, professional groups, or the public sector, to address or solve them alone. In addition, they are linked to global concerns, the need for preventive work, and a perceived threat towards the sustainability of society's ongoing welfare.

We are affected by and affect the whole world. Our schools are filled with children who have fled from war, they have family members still living in war, and our current unsustainable behaviours affect climate change on the other side of the globe. Everything is connected [...] Our future welfare is under threat, what we do now will have an effect in 2, 4, 7, 16 years. As we formulate the challenges that lie ahead, social sustainability becomes the obvious main strategy. (Manager A, Case B)

As explained in the quotation above, it is the lack – or the looming threat of the erosion – of a sustainable society that serves as the presented driving force compelling the studied actors to view their work as pivotal. The lack – or absence – of social sustainability is primarily signalled in how current institutional settings fail to address both current and future stances because its organizational structure fragmentizes social problems while causing counterproductive effects. This is explained by one of the studied strategists in the quotation below:

Our old, traditional, hierarchical, linear organization structures work well when everyone has their specific responsibilities but so many issues get stuck in the gap between committees and departments, between the political and administrative spheres, and between public and private organizations. We lose track of these problems because people think that ‘someone else is responsible for that’ or different organizations work on the same issues and collide in their different missions. Complexity requires that we bring together different skills and establish systematic, long-term approaches. (Strategist A, Case B)

The quotation above illustrates the intangible function of the concept of social sustainability and the *constructive ambiguity* embedded in its representation of a vaguely discernible future in which the failures of current social practices have been overcome. Social sustainability does not symbolize one concrete and tangible mission but acknowledges persistently problematic distances between stakeholders on a diverse set of issues. It reveals how the boundaries of multiple levels of governance, sectors and public organizations impede coordination among organizations. Social sustainability, in a Laclaudian sense, represents a *social imaginary* to propel discussions of what current practices are lacking. It functions as an empty signifier that offers a shared reference point for bringing a diverse set of actors together to identify, define, and address problems that current institutional settings have failed to address.

The studied actors have established a permanent *participatory architecture* that allows heterogeneous actors to interact in a routinized fashion over prolonged timespans to secure long-term decision-making and resource allocation on issues of concern. The ‘silo-organization’ of contemporary society is portrayed as simultaneously unsustainable and the very prerequisite for innovation because it requires the simultaneous protection and integration of a multitude of stakeholders’ uniquely different resources, capabilities, and expertise to achieve social sustainability. Social sustainability, in this sense, reconceptualizes existing practices and actors, including their position, aims and responsibilities, while simultaneously questioning and legitimizing their ability to address a reality that evades them. The more universal – or ambiguous – the idea of social sustainability becomes, the more actors and issues it manages to incorporate. It has motivated diverse communities of stakeholders to participate in multi-stakeholder partnerships

and both of the studied governance networks have grown significantly in both size and mandate over the past years. One of the studied strategists describes that the attractiveness and unifying force of social sustainability lies in its semantic openness and conceptual ambiguity, enabling its transformation into a wide range of political projects:

I used to work quite isolated and with a set of very few politicians. Now all top municipal managers are involved in my work, we have representatives from primary care, safety coordinators, and the local police. We invite housing associations, important companies, and NGOs that operate in our municipality [...] As soon as we started talking about social sustainability I immediately got more foothold and better access to the organization, it's appealing because it can be made relevant to everyone! (Strategist B, Case A)

Social Sustainability as an Empty Signifier: Destructive Ambiguity

Case A. In governance network A, the frustrating experiences of trying to organize work around 'everything and nothing' induce high degrees of frustration among the involved stakeholders.

It's like Duchamp's urinal. If I put the urinal in a museum, is that culture? Any issue can be translated into public health and any urinal can become social sustainability if I set it up in the museum. (Politician F, Case A)

The citation above illustrates how the process of identifying local issues related to social sustainability is perceived as a grand challenge in itself. In case A, the articulation of social sustainability as a grand challenge introduces a level of ambiguity that constrains collective action by evoking attitudes of defeatism in preference of the ability to act. Social sustainability takes on a universal character and ceases to concern a specific set of visible consequences of a problem while representing an almost intolerable imaginary – a vaguely structured mental space onto which a never-ending range of issues, mandates, missions, actors and practices may be projected. The involved actors describe endless discussions of understanding complex and interconnected problems on an abstract level but an inability to transform such discussions into actionable challenges and form the appropriate governance structures. The more the studied actors recall the characteristics and features of 'messy' and interconnected problems, the more grandeur the

problems become. However, paradoxically, the inability to transform grand ambitions into organizational action results in their displacement by the micro-management of what the studied actors call ‘simple’ issues, explained by one of the frustrated politicians below:

We now represent the broadest forum in our municipality and we still get stuck in the simplest most narrow issues you can imagine, we poke into details that we shouldn't. In our last meeting we discussed whether to finance new signs for one of our walking trails [...] In another meeting, we discussed whether we should offer healthy smoothies or sweetened drinks at the local swimming pool. I mean, are you kidding me? The fact that social sustainability is interconnected to everything leaves us with nothing at all. We have discussed these issues for so long - what is the role of this forum? Who should participate? What issues should we address? And everyone just agrees, ‘Yes, this is so important’, but *what* exactly is so important? (Politician G, Case A)

While the studied network represents a *participatory architecture* that allows heterogeneous actors to interact in a routinized fashion, the studied actors describe the difficulties in moving from discussing the complex interrelations of grand challenges towards organizational action. One of the politicians describes that the forum instead serves mainly to discuss preexisting professional and political agendas:

It is just the same old issues that are discussed. The agenda looks the same every year, it overflows with regional and national level strategies and plans with very little connection to our local situation. You know, for labour market issues we had to create a new network because apparently there was no room for it on our agenda, even though we all agree that it is *the* main issue that we have to handle when it comes to social sustainability. (Politician H, Case A)

The studied actors simultaneously express the necessity of initiating multi-stakeholder solutions to grand challenges and experiences of unnecessary collaboration. The difficulties in knowing how, when, and why the networks should act in a certain direction importantly highlight their work as compiled by *a solution in search of problems* where the studied actors are increasingly involved in a method/solution (multi-stakeholder partnerships) of addressing a grand challenge that ultimately cannot concretely be articulated.

We have come a long way in understanding the complex interrelations of issues, but then we are like, ‘What do we do with all of this?’, and we get stuck in the simple solutions anyway, because, you know, anything can be related to everything! [...] We keep discussing and the more complex it gets... is it really helpful to dwell on issues like this? A lot of us feel like we are just ‘collaborating for collaboration’s sake’ and the more we discuss the less we feel like we can intervene. (Manager C, Case A)

Case B. In governance network B, a common trait is that the actors under study collectively project a positive image of an effective operational model characterized by clearly defined roles and a high degree of trust among the involved stakeholders.

Our primary success factor is that we have managed to build new permanent relationships, both in the network structures and in the line organization by linking the heavy decision mandate of politicians and top managers to steering groups that work across the line organization. (Manager B, Case B)

The involved stakeholders concur that the cross-sector strategist responsible for overseeing and monitoring the policy domain of social sustainability plays a pivotal role in their success. They unanimously emphasize the importance of formalized facilitation within multi-stakeholder partnerships. The cross-sector strategist assumes the role of an intermediary support function aimed at strengthening the achievement of *multivocality* within partnerships by brokering relationships and ensuring that deliberations incorporate input from various perspectives. Their responsibilities encompass disseminating information, and triggering ideas and discussions while ensuring that stakeholders are designated and invited to regularly scheduled network meetings.

Our strategists are completely indispensable! They coordinate all of our work and carry through relationships within and outside the municipal organization. They link our work to the regional and national level policies and other types of work carried out in the organization. They report to politicians and ensure that information is carried out at the organizational level. (Politician C, Case B)

The studied cross-sector strategists describe themselves as ‘chameleons’ that adapt their communication styles to create commonality between issues of social sustainability and locally available solutions, integrating it into already existing policies and agendas. Despite the substantial time and effort invested in multi-stakeholder partnerships, their ultimate trajectory thus largely aligns with well-established institutionalized solutions, such as annual projects and initiatives that are already accessible to the public. An examination of policy documents in both of the cases under investigation reveals that a significant portion of the strategists’ endeavours involves directing resources toward projects and solutions that closely resemble those outlined in already existing professional and political agendas, as well as regional, national and European policies. Notably,

the strategist in focus expresses concerns regarding the propensity of the work performed in governance network B to inadvertently reinforce already dominant perspectives, including her own professional perspective.

I feel like I influence the politicians too much. Mostly, what I suggest becomes the driving force of our work. People are content with me drawing from the available steering documents. I strive to gain traction; that's my job. But people expect me to monitor these issues, not just facilitate discussions [...] I feel like a lot of my work ends up pushing my own agenda and relating it to other peoples' ongoing work. [...] I'm not sure if it's a failure necessarily, it gets things done, but my initial ambition is never to push my own agenda so much. (Strategist A, Case B)

The multi-stakeholder negotiations undertaken in case B often serve more as symbolic gestures than instrumental means to attain a multifaceted objective. Nevertheless, the studied actors view their endeavours as successful in terms of organizing multivocal solutions. One of the studied politicians explained that the inability to measure or evaluate achievements of grand challenges leads to the perception that efforts to achieve social sustainability are equivalent to achieving organizational manageability:

We want to achieve social sustainability but we can never really know when we have reached that goal. We have to think about results differently, for example, that we have managed to coordinate a process and that we succeeded in bringing different perspectives together in new ways. (Politician E, Case A)

In case B, substantial effort has been dedicated to establishing relationships, fostering trust, and implementing formal governance structures. These endeavours have garnered a focus on means above the ends, assigning multi-stakeholder solutions an intrinsic value. The idealized aspiration of pursuing multivocality maintains a level of ambiguity that obscures the actual underlying dynamics that fixate the content of the grand challenge to enable organizational action. The involved actors generally express satisfaction with their efforts and *destructive ambiguity* is at play when multi-stakeholder negotiations primarily serve as a legitimate, albeit superficial and symbolic, exercise that conceals conflicts and privileges the dominance of certain perspectives over others.

In terms of the organizational consequences of a grand challenges discourse, this case illustration indicates that while the strategic ambiguity embedded in the grand challenges discourse functions as a motivator for diverse communities of stakeholders to engage in a focal issue, it simultaneously poses critical barriers to subsequent organizational action. However, the empirical cases presented here primarily serve as a brief illustration of the proposed theoretical framework and there is a need for more extensive research into the organizational implications of a grand challenges discourse. Future studies should explore various empirical contexts and interpretations of grand challenges to contribute to further theory development.

Discussion

Part of the ‘turn’ (Gümüşay et al., 2022, p. 2) towards the emphasis on grand challenges in management and organization studies is the encouragement of scholars to step out of their metaphorical ‘ivory tower’ and engage in research that contributes meaningfully to topics that impact the lives of people within and outside organizations (Howard-Grenville, 2021; Wickert et al., 2021). While this aspiration is commendable, this article aligns with the growing body of research asserting that current approaches to studying grand challenges fall short of advancing theory and explaining complex empirical phenomena (Brammer et al., 2019; Carton et al., 2024; Dorado et al., 2022). However, instead of advocating for the retirement of the concept (cf. Seelos et al., 2022), I argue that this critique should not blind us from recognizing the concept’s potential to open up valuable avenues for research. The non-essentialist and post-structural perspective offered here, while sharing some recognition with existing conceptualizations, holds several distinctive implications for future research. In the forthcoming section, I discuss three key advantages of embracing analysis of the discursive construction of grand challenges in research, along with its relevance for policy considerations.

First, the theoretical framework presented in this paper highlights the importance of distinguishing between grand challenges as a research concept (analyst category) and their existence as social facts (actor's category). In the latter perspective, grand challenges are not considered as fixed ontologized denotations of a specific set of problems, but rather as discursive elements recognized and acted upon by a variety of stakeholders, including policy-makers, researchers, and organizational actors. This perspective embraces grand explanations as part of a broader shift in how policy-makers, researchers, and organizational actors frame and communicate their agenda, shedding light on how the grand challenges discourse bears down on situated organizational contexts. Adopting this approach can include multi-level analysis, with micro-level theorization viewing grand challenges as the social reality of policy advisors and organizational actors in a phenomenological sense. It encompasses examinations of whether these actors actively and strategically employ the grand challenges discourse to achieve particular objectives, such as to justify slow progress, or to call more resources to certain problems (cf. Howard-Grenville & Spengler, 2022) or whether they unwittingly participate in a discourse that operates mostly behind their backs (cf. Kaldeway, 2018). Such micro-level analysis of the grand challenges discourse can involve explorations of the type of language and practices used to create, maintain, or reduce ambiguity in the context of proposed action towards grand challenges. The meso-level social analysis investigates the organizational consequences of the grand challenges discourse, preferably with a specific focus on organizational action. This level of analysis is exemplified in the present study by acknowledging the constructive and destructive ambiguity embedded in the grand challenges discourse. Such analysis would also involve studying the dynamics involved in constructing how, when, and why problems in the local context become articulated as complex (or not). It allows research on the organizational and societal consequences of this discourse and whether the promotion of grand explanations increases an organization's willingness or ability to

act, or if they risk increasing unproductive responses, such as paralysis or overestimation (see e.g. Weick, 1985). Lastly, at the macro level, studies can seek to sufficiently locate the grand challenges discourse within the broader historical landscape of its era. For instance, examinations of the discourse's relation to the larger questioning of the capacities and limitations of governmental policy-making (Turnbull & Hoppe, 2019), the problem of institutional trust (Lounsbury, 2023) the rise of postmodern values (Durrant & Legge, 2006), and the rising costs of welfare sectors (Noordegraaf, 2020).

The *second* key advantage and implication of analyzing the discursive construction of grand challenges relates to its post-structuralist perspective which emphasizes that no problem exists outside of a policy process waiting to be solved. Instead, problems are produced as problems of a particular kind. This perspective implies that action is not taken in response to a grand challenge; instead, grand challenges are viewed as arenas for problem-raising as opposed to problem-solving. Laclau's theory on empty signifiers effectively emphasizes the shift from grand and elusive explanations to the particularity of rationalized and narrowed-down actionable problems that can be addressed locally. The theoretical framework and model presented in this paper (see Figure 1) illustrate the significance of identifying and analyzing the discursive function of grand challenges in situated organizational contexts. Specifically, it offers a vocabulary for studying the signifying practices and logics involved in shaping current aspirations for an alternative future, illustrating the function of grand challenges as moving between fixation and non-fixation, between particularity and multivocality. In terms of policy implications, acknowledging this aspect holds significant relevance, especially in light of the frequent criticism of the imprecision in grand challenges. For instance, how the versatility of grand challenges, such as sustainability, can enable empty gestures on the part of decision-makers or be exploited to serve

the interests of elites (Brown, 2016). However, this assertion should not necessarily lead policy-makers to throw the baby out with the bathwater. The framework outlined in this paper underscores the discursive function of grand challenges in providing a vocabulary and bestowing authority upon discussions of issues that may otherwise remain unspoken and unaddressed. It draws attention to aspects of absence, bringing into focus what is lacking within established discourses (Laclau, 2005). By directing our attention to generalized experiences of concerns for the future, including the looming threats of social and environmental catastrophes, grand explanations bear the potential of disrupting existing approaches to acting. Nevertheless – and importantly – such explanations are unable to address the concerns that gave rise to it. Any suggested resolution, whether articulated through multi-stakeholder partnerships or otherwise, may not necessarily yield positive consequences. Laclau’s theory of empty signifiers reminds us that what makes the grand challenges discourse influential is simultaneously what makes it insufficient for guiding organizational action. This brings to the core the fundamental struggles over meaning inherent in any effort to act and make decisions regarding grand challenges and emphasizes the importance of purposefully acknowledging that working towards a grand challenge should involve negotiations rather than consensus building and perhaps power play rather than collaboration. This perspective encourages us to consider the third key advantage of applying Laclau’s theorization of empty signifiers to grand challenges: its emphasis on power imbalances and concealment of conflicts.

Third, analyzing the discursive construction of grand challenges provides a perspective that extends the analysis of the grand challenges discourse beyond its potential of motivating or impeding organizational action and prompts us to explore the potential ‘dark side’ of these organized contexts. This perspective entails moving away from an overly simplistic and optimistic discourse that tends to depoliticize social challenges and avoids treating multi-

stakeholder solutions as an empirical question (Seelos et al., 2022). Instead, we delve into understanding how, when, and why certain issues are framed as grand and whose interests are advanced, ignored or misrepresented in the process (Gray et al., 2022). This would also involve investigations of how the strategic ambiguity embedded in the grand challenges discourse is strategically employed. For instance, how dominant policy actors manage to mobilize resources and drive change in certain directions by grafting it onto actors' already existing interests and the legitimate responses of dominant governance actors (Grodal & O'Mahony, 2017; Ludwig et al., 2022).

When crafting organizational tools to address grand challenges, scholars have so far favoured a solutions-focused logic. This logic posits an implied tractability of grand challenges, where multi-stakeholder partnerships are seen as having the capacity to define grand challenges and their solution, resulting in substantial societal progress (Howard-Grenville & Spengler, 2021). A cautious approach is warranted for research in this domain. Treating grand challenges as ontologized entities seeking a solution not only diminishes reflexivity but hinders the advancement of contextually sensitive research. Most importantly, this approach promotes a pragmatist-rooted, solutions-focused logic that may inadvertently obscure underlying conflicts, power imbalances, and exclusions inherent in the process of addressing grand challenges. Indeed, organization studies cannot effectively contribute to solving problems that have not yet been adequately formulated. Embracing such a normative stance reinforces the hegemony of the grand challenges discourse, creating a figurative smokescreen, concealing that the problems we attempt to address by definition lack a universally agreed-upon definition and that any proposed solution may not necessarily lead to positive outcomes. Indeed, grand challenges are not problems that organizations or organizational scholars can encompass, divide or draw lines around; they represent something for which we lack categories - unframeable, unbounded, incalculable and unthinkable (cf. Campbell

& Dylan-Ennis, 2019). In our quest for meaningful contributions, let us not forget the fuzzy terrain constituting the organizational world, including its essentially impossible missions; the very core of what makes organization research a creative endeavour.

Conclusion

The study of grand challenges has gained substantial attention within the realm of organization and management research. This article offers a critique of current scholarship, in particular, its tendency to simultaneously recognize the constructed nature of grand challenges while attributing inherent properties to them. I trace this duality of grand explanations back to its pragmatist origins and argue that the hopeful and proactive stance embedded in current conceptualizations has encouraged a solutions-focused logic that presents barriers for both the handling of social problems and for theory development. In response, the proposed theoretical framework draws on Ernesto Laclau's notion of empty signifiers, alongside the literature on ambiguity in organizational processes, to theorize the constitutive function of grand challenges as elements of discourse. Seen through this lens, grand challenges are in themselves devoid of meaning but employed to represent an *ontological absence*; a necessary social imaginary to promote action on what is absent or lacking in a society. The post-structuralist perspective helps to unpack the inherently ambiguous relation between grand challenges and their political expression, portraying grand challenges, not as denotations of pre-existing, objective phenomena but as *social facts* that are shaped, articulated, and perpetuated through discourse and the interplay of power dynamics among the involved stakeholders. The article offers a vocabulary for studying the signifying practices and logics involved in shaping current aspirations for an alternative future, illustrating the discursive function of grand challenges as moving between fixation and non-fixation, between particularity and multivocality. The paper further explores how the strategic ambiguity inherent in the grand

challenges discourse may inform organizational processes in both constructive and destructive ways. The perspective presented here embraces grand explanations as part of a broader shift in how policymakers, researchers, and organizational actors frame and communicate their agenda, shedding light on how the grand challenges discourse bears down on situated organizational contexts. It encourages scholars to explore the intricate dynamics that precede the construction, labelling and attempts at addressing grand challenges and emphasizes how action is not taken in response to a grand challenge; instead, grand challenges are seen as arenas for problem-raising as opposed to problem-solving.

Finally, the allusion to ‘Mission: Impossible’ and the notion of grand challenges prompts us to consider their shared attribute as bold pursuits of the unattainable. In the realm of grand challenges, the fabled fullness of meaning remains ambiguous, akin to the perpetually out-of-reach goals in the imaginary escapades of Tom Cruise’s character. While grand challenges compel our intellectual rigour to dissect their complexities, our endeavours still symbolize the same quixotic nature as the pursuits of the imaginary ‘impossible missions force’, albeit with different tools at our disposal. One is armed with linguistic ambiguity, the other with a daring protagonist and a catchy theme tune.

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