

Naming the impossible: The hegemonic project of grand challenges

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Abstract

This article advances a discourse-theoretical reconceptualization of societal grand challenges. In organization studies, grand challenges have become a privileged vocabulary for engaging urgent societal problems such as climate change, global health, and sustainable development. While this expanding literature has generated insights into how such problems may be addressed, less attention has been paid to the processes through which grand challenges are constructed, framed, and legitimized as shared objects of concern. Drawing on Laclau and Mouffe's discourse theory, I argue that grand challenges derive their organizing force from their operation as empty signifiers, discursively open terms whose indeterminacy enables them to gather heterogeneous meanings and defer closure. As empty signifiers, they evoke a shared social imaginary that organizes collective action in response to what is perceived as absent or lacking in society. In this view, the articulation of a grand challenge is a political project in which hegemonic ordering takes place, selectively privileging certain interpretations and shaping legitimate action against a backdrop of apparent consensus. To theorize how grand challenges acquire meaning, I develop a triadic model of signification that conceptualizes them as empty, floating, and partially fixed signifiers. The article's primary contribution is to reconceptualize grand challenges as hegemonic projects constituted through articulatory practices. The discussion derives three analytical implications for grand challenges scholarship: (1) approaching problem articulation as a political process, (2) reorienting empirical inquiry toward tracing situated partial fixations, and (3) making explicit the epistemic assumptions underwriting solution-oriented research.

Keywords

grand challenges, empty signifiers, discourse, hegemony, wicked problems, societal challenges, articulation

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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 research¹ (Cloutier et al., 2025; Gümüşay et al., 2022; Rouleau, 2023), and by formulating grand challenges as problems that can plausibly be addressed through coordinated and collaborative efforts, it may seem as though we are poised to announce our responsible exit from “the ivory tower.” Whether referring to problems such as climate change, global health, or sustainable development, grand challenges are described as inter-related societal problems with far-reaching implications that demand multi-stakeholder solutions. They “call to action” (Berrone et al., 2016: 4) signaling that change is urgent because something “significantly and adversely affect(s) human welfare and well-being” (Ferraro et al., 2015: 365). However, while a pragmatist framing has gained significant traction, it increasingly faces criticism for reducing grand challenges to a mere fashionable label devoid of analytical rigor (Gariel and Bartel-Radic, 2024; Seelos et al., 2022). Building on this critique, I argue that the prevalent focus on solutions in grand challenges research (Howard-Grenville and Spengler, 2022) risks obscuring the processes through which grand challenges are constructed, framed, and legitimized, as well as the power relations that shape their definition and prioritization (cf. Gray et al., 2022; Hassan and Prasad, 2025). Furthermore, although multi-stakeholder partnerships hold promise, their portrayal as a universal governance remedy risks overlooking their contextual challenges and limitations. More fundamentally, there is an inherent contradiction in the presumption that organization scholarship can aid in tackling problems that we simultaneously cannot even articulate. 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 and Ansari, 2016). They signify everything and nothing at once, mobilized by actors with incompatible agendas, still appearing as common ground. 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 and 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 concept of grand challenges thus arises from the need to name an object which is simultaneously impossible and necessary.

While this epistemological tension is acknowledged in the literature (George et al., 2016; Reinecke and Ansari, 2016), its analytical consequences remain insufficiently elaborated. More specifically, even though the literature frequently describes grand challenges as discursively constructed, this status is rarely granted analytical force. Grand challenges are recognized as contested and socially mediated, yet are frequently treated as ontologically given problem domains — complex but nonetheless pre-given phenomena that call for coordinated responses (Couture et al., 2023; Ferraro et al., 2015; Howard-Grenville and Spengler, 2022). What this ontologization leaves unexamined is the very dynamic that gives grand challenges their organizing force — the articulation through which conflicting and incompatible demands are temporarily held together as if constituting a single problem space. Notably, even when grand challenges are examined as constructed phenomena (e.g. Reinecke and Ansari, 2016; Schoeneborn et al., 2022; Stjerne et al., 2022), construction is typically approached as negotiation among perspectives or as collaborative sensemaking. What remains under-theorized is the hegemonic dimension of construction, namely the power-laden processes through which certain articulations gain traction and organize the conditions of collective action.

Drawing on discourse theory (Glynos and Howarth, 2007; Laclau, 2005; Laclau and Mouffe, 1985), I conceptualize grand challenges as *empty signifiers* — discursively open terms whose organizing force derives from their capacity to absorb divergent meanings and defer closure. Their power lies not in definitional clarity, but in their capacity to invoke a shared social imaginary that organizes collective action in response to what is perceived as absent or lacking in society (cf. Chiapello and Fairclough, 2002; Laclau, 1990). In this view, the articulation of a grand challenge is a political project in which hegemonic ordering takes place, selectively privileging certain interpretations and shaping legitimate action against a backdrop of apparent consensus. This reconceptualization reframes the analytical task of grand challenges scholarship from evaluating how they should be addressed to the ordering effects through which they are constituted as objects of collective concern. This shift does not imply that questions of action or intervention are irrelevant. Rather, it foregrounds that any practical response is necessarily conditioned by the articulatory processes through which grand challenges come to acquire meaning. Crucially, the conditions under which collective action becomes possible are inseparable from the power relations that shape what can be named as the problem and who can be drawn into its orbit. The research question guiding the following analysis is:

How do grand challenges come to acquire meaning and organizing force?

To address this question, the article develops a discourse-theoretical framework that theorizes grand challenges through three signifying modalities — empty, floating, and fixed — not as sequential stages or discrete categories, but as coexisting and mutually implicating modes through which grand challenges remain discursively open, become contested, and are partially fixed. By treating the discursive openness of grand challenges as a political rather than facilitative condition, the article highlights how their indeterminacy, often celebrated for enabling collaboration and innovation, simultaneously functions as a condition of hegemonic ordering. In doing so, the article contributes to the expanding grand challenges agenda in organization studies by reconceptualizing grand challenges as hegemonic projects.

For critical organization studies at large, this issue is not merely conceptual but profoundly political. Grand challenges have become a central vocabulary through which organizations, states, and transnational bodies articulate and legitimate interventions into society, extending their influence far beyond the scholarly domain. By reframing grand challenges as sites of hegemonic ordering, the article thus speaks directly to ongoing debates in Organization about the politics of problem framing, the role of discourse in constituting organizational realities, and the subtle ways in which calls for responsibility and impact may depoliticize conflictual terrains.

The paper is organized as follows. The next section situates the grand challenges agenda within contemporary organization theory and outlines the limitations of dominant pragmatist approaches. I then introduce a post-foundational ontology and develop a triadic model that conceptualizes grand challenges as empty, floating, and partially fixed signifiers articulated within hegemonic projects. The concluding section discusses the analytical implications of this perspective for grand challenges research.

The pragmatic black-box of grand challenges

The conceptual roots of grand challenges trace back to Rittel and Webber's (1973) seminal critique of rational planning in the face of wicked problems, issues so interdependent and value-laden that they resist definitive articulation and resolution. Yet, unlike Rittel and Webber's characterization of wicked problems as fundamentally unsolvable, grand challenges have been reinterpreted by

organization scholars through a markedly more optimistic lens. Much of the literature positions grand challenges as opportunities for progress and problem-solving, emphasizing that organizations can — and should — drive change through *participatory architectures*, *multivocal inscriptions*, and *distributed experimentation* (Ferraro et al., 2015; George et al., 2016). These strategies aim to facilitate collaboration across divergent actors, resting on the assumption that even if problem boundaries remain contested, joint problem-solving can produce a “collaborative advantage” (Vangen et al., 2015). This orientation has been influential and led to a substantial body of work focused on how organizations can design and sustain forms of cross-sector collaboration, innovation partnerships, and adaptive governance mechanisms, all presumed to improve collective responses to complex societal challenges (e.g. Grodal and O’Mahony, 2017; Howard-Grenville et al., 2014; Leixnering et al., 2026). Central to this pragmatic (and treacherously satisfactory) reorientation from unsolvable wicked problems to solvable grand challenges has thus been a shift in how rationality is conceived — from reliance on objective criteria to an emphasis on negotiated, multi-stakeholder processes capable of addressing complex societal issues. In this view, uncertainty or heterogeneous interpretations are not obstacles to coordination but conditions to be pragmatically embraced. Rather than resolving differences, multivocal inscriptions (Ferraro et al., 2015) are understood to allow shifting interpretations to coexist, enabling broad participation without requiring substantive alignment (Schwoon, 2025; Seidl and Werle, 2018). By foregrounding collaborative responses, the grand challenges literature has largely treated problem constitution as a backdrop to, rather than as the central object of, analysis.

While recent critiques (e.g. Brammer et al., 2019; Carton et al., 2024; Dorado et al., 2022; Gariel and Bartel-Radic, 2024; Gutierrez et al., 2022; Seelos et al., 2022) question the analytical precision of the concept and warn against its inflationary use, these debates remain largely at the level of conceptual coherence. Beneath these critical reassessments — and much of the intellectual discussions surrounding grand challenges — lies a deeper conceptual tension. Although several studies explicitly recognize that grand challenges are socially and discursively constructed, this recognition often coexists with attempts to classify, typologize, or measure their defining characteristics. Extant research frequently describes grand challenges as having a “nature” of their own (Berrone et al., 2016; George et al., 2016; Gray et al., 2022; Reinecke and Ansari, 2016), classifies them through typologies of heterogeneous properties (Brammer et al., 2019), or theorizes their variation along degrees of “grandness” (Colquitt and George, 2011). To ontologize problems in this sense rests on the analytical assumption 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 and Hoppe, 2019). Crucially, this tendency obscures the processes through which particular issues — whatever their material underpinnings — are rendered visible and elevated to the status of grand challenges in the first place (Gray et al., 2022; Howard-Grenville and Spengler, 2022). By stabilizing grand challenges as identifiable and actionable problem domains, current conceptualizations have contributed to black-boxing their contingent, and discursively constructed character, as well as the political work involved in defining, legitimizing, and prioritizing problems and interventions.

Crucially, this tendency does not disappear in studies that explicitly adopt a constructivist stance. Although the grand challenges literature has increasingly foregrounded the social character of societal problems, generating important insights into framing processes, interpretive flexibility, and communicative alignment across heterogeneous actors (Ferraro et al., 2015; George et al., 2016; Gray et al., 2022; Reinecke and Ansari, 2016; Schoeneborn et al., 2022), construction is typically examined in terms of interaction, framing, and coordination within already recognizable problem domains. Even where grand challenges are analyzed through a communicative lens, the analytical focus tends to center on how language enables coordination and collective action, while

the category of the grand challenge itself remains presupposed as a legitimate and shared horizon of concern. A post-foundational perspective shifts the analytical gaze from these interactional dynamics to the constitutive dimension of problem formation itself and the political processes through which an indeterminate signifier becomes capable of organizing heterogeneous demands under the appearance of universality. This distinction reflects a broader divide within constructivist scholarship between analyzing meaning-making within established domains and theorizing the structuring effects of discourse in bringing such domains into being (cf. Hacking, 1999). This reorientation has important implications for how grand challenges are analyzed. Where analysis begins from prevailing problem formulations, scholarship risks inadvertently reproducing the categories advanced by governments, media, or other influential actors rather than interrogating the power-laden processes through which certain societal issues are rendered salient. This uncritical uptake obscures not only the agendas and interests that shape what comes to be recognized as a grand challenge in the first place. It also obscures the performative dimension through which grand challenges acquire determinate form and begins to orient intervention in particular directions. The designation of an issue as a grand challenge is not a neutral reflection of objective conditions but the result of ongoing articulatory practices through which problems and solutions co-evolve (cf. Dorado et al., 2022). Arguably, this should urge scholars not to promote exclusive attention to methods of problem-solving, but the complex art of problem-raising.

A discursive ontology of grand challenges

Despite broad agreement that grand challenges are evaluative and shaped by interpretive struggles, their constitution as discursive objects remains undertheorized (Howard-Grenville and Spengler, 2022; Kaldewey, 2018; Schoeneborn et al., 2022). Addressing this gap requires a shift from treating discourse as a representational device to understanding it as an ontological condition. In post-foundational discourse theory, discourse is not a descriptive layer added to an already-formed reality but the very terrain through which objects and problems are rendered socially meaningful (Cederström and Spicer, 2014; Chia, 2000; Conrad, 2004; Laclau and Mouffe, 1985). Discourse refers to contingent articulatory practices through which social objects and identities are constituted and partially stabilized. Societal problems, in this view, do not present themselves as self-evident entities awaiting recognition. They emerge as problems through articulatory practices that establish what counts as an issue, what is at stake, and which forms of intervention appear possible or legitimate (Bacchi, 2009; Markowitz et al., 2012; Turnbull and Hoppe, 2019). Articulation, in this view, refers to the contingent practice of linking heterogeneous elements — demands, identities, ideas, or problems — in ways that modify their identities through the relation itself. Through such linkages, meaning is provisionally fixed while alternative configurations are excluded. This understanding is especially salient for grand challenges, not because they are uniquely boundary-less, but because their designation as “grand”² relies on articulatory linkages that bring heterogeneous demands and value-laden, often future-oriented concerns, into the semblance of a shared problem space (cf. Henriksen and Seabrooke, 2016; van Bommel and Spicer, 2011).

Laclau and Mouffe (1985) build their discourse theory on the assumption that the social is constituted by discursive attempts to fix meaning, alongside the inherent impossibility of securing such fixation. While their account takes clear distance from idealism, the material world acquires social significance through articulatory practices that render objects meaningful. Meaning is therefore never given in advance but remains contingent, continuously open to re-articulation. Laclau (1990, 1996, 2005) terms this condition *ontological lack*, defined as the “perception or intuition of a fullness that cannot be granted by the reality of the present” (p. 63). This notion does not imply that social reality is illusory or that nothing exists beyond discourse. Rather, it

highlights that the social has no ultimate foundation — there is no point at which all demands are reconciled and meanings permanently secured. The absence of such closure is itself an ontological condition (Arnaud and Vidaillet, 2018; Müller, 2013). On this basis, Laclau and Mouffe (1985) posit the primacy of *the political* — because the social lacks an ultimate ground, the articulation of a problem is always a political act, simultaneously bringing its object into being and foreclosing alternative modes of intelligibility.

This post-foundational understanding offers a distinct vantage point for analyzing grand challenges. Rather than presuming that their meaning follows naturally from the phenomena they denote, this perspective foregrounds the articulations through which grand challenges are rendered coherent enough to be named, invoked, and taken up as socially consequential (cf. Laclau, 1996). Crucially, what Laclau and Mouffe contribute, beyond other constructivist or discourse-oriented approaches, is a theorization of how discursive openness can enable the linking of disparate and potentially conflicting claims into a temporary unity. In their account, the discursive openness, or indetermination, of a signifier is not a deficit to be resolved but the very condition that enables heterogeneous demands to be linked within a hegemonic project (Islam et al., 2022; Kenny and Scriver, 2012; Laclau, 2005). Yet the same indeterminacy that enables such linkage also renders the signifier vulnerable to hegemonic closure (Laclau, 1996, 2005). What appears as a broadly inclusive articulation may simultaneously universalize particular interests while suppressing competing claims (Dupas Amory, 2026; Laclau and Mouffe, 1985; Tomlinson and Schwabenland, 2010). The discursive openness often associated with grand challenges is therefore, in Laclauian terms, ambivalent. It facilitates broad articulation while potentially masking conflict and depoliticizing disagreement.

Against this backdrop, the following section conceptualizes grand challenges as empty signifiers. While Laclau and Mouffe's (1985) discourse theory encompasses a broad conceptual architecture — including notions of antagonism, equivalence, and political logics — the following analysis focuses specifically on their treatment of signifiers. The distinctions between empty, floating, and fixed signifiers provide a parsimonious vocabulary for examining how grand challenges acquire meaning and organizing force through discursive openness and hegemonic ordering. This selective focus does not delimit the theoretical terrain but offers a starting point from which future research may extend the analysis by incorporating additional elements of discourse theory.

Grand challenges as empty signifiers

By definition, problems elevated to the status of grand challenges resist clear specification. I argue that this indeterminacy is not simply a matter of empirical unruliness but signals a deeper discursive condition. The literature repeatedly observes that grand challenges cannot be captured by a single definition because they appear as “evolving sets of interlocking issues and constraints” (Ferraro et al., 2015: 365) that cannot be delimited as discrete economic, political or social problems. Their boundaries shift; their dimensions multiply; their causal structures overflow established categories. As Reinecke and Ansari (2016) note, any attempt to draw precise boundaries around a grand challenge inevitably excludes some perspectives, values, and forms of knowledge. Yet, “the core of beginning to address a grand challenge lies in its articulation” (George et al., 2016: 1887) and in building narratives that can mobilize effort, resources, and attention for a broader impact (Brammer et al., 2019; Gümüşay et al., 2022). The concept of grand challenges thus arises from the need to name an object which is simultaneously impossible and necessary. It is impossible in the sense that no stable or final definition can exhaust the complexity attributed to the phenomenon, yet necessary because such terms evoke an ethical, political, existential urgency that insists on expression even when meaning remains elusive. Laclau (2005) explains this dynamic

through the notion of empty signifiers and the process of meeting “the need to express something that the literal term would simply not transmit” (p. 71).

According to Laclau and Mouffe (1985), language is a system of differences and relations among *signs*, assembled by a *signifier* that represents a corresponding object, subject, or practice, that is, 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. Because signs acquire meaning only through their difference from other signs, none can occupy a position outside the system from which it could represent the social as a whole. No single sign — or system of signs — can fully represent the social as a unified whole. Any representation therefore remains partial and contingent. Hence, the language system is contingent, shaped by historical and social contexts, and a field of relational signs can only acquire determinate meaning within a particular discourse (Laclau and Mouffe, 1985). Within this system, the empty signifier emerges as a privileged site — a signifier that does not denote a fixed referent, but stands in for a lack, or “absent fullness” (Laclau, 1996), around which political demands — understood as social claims, grievances, or aspirations seeking recognition — can be unified (Islam et al., 2022; Kenny and Scriver, 2012). Whereas other signifiers retain their attachment to a specific signified (subject, object, or practice), the empty signifier does not imply a concrete meaning but signals a moment of *dislocation*, where the process of signification is interrupted because it highlights how existing discourses fail to represent what exceeds their signification system (Laclau, 1996). This effect can be observed, for instance, when a term like “sustainable development” is invoked. While it suggests urgency and moral clarity, it resists precise definition (Garland et al., 2013; Wright and Nyberg, 2017). At the same time, it exposes the limits of existing legal, political, and economic discourses to grasp the depth of ecological and social breakdown (cf. Arora and Romijn, 2012). In this sense, sustainable development functions not as a resolution but signals a rupture in prevailing discourses, indicating a fullness that existing frameworks cannot contain. In Laclau and Mouffe’s account, this dynamic is what allows terms such as “democracy,” “freedom,” or “justice” to function as empty signifiers, notions that present themselves as unified while linking diverse and potentially incompatible political demands under a common label.

The empty signifier in this sense signifies the inherent limitation of language to fully capture the complex and multifaceted aspects of the social. However, this impossibility does not imply that all signifiers function as empty signifiers. Most signifiers acquire meaning within a relatively stable system of difference. A signifier comes to function as an empty signifier only when it comes to stand in for a broader totality — that is, for society as if it could be represented as a unified whole — temporarily condensing heterogeneous meanings that cannot be reconciled within an existing discourse. It is devoid of meaning in itself but is employed to represent ontological lack. The articulation of an empty signifier disrupts existing discourses to represent a shared social imaginary of “how things might or could or should be” (cf. Chiapello and Fairclough, 2002: 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, its indeterminate character, an object that exceeds our grasp, constitutes a precondition for hegemonic ordering, 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 (Tomlinson and Schwabenland, 2010; van Bommel and Spicer, 2011). By their capacity to evoke a sense of allure and significance, empty signifiers allude to something profound yet unfulfilled or urgent in society. They appear to hint at deeper meanings beyond their literal term but remain open, lacking a single fixed meaning (Islam et al., 2022).

This vocabulary allows us to approach phenomena whose contours remain evaluatively open and continually contested — phenomena that call forth collective urgency without offering a stable

object. Grand challenges are precisely of this kind.³ They do not appear as empirical categories awaiting identification but take shape through articulatory practices that temporarily organize heterogeneous demands around an indeterminate signifier. A significant element of the grandeur of grand challenges relates to their level of ambition — the aspiration 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 and O'Mahony, 2017). They signal a collective sense of urgency, a desire for systemic transformation, “a call to action” (Berrone et al., 2016: 4), but remain open to multiple, even contradictory, interpretations. When a problematic situation is elevated to the status of a grand challenge, it does not signify a specific object, subject, or practice, but functions as a flexible label for mobilizing attention, resources, and expertise. Through their articulation, grand challenges draw their force from a perceived failure of current institutional arrangements to address urgent or emerging conditions. 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 challenges cause an interruption in existing discourses by articulating consequences with claims of their long-term (sometimes even medium and short-term) destructive effects (Brown, 2016). Their formulation marks a dislocation of dominant beliefs (cf. Laclau, 2005) because it evades the frame of reference of current discourses that are unable to accommodate their own destructive consequences and adapt to emerging conditions. The climate crisis, for instance, confronts prevailing economic discourses with consequences, ecological collapse, irreversible loss, that these frameworks have helped produce but remain structurally unequipped to register or address (cf. Hossay, 2006).

From this perspective, the capacity of grand challenges to organize heterogeneous demands across domains stems not from shared substantive content but from their discursive openness and their ability to function as points of universal reference. This provides a powerful lens for understanding how grand challenges can simultaneously appear urgent and indeterminate, universal and particular, inclusive and exclusionary. Such openness is precisely what allows them to unite scientists, policymakers, corporations, and civil society actors under a common banner, even when their interests diverge. The concept is sufficiently abstract to invite participation, yet sufficiently charged to signal moral gravity and institutional legitimacy.

To conceptualize grand challenges as empty signifiers, however, is not to suggest that they remain suspended in pure indeterminacy. An empty signifier does not remain indefinitely open. As it is invoked, contested, and operationalized in practice, its meaning shifts and may become provisionally stabilized. To account for these shifts, the next section differentiates between three discursive modalities — empty, floating, and fixed — through which grand challenges acquire meaning and organizing force. This distinction makes it possible to analyze how grand challenges render certain forms of collective action thinkable while marginalizing others.

The discursive modalities of grand challenges

Grand challenges function as empty signifiers to the extent that they unify heterogeneous demands by suspending, rather than resolving, their differences. Their apparent coherence arises from the articulatory practices through which heterogeneous demands are linked as if they formed a shared problem space. Yet the very operation that allows for this provisional unity also reveals its limits. Any attempt to specify what the grand challenge *is* reactivates the tensions that emptiness temporarily holds in suspension. To act on grand challenges, they must inevitably become rationalized to iteratively represent specific problems that are possible to intervene within the local context (cf. Dorado et al., 2022; Reinecke and Ansari, 2016). Acting upon a grand challenge entails narrowing its remit to select a course of action among several alternatives and temporarily fixing its function.

As grand challenges circulate across institutional settings, their function as empty signifiers generates a field of contestation. Different actors attempt to anchor the signifier in competing problem definitions, causal stories, or normative imaginaries through which it takes the function of a *floating signifier*: formally open but increasingly drawn into struggles over how it should be interpreted, which demands it should gather, and which futures it should prefigure (Laclau, 2005). The discursive openness that defines the empty signifier is what makes it available for such contestation, its indeterminacy is the structural condition that enables political struggle. In the floating modality, this struggle becomes visible — competing projects seek to articulate the signifier in incompatible directions, attempting to bind its meaning, delimit its reach, and invest it with a horizon that can sustain their respective political logics. For example, simultaneously linking “climate action” to economic competitiveness, ecological regeneration, technological optimism, or distributive justice. Similarly, “organized crime” may be articulated as a problem of criminal justice, focusing on law enforcement measures vis-à-vis preventive framings centered on structural inequalities. Yet no articulation succeeds in stabilizing the signifier, and its meaning continues to oscillate among competing projects. What is at stake is not the coexistence of perspectives as such, but attempts to occupy the signifier as the reference point through which legitimate action is defined. Such articulations confront one another openly because none can foreclose the field, every attempt to stabilize meaning immediately reactivates alternative possibilities. Floating signifiers thus mark a modality in which meaning remains indeterminate but is actively contested. The grand challenge continues to draw its force from discursive openness, while becoming a focal point for struggles to orient, delimit, or appropriate its meaning.

In certain articulations, what is invoked as a grand challenge may take on the function of a *fixed signifier*, as particular interpretations gain sufficient temporary dominance and begin to structure sense-making and orient action. Here, *fixed* does not imply full closure but denotes a relatively stabilized articulation within a given context. Such partial fixations may emerge within a wide range of contexts — organizational, sectoral, national, or transnational — as the signifier is taken up and provisionally anchored in particular articulations. The articulation of an empty signifier presupposes partial fixation to make it recognizable, yet such fixation never achieves full discursive closure. For Laclau and Mouffe (1985), partial fixation denotes moments in which the signifier is temporarily anchored to a specific articulation. In organizational research, this anchoring often takes institutional form through policy frames, strategic discourse, or intervention programs and operates by rendering the empty signifier actionable. Such operationalizations stabilize a particular reading of the grand challenge without closing it, the signifier continues to invite reinterpretation and contestation across settings. This openness, however, does not eliminate exclusion. Any provisional fixation requires that some interpretive possibilities recede or lose traction so that one reading can function as a workable point of orientation (Laclau 1990, 1996). These constitutive exclusions are what allow a partial fixation to take shape in the first place. Openness and closure therefore coexist, meaning that the signifier remains formally indeterminate enough to gather heterogeneous actors under a shared banner, yet it operates as if it had stable content because alternative articulations are pushed to the margins. For Laclau and Mouffe, such exclusions are not primarily strategic maneuvers but structural effects of articulation. They may be enacted consciously or implicitly, openly or through institutional routine, yet their necessity derives from the attempt to provisionally fix meaning as a workable point of orientation.

Empirically, this dynamic is visible in the grand challenges’ literature, as ostensibly open signifiers become operationalized in practice. For example, Gehman et al. (2022) show how the seemingly open ambition of “sustainability” becomes operationalized through specific indicators and metrics, thereby privileging certain interpretations of sustainable action over others. Grodal and O’Mahony (2017) illustrate a comparable dynamic in the case of “inclusive innovation,” while the

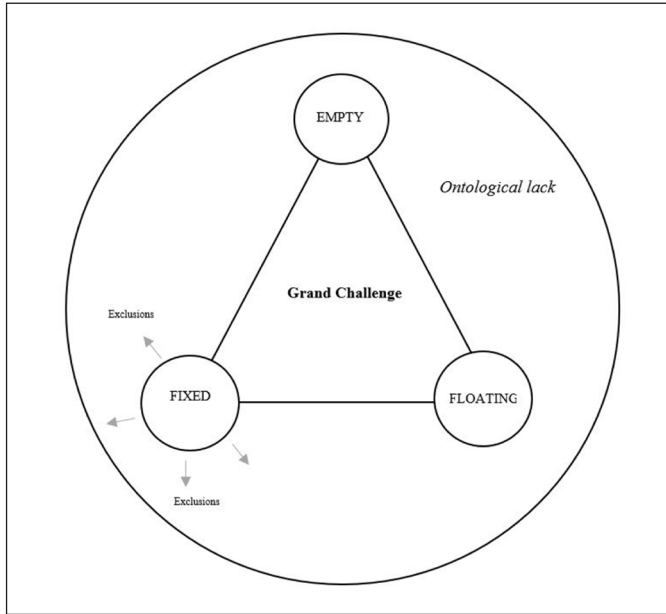


Figure 1. The discursive modalities of grand challenges.

signifier enabled broad participation, the coordination that followed tacitly centered entrepreneurial logics. In both cases, openness functions as a mode of closure. The signifier retains its formal indeterminacy, yet the institutionalization of one interpretation marginalizes alternatives that do not fit the operationalized frame.

Figure 1 illustrates how a grand challenge acquires meaning and organizing force across the three signifying modalities. The outer circle depicts the condition of ontological lack (Laclau 1990, 1996, 2005), indicating that meaning can never be finally secured. In the model, the triangle represents the signifying modalities through which articulation unfolds — empty, floating and partial fixation — each presupposing and reactivating the others. At the center lies the object of articulation, the grand challenge, whose intelligibility depends on its movement across these modalities rather than on any inherent properties. A signifier may appear identical at the level of its linguistic form even as it performs different articulatory functions. The lines connecting the three nodes in the model indicate that these modalities are analytically distinct yet interdependent. They do not describe sequential stages but relational effects of articulation, each modality gains its identity only through its differentiation from the others, and none can be sustained in isolation. Empty, floating, and fixed signification therefore coexist as mutually enabling conditions of ordering. The discursive openness of a grand challenge depends on the continual oscillation between these modalities, while any moment of stabilization presupposes the very indeterminacy it seeks to contain. Lastly, the outward-facing arrows at the fixed node mark the constitutive exclusions involved in partial fixation, boundaries that enable fixation while simultaneously revealing its partial and political character.

Within empirical inquiry, these modalities become traceable through the operations they set in motion: the dislocation of existing meaning structures (empty), the appearance of competing projects seeking to orient the signifier (floating), and the provisional anchoring of one articulation in situated practices that render the signifier actionable (partial fixation). These are not sequential stages but relational effects through which grand challenges become intelligible and actionable in

empirical settings. This dynamic is the point of departure for the next section, where Laclau and Mouffe's account of hegemony specifies how these modalities jointly produce ordering effects and constitutive exclusions within hegemonic projects.

The hegemonic project of grand challenges

For Laclau and Mouffe (1985), hegemony is distinguished from notions of dominance, consensus, ideology, or power understood as a stable resource, as all of these presuppose a foundation that their post-foundational ontology denies. Hegemony refers instead to the contingent process through which a particular articulation occupies the empty place of the universal and comes to appear as the common ground. In the vocabulary presented above, hegemony is the effect of an empty signifier that comes to stand in for a broader totality through the interplay of the three signifying modalities (empty, floating, and fixed). In doing so, it organizes social relations and practices around a particular understanding of the issue. It arises because the signifier is sufficiently empty to appear universally consequential, because the heterogeneous demands it attracts reveal its hegemonic potential, and because it is partially stabilized within situated practices. While the absence of an ultimate ground renders all social meaning contingent, ontological lack does not imply that every signifier becomes hegemonic. As laid out previously, most signifiers continue to function within differentiated chains of meaning, remain tied to particular referential fields and do not acquire the symbolic capacity to articulate a broader totality (Islam et al., 2022; Kenny and Scriver, 2012). Hegemony requires something far more exceptional — the emergence of an empty signifier whose meaning becomes sufficiently indeterminate to absorb heterogeneous demands and establish a shared horizon within which multiple interpretations must position themselves (Laclau, 1996, 2005). Only signifiers that undergo this process of radical abstraction can serve as the object upon which competing political projects struggle to define it. From this perspective, hegemony describes not stability but a contested openness.

Hence, the articulation of a grand challenge is not simply the naming of a complex problem but a hegemonic project: a formation that simultaneously claims universality — that is, presents itself as expressing the common good or shared interest — while organizing its own exclusions within the social field. Grand challenges function as hegemonic projects not because they impose a single interpretation, but because they establish a shared horizon within which multiple interpretations must position themselves. Crucially, this dynamic does not eliminate conflict but reconfigures the terms on which it becomes articulated. Once a signifier comes to occupy the position of the universal, contestation shifts from questioning its relevance to struggles over how it should be articulated and organized (Laclau, 1996). The articulation of a grand challenge as a shared point of orientation is not the culmination of hegemony but its point of departure. In organizational settings, this means that disagreement shifts from questioning the existence of the issue to struggles over how it should be framed and organized. Hegemony is never a single settlement but the dispersed and continuously renewed effort to occupy the empty space of what is absent in society, across multiple sites (Laclau, 1996, 2005). Once a grand challenge is articulated as consequential, it does not impose one canonical interpretation but opens a terrain where diverse actors must translate its indeterminacy into context-specific forms. Each situated articulation — whether in a municipal strategy process, a global governance body, a corporate sustainability unit, or a civil-society network — re-enters the struggle over what the grand challenge signifies, what is at stake, and what forms of agency are rendered possible or necessary.

In this perspective, the analytical significance of grand challenges lies not only in their nominal universality but in how they are continuously re-articulated within specific contexts. These situated iterations do not carry out a general discourse but actively reshape it by anchoring the empty signifier in practices, metrics, programs, narratives and institutional routines that make it actionable in

that setting. What emerges is not a unified global project but a constellation of local hegemonic formations, each provisional and each stabilizing meaning in different ways, generating different patterns of visibility and marginalization. These formations can generate a wide range of hegemonic effects, from the naturalization of particular problem framings to the displacement of alternative diagnoses. They may stabilize specific attributions of responsibility, translate conflict into managerial vocabulary, create ceremonial commitments that absorb attention without altering practice, or reorder which interventions come to appear feasible, necessary, or even imaginable — while still drawing legitimacy from a horizon presented as universally shared. Taken together, these dynamics reveal that in the case of grand challenges, hegemonic effects arise from the combined operation of empty, floating, and partial fixation — shaping both what count as universal and the practical and procedural arrangements through which actors coordinate their responses. The normatively promoted plurality of perspectives in grand challenges scholarship (cf. Ferraro et al., 2015; George et al., 2016; Gümüşay et al., 2022) does not counteract hegemony but constitutes the very condition through which a particular articulation becomes taken-for-granted as the common problem-space. While pragmatist accounts frame multivocality as an inclusive design principle, a post-foundational lens highlights that its celebrated openness also creates fertile conditions for hegemonic obscuration. Because the signifier remains formally indeterminate, heterogeneous interpretations can be aligned without necessarily becoming articulated as antagonistic (Laclau, 1996, 2005), such that conflict can be absorbed rather than expressed and certain interpretations become dominant without appearing as such. In this sense, multivocality can function as a mode of concealment — not by erasing difference outright, but by rendering some differences less intelligible or institutionally actionable (cf. Tomlinson and Schwabenland, 2010; van Bommel and Spicer, 2011). Such obscuring dynamics do not eliminate disagreement but delimit the forms through which it can be rendered visible or contestable. If grand challenges operate as hegemonic projects in this sense, important analytical consequences follow for grand challenges research. The following discussion develops these implications in three respects.

Discussion

Part of the “turn” (Gümüşay et al., 2022: 2) toward 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 and Spengler, 2022). 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, as Seelos et al. (2022) suggest, I argue that this critique should not prevent us from recognizing the concept’s potential to open up valuable avenues for research. Notably, the problem form that the concept names is already operative in practice, as organizations, policy arenas and governance bodies routinely invoke it to frame priorities, justify interventions and mobilize collective action. Accordingly, this article set out to reconfigure the foundations upon which grand challenges have been theorized, reorienting analysis from solutions-oriented framings to the articulatory processes through which they become intelligible, actionable, and institutionally consequential. Treating grand challenges as empty signifiers reveals that their meaning and organizing force arise not from inherent complexity but from the hegemonic projects through which discursive openness is mobilized, contested, and provisionally stabilized across sites of practice. On this basis, the discussion specifies what this reconceptualization implies for how grand challenges are analyzed.

The primary contribution of this article is conceptual, reconceptualizing grand challenges as hegemonic projects constituted through articulatory practices. The following discussion derives

three analytical implications of this discourse-theoretical reconceptualization for grand challenges scholarship: (1) approaching problem articulation as a political process, (2) reorienting empirical inquiry toward tracing situated partial fixations, and (3) making explicit the epistemic assumptions underwriting solution-oriented research. Taken together, these implications clarify how reconceptualizing grand challenges as hegemonic projects reshapes both empirical analysis and the position of research within the field.

Repoliticizing problem articulation. The first implication addresses the ontological level of the argument. By foregrounding the role of empty signifiers and the structuring role of their signifying modalities, the analysis demonstrates that the articulation of a grand challenge is not a neutral act of representation but a political intervention (cf. Glynos and Howarth, 2007; Laclau, 1990). While the scholarly literature on grand challenges emphasizes openness as a necessary condition for mobilization, such openness is never boundless. The moment actors seek to translate a grand challenge into concrete agendas, programs, or responsibilities, indeterminacy must be narrowed in order to render action possible. This shift from an indeterminate horizon to more operationally usable articulations is not simply a matter of practical coordination but a political act that establishes which interpretations become actionable, which recede from view, and which forms of agency are rendered legitimate or marginal. Crucially, it is in this movement — from emptiness to situated articulation — that the hegemonic dimensions of grand challenges become visible. The analysis renders these constitutive exclusions legible, showing that the apparent inclusiveness celebrated in the literature does not circumvent the logic of hegemony but performs it. What appears as a shared societal imperative is, in Laclauian terms, the temporary occupation of an empty space by particular articulations that present themselves as universal (Laclau, 1996, 2005). The potency of grand challenges thus lies not only in their moral force but in their capacity to facilitate the presentation of particular interpretations as universal while concealing the partiality from which they arise.

Recognizing this dynamic unsettles the normative confidence with which the concept of grand challenges are frequently mobilized. It refocuses analytical attention from the purported object to the political work performed in its name. This entails examining how divergent articulations become translated into managerial vocabularies, how conflicts are recast as technical matters of implementation, and how imaginaries of responsibility travel across fields under the appearance of collective concern. By repoliticizing problem articulation, the analysis shifts the analytical focus from prevailing solutionist framings to how the formulation of grand challenges organizes the conditions under which responses become thinkable.

Tracing situated partial fixations. The second implication shifts from ontology to epistemology, where and how hegemonic ordering materializes in practice. Recognizing grand challenges as hegemonic projects, rather than pre-given domains of collective action opens new empirical and theoretical pathways. It creates a space for examining how their discursive openness is locally operationalized, how competing articulations crystallize around it, and how partial fixations shape the possibility of contestation and alternative articulations. Hegemony, in this view, is not a top-down imposition nor a global settlement but a dispersed and recursive process unfolding across multiple organizational and institutional sites. Each instantiation of a grand challenge — be it a sustainability report, a municipal strategy, a philanthropic initiative, or a multi-stakeholder partnership — constitutes an attempt to anchor an indeterminate signifier within particular patterns of articulation.

This insight redirects analytical attention toward the practices through which grand challenges become provisionally stabilized. The question is not which interventions or organizational structures best address a grand challenge, but which situated practices give the signifier its local form

and authority. What the model developed here contributes is a vocabulary for tracing this process. More specifically, the framework offers a critical logic of empirical inquiry, sensitizing researchers to the articulatory practices through which grand challenges are constructed. Crucially, this logic of inquiry treats the signifying modalities of grand challenges not as empirical categories but as relational effects that must be reconstructed from situated practices, such as policy texts, strategy work, indicator design, collaboration infrastructures, public consultations in which actors contest or stabilize what the grand challenge is taken to mean. The purpose is not to classify instances but to trace how each articulation brings alternative possibilities into view or pushes them into the background, how particular coalitions acquire hegemonic traction, and how exclusion is enacted under conditions of discursive openness. In doing so, the paper also contributes to the ongoing effort to mobilize Laclau and Mouffe's discourse theory empirically. Because their framework is ontological rather than procedural, scholars have stressed that its key concepts require careful translation and reflexive application (Glynos and Howarth, 2007). The triadic model developed here functions as a critical logic of inquiry. It does not specify methodological steps but directs empirical analysis toward reconstructing the articulatory practices through which grand challenges acquire their hegemonic form. In empirical terms, this logic of inquiry directs attention to articulatory practices rather than to thematic content. What is traced are not statements about grand challenges, but the relations that link or separate demands, actors, and problem definitions as they are brought into a shared field of articulation. An articulation becomes observable whenever these relations are actively (re)configured — when heterogeneous elements are tied together as if they expressed a common concern, or when boundaries are drawn that differentiate legitimate from illegitimate interpretations. This distinguishes a Laclauian analysis from framing or sensemaking approaches. The empirical focus is not on the meanings actors express, but on the political work through which particular meanings gain the capacity to organize a field. Attending to these practices allows researchers to reconstruct how emptiness becomes politically productive (e.g. the abstraction that enables heterogeneous uptake), how contestation materializes in floating articulations, and how partial fixations sediment into institutional routines.

This logic of inquiry also resonates with adjacent literatures that examine how issues are constituted rather than discovered — critical policy studies on problematization (Bacchi, 2009), discursive institutionalism's account of how ideas structure institutional practice (Schmidt, 2008), and organizational research on issue construction (Hoffman, 1999) — each offering analytical resources for tracing how grand challenges become intelligible, actionable, and legitimate across sites. This insight shifts the analytical focus away from the widespread tendency to study how grand challenges should be addressed — through collaborations, governance arrangements, or implementation approaches — and toward how such processes participate in constituting the very problem they purport to solve.

These situated partial fixations accumulate into what can be understood as local hegemonic formations in which the empty signifier becomes provisionally stabilized through practices that render certain problem definitions actionable while displacing others. The analytical task is therefore not to assess whether a grand challenge is “correctly” defined, but to trace how particular articulations become operative, and with what consequences for inclusion, accountability, and the distribution of epistemic and institutional authority.

Rethinking solutions-oriented research. The third implication concerns the epistemic commitments that structure current approaches to grand challenges research. Much of this literature remains oriented toward evaluating how organizations can contribute to addressing societal problems (Ferraro et al., 2015; Gümüşay et al., 2022). If grand challenges function as empty signifiers, however, a solutionist orientation carries important epistemic consequences. A discourse-theoretical perspective foregrounds the need for methodological reflexivity. Researchers cannot treat societal problems as pre-given objects without reinforcing the illusion that their boundaries reflect the

nature of the issue rather than the effects of discursive struggle (cf. Turnbull and Hoppe, 2019). What follows is not a rejection of material conditions, but a recognition that their articulation is never epistemically neutral. Knowledge claims become implicated in hegemonic ordering, shaping not only scholarly agendas but also the institutional arrangements they purport to explain (Fournier and Gray, 2000; Spicer et al., 2009).

When research takes grand challenges as given objects that call for solutions, and aligns itself with collaborative or innovation-oriented responses (Ferraro et al., 2015; George et al., 2016; Gümüşay et al., 2022), it does not merely describe an existing agenda but participates in consolidating it as a natural and neutral problem-space. The signifier's urgency appears to stem from external conditions rather than from the discursive operations through which certain diagnoses, responsibilities, and temporal horizons are elevated over others (cf. Tomlinson and Schwabenland, 2010; Turnbull and Hoppe, 2019). In this sense, grand challenges research is not external to the hegemonic projects it studies but forms part of the articulatory field through which particular problem-spaces are stabilized and rendered authoritative.

This entails a reorientation of inquiry. Rather than asking how organizations can best respond to grand challenges, research must interrogate how specific articulations come to define what counts as a grand challenge in the first place, how certain solutions become intelligible and legitimate, and how alternative formulations are displaced or rendered marginal. The analytical task shifts from improving responses within an assumed problem-space to examining the political constitution of that space itself. Such a shift does not suspend engagement with practice but reframes it by situating intervention within the discursive conditions that make particular forms of action appear necessary, feasible, or inevitable.

Taken together, these implications reorient grand challenges scholarship toward *problem-raising* rather than problem-solving. To study grand challenges is not only to analyze how to address pressing societal issues, but to confront the political work through which the "impossible" is named, organized, and made actionable. In this sense, the turn to grand challenges does not move organization research beyond politics, it returns us to it (cf. Contu, 2018). In our quest for meaningful contributions, let us not forget the unruly terrain constituting the organizational world, the very core of what makes organization research a creative endeavor.

Concluding remarks

This paper develops a discourse-theoretical reconceptualization of societal grand challenges. Grand challenges acquire significance not through inherent properties but through the articulatory practices that constitute them as objects of collective concern. By conceptualizing grand challenges as empty, floating, and fixed signifiers, the analysis shows how their capacity to organize collective action emerges from the signifying modalities through which hegemonic projects are articulated. In doing so, the article demonstrates that understanding grand challenges requires recognizing that their discursive openness is not simply an obstacle to coordination (Berrone et al., 2016; Reinecke and Ansari, 2016) or a strategic resource for collaboration (Ferraro et al., 2015; George et al., 2016), but a political condition through which hegemonic projects are constituted. The triadic model specifies how this condition becomes empirically traceable, by linking emptiness, contestation, and partial fixation to the situated practices through which grand challenges are rendered actionable. It is here — where universality is claimed, exclusions are enacted, and futures are imagined — that the politics of grand challenges becomes visible. And it is here that critical organization studies find its analytical leverage, not to refine solutions, but to expose the struggles through which problems are made, contested, and sustained as the objects around which collective life is organized. Together, these implications reorient grand challenges scholarship toward treating grand challenges as hegemonic projects constituted within, and constitutive of, contemporary organizational life.

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Notes

1. Leading management journals have urged scholars to address grand challenges via editorial notes (e.g. Colquitt and George, 2011; Eisenhardt et al., 2016; Van Der Vegt et al., 2015), call for papers and special issues (e.g. Academy of Management Journal, 2014; Drori et al., 2025; George et al., 2016; Voegtlin et al., 2022), resulting in a broad scholarly uptake of the concept that continues to grow over time (Dorado et al., 2022; Gariel and Bartel-Radic, 2024).
2. Although the particular label “grand challenge” is largely employed within scholarly discourse, the problem-form it denotes—societal issues rendered as complex, systemic and requiring coordinated, cross-sectoral intervention—is widely institutionalized in practice. Policy fields routinely invoke “wicked problems” (Head, 2022) and “societal challenges” (European Commission, 2013), while mission-oriented innovation policy frames such issues as collective, future-oriented transformations that demand broad mobilization (Mazzucato, 2018). Similar dynamics characterize collaborative governance initiatives in public administration (Bryson et al., 2015; Kanon & Andersson, 2023) and cross-sectoral architectures documented in empirical studies (e.g. Kanon, 2024).
3. As with most empty or open signifiers, the signifier referred to as “grand challenges” is not tied to a single lexical form. It is articulated through partially synonymous labels (e.g. “global challenges,” “wicked problems,” “pressing societal issues”) as well as adjacent problem categories that different fields and communities use interchangeably or as functional equivalents (e.g. “sustainable development,” “climate resilience,” “social inequalities,” “responsible innovation”). The variability of these formulations further illustrates the indeterminacy that enables the signifier to organize heterogeneous concerns.

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