Quartz

What riding my bike has taught me about white privilege

By Jeremy Dowsett

The phrase “white privilege” is one that rubs a lot of white people the wrong way. It can trigger something in them that shuts down conversation or at least makes them very defensive. (Especially those who grew up relatively less privileged than other folks around them). And I’ve seen more than once where this happens and the next move in the conversation is for the person who brought up white privilege to say, “The reason you’re getting defensive is because you’re feeling the discomfort of having your privilege exposed.”

I’m sure that’s true sometimes. And I’m sure there are a lot of people, white and otherwise, who can attest to a kind of a-ha moment or paradigm shift where they “got” what privilege means and they did realize they had been getting defensive because they were uncomfortable at having their privilege exposed. But I would guess that more often than not, the frustration and the shutting down is about something else. It comes from the fact that nobody wants to be a racist. And the move “you only think that because you’re looking at this from the perspective of privilege” or the more terse and confrontational “check your privilege!” kind of sound like an accusation that someone is a racist (if they don’t already understand privilege). And the phrase “white privilege” kind of sounds like, “You are a racist and there’s nothing you can do about it because you were born that way.”

And if this were what “white privilege” meant—which it does not—defensiveness and frustration would be the appropriate response. But privilege talk is not intended to make a moral assessment or a moral claim about the privileged at all. It is about systemic imbalance. It is about injustices that have arisen because of the history of racism that birthed the way things are now. It’s not saying, “You’re a bad person because you’re white.” It’s saying, “The system is skewed in ways that you maybe haven’t realized or had to think about precisely because it’s skewed in your favor.”

I am white. So I have not experienced racial privilege from the “under” side firsthand. But my children (and a lot of other people I love) are not white. And so I care about privilege and what it means for racial justice in our country. And one experience I have had firsthand, which has helped me to understand privilege and listen to privilege talk without feeling defensive, is riding my bike.

Now, I know, it sounds a little goofy at first. But stick with me. Because I think that this can be an analogy that might help some white people understand privilege talk without feeling like they’re having their character attacked.

About five years ago I decide to start riding my bike as my primary mode of transportation. As in, on the street, in traffic. Which is enjoyable for a number of reasons (exercise, wind in yer face, the cool feeling of going fast, etc.) But thing is, I don't live in Portland or Minneapolis. I live in the capital city of the epicenter of the auto industry: Lansing, Michigan. This is not, by any stretch, a bike-friendly town. And often, it is down-right dangerous to be a bike commuter here.

Now sometimes its dangerous for me because people in cars are just blatantly a**holes to me. If I am in the road—where I legally belong—people will yell at me to get on the sidewalk. If I am on the sidewalk—which is sometimes the safest place to be—people will yell at me to get on the road. People in cars think its funny to roll down their window and yell something right when they get beside me. Or to splash me on purpose. People I have never met are angry at me for just being on a bike or for being in "their" road and they let me know with colorful language and other acts of aggression.

I can imagine that for people of color life in a white-majority context feels a bit like being on a bicycle in midst of traffic. They have the right to be on the road, and laws on the books to make it equitable, but that doesn't change the fact that they are on a bike in a world made for cars. Remembering this when I'm on my bike in traffic has helped me to understand what privilege talk is really about.

Now most people in cars are not intentionally aggressive toward me. But even if all the jerks had their licenses revoked tomorrow, the road would still be a dangerous place for me. Because the whole transportation infrastructure privileges the automobile. It is born out of a history rooted in the auto industry that took for granted that everyone should use a car as their mode of transportation. It's not built to be convenient or economical or safe for me.

And so people in cars—nice, non-aggressive people—put me in danger all the time because they see the road from the privileged perspective of a car. E.g., I ride on the right side of the right lane. Very few people change lanes to pass me (as they would for another car) or even give me a wide berth. Some people fly by just inches from me not realizing how scary and dangerous that is for me (like if I were to swerve to miss some roadkill just as they pass). These non-aggressive close-passers don't realize that a pothole or a build up of gravel or a broken bottle, which they haven't given me enough room to avoid and which they don't even have to be aware of, could send me flying from my bike or cost me a bent rim or a flat tire.

So the semi driver who rushes past throwing gravel in my face in his hot wake isn't necessarily a bad guy. He could be sitting in his cab listening to Christian radio and thinking about nice things he can do for his wife. But the fact that "the system" allows him to do those things

instead of being mindful of me is a privilege he has that I don't. (I have to be hyper-aware of him).

This is what privilege is about. Like drivers, nice, non-aggressive white people can move in the world without thinking about the "potholes" or the "gravel" that people of color have to navigate, or how things that they do—not intending to hurt or endanger anyone—might actually be making life more difficult or more dangerous for a person of color.

Nice, non-aggressive drivers that don't do anything at all to endanger me are still privileged to pull out of their driveway each morning and know that there are roads that go all the way to their destination. They don't have to wonder if there are bike lanes and what route they will take to stay safe. In the winter, they can be certain that the snow will be plowed out of their lane into my lane and not the other way around.

And it's not just the fact that the whole transportation infrastructure is built around the car. It's the law, which is poorly enforced when cyclists are hit by cars, the fact that gas is subsidized by the government and bike tires aren't, and just the general mindset of a culture that is in love with cars after a hundred years of propaganda and still thinks that bikes are toys for kids and triathletes.

So when I say the semi driver is privileged, it isn't a way of calling him a bad person or a man-slaughterer or saying he didn't really earn his truck, but just way of acknowledging all that–infrastructure, laws, government, culture–and the fact that if he and I get in a collision, I will probably die and he will just have to clean the blood off of his bumper. In the same way, talking about racial privilege isn't a way of telling white people they are bad people or racists or that they didn't really earn what they have.

It's a way of trying to make visible the fact that system is not neutral, it is not a level-playing field, it's not the same experience for everyone. There are biases and imbalances and injustices built into the warp and woof of our culture. (The recent events in Ferguson, Missouri, should be evidence enough of this). Not because you personally are a racist, but because the system has a history and was built around this category "race" and that's not going to go away over night (or even in 100 years). To go back to my analogy: Bike lanes are relatively new, and still just kind of an appendage on a system that is inherentyly car-centric.

So–white readers–the next time someone drops the p-word, try to remember they aren't calling you a racist or saying you didn't really earn your college degree, they just want you to try empathize with how scary it is to be on a bike sometimes (metaphorically speaking).

One last thing: Now, I know what it is like to be a white person engaged in racial reconciliation or justice work and to feel like privilege language is being used to silence you or to feel

frustrated that you are genuinely trying to be a part of the solution not the problem but every time you open your mouth someone says, “Check you privilege.” (I.e., even though privilege language doesn’t mean “You are one of the bad guys,” some people do use it that way). So if you’ll permit me to get a few more miles out of this bike analogy (ya see what I did there?), I think it can help encourage white folks who have felt that frustration to stay engaged and stay humble.

I have a lot of “conversations” with drivers. Now, rationally, I know that most drivers are not jerks. But I have a long and consistent history of bad experiences with drivers and so, when I’ve already been honked at or yelled at that day, or when I’ve read a blog post about a fellow cyclist who’s been mowed down by a careless driver, it’s hard for me to stay civil.

But when I’m not so civil with “privileged” drivers, it’s not because I hate them, or think they are evil. It’s because it’s the third time that day I got some gravel in the face. So try to remember that even if you don’t feel like a “semi driver,” a person of color might be experiencing you the way a person on a bike experiences being passed by a semi. Even if you’re listening to Christian radio.