

Short Commentary

Inner Worlds Make Outer Worlds: Reflecting on 10 years of Research into Stuckness

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Have you ever granted yourself the luxury of mapping the changes in your inner world against changes in your theory and meaning making?

I did.

I reviewed ten years (2016-2025) of researching stuckness to understand how my changing inner world created shifts in my theory of stuckness. This review is published by the Action Research Journal and entitled "Shamefully Stuck to Joyfully Jammed? Reflexivity in Researching Stuckness".

This paper uses an Action Research approach to describe five cycles of change in my life and how these changes created shifts in my theory through the processes of reflexivity. It also speaks to the valuable role of co-researchers in my research eco-system. The outputs from this research included a doctorate, three papers, two books, and a coaching praxis.

Just as a frame, I work as an Existential psychotherapist and coach, living in South Africa, but working globally with corporate and public sector leaders. The research period began with a doctorate in Existential Psychotherapy at Middlesex University in 2016. I am now (2025) completing my second book and learning new things all the time. Stuckness has been a gift that just keeps on giving.

During these ten years I experienced a lot of change, including in my relationship to myself (and my stuckness), my racialised thinking, the impact of the deaths of five dearly beloved people, relationship break-ups, my ADHD explosion, and menopause. These factors created changes in my research including a more contextual and compassionate approach to stuckness and the broadening of the applicability of the theory created by working through my own racialised thinking. By engaging deeply with my own wounding, I was able to appreciate the role wounds play in initiating transformation. By engaging with my own losses, I was able to understand how transformation always includes many losses. Initially my theory positioned stuckness as a degenerative event experienced as a result of intrapsychic factors caused by individual deficiency. In straighter and less kind words, people got stuck because they were too pig-headed, stupid, or lazy to adapt.

Now I understand stuckness as a regenerative developmental impasse that allows us to digest our pasts and incubate a new future.

We all get stuck and this experience is essential for our transformation and adaptation, it is stuckness that enables our evolution. One example of how changes in my inner world resulted in changes in my theory is described below. But before I go there, I want to note that I did all the recommended reflexivity processes; journaling, making pictures, engaging with others, taking issues to therapy, and I still missed reflecting fully on my deeper assumptions around stuck me, and stuck others.

After completing the interviews, I coded everything and started building a narrative about who and how people get stuck. The emerging narrative was awful – bland, judgemental, and demoralising. It was then that my research supervisor asked me why I was so hard on the research participants. While figuring this out I began to see the undercurrent of judgment I had of my own stuck self, as well as the participants.

As I worked with my own self-judgement around being stuck, my approach to the stuck participants changed. I began to understand the role of my own wounding in my stuckness, and then I was able to see it in the data. My mind opened to the possibility that stuck people were not completely at fault, and then I started to recognise the enormous role context had played in people getting stuck. I went back to the literature review and discovered that the role of context in stuckness was almost completely absent. All writers had minimised this critical factor making stuckness an intrapsychic and not a relational experience.

I was delighted by this insight and threw away all my original coding. I began coding again, this time looking for context. As a result of this and other insights, a new narrative emerged, one where stuckness was not an intrapsychic phenomenon caused by people being stupid or lazy. It was the idea of stuckness always being a relationship issue where one party was dancing an outdated dance that had no traction with the dancing partner or current context. We get stuck when the dance we learned at an earlier time is no longer effective, and when our wounds are triggered and pop up for attention. It is then that we must go inwards to find our new dance, one that matches the current context and creates traction for our action.

Writing the paper for the Action Research Journal has given me so many insights.

Firstly, that we can use inner work and reflexivity as the alchemical engine that refines, enriches and grows our theory. In this way, we can use reflexivity as a mechanism to bring ideas in consciously and with integrity, not rule them out as subjective and irrelevant. Furthermore that when we create a compassionate and supportive inner world for ourselves, we can create human centric research that is compelling, compassionate, and useful. That if we want to build useful and humanising theories, we need to have the inner worlds that support this. Our research and research participants are only human if we are too. A further area of learning was the importance of co-researchers and the research eco-system. Isolated research is an echo-chamber of our inner worlds, and when these are stuck or blind, we need others to invigorate our research.

Lastly, that research is never complete, it's just good enough for now.

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