Akwesi Osei: Barriers to Black men cycling in London podcast

DP: Okay, hello, everyone. My name is Dulce Pedroso. And I'm really pleased to be here recording a new episode for the Active Travel Academy podcast. I'm especially happy to be here with Akwesi Osei my fellow Active Travel Academy Fellow, isn’t it? Okay, I'm especially happy to be here with Akwesi who was an Active Travel Academy Fellow. Also another ‘Justice In and for Active Travel Grant’ recipient, a bit of a mouthful, who did some really interesting research on barriers to Black men cycling. And he's written a paper called ‘You always think about what other people be thinking’. And for me, this was a really interesting paper because this talks about similar issues to my own paper. So I was also a ‘Justice In and For Active Travel Grant’ recipient, but I looked into Women of Colour. So I read through your paper from that lens and spotted lot of similarities, but also some clear differences as well. So maybe like over the next 40 minutes or so we can sort of dive into those themes a bit. So yeah, maybe I'll just let you introduce yourself before we get into the paper.

AO: Okay. Hello. So yes, my name is Akwesi Osei, I'm a transport planner at the Climate Action charity called Possible. I've been with them for two years. And when I was starting that job, I also was really lucky to have got the grant to do this research with the Active Travel Academy, I was really keen to do the research, because I think as a lot of people during the pandemic, took up cycling. I can't say *I* cycle as much now. But I was just kind of really interested in the racial background of a lot of cyclists because I realised there wasn't many cyclists that looked like me, I just became very curious as to why. So, when I did see the call for people to apply for this grant, it was kind of like a no-brainer. And I've always had an interest in not just transport, but social justice, and transport equity, so, this just kind of ticked all the boxes lately. And my background has been in planning, both town planning and transport planning those are what both my degrees are in. So I guess I'm very much in the planning circles. I guess.

DP: That's amazing. So I think what sets your research apart from other research that looks at cycling and, and Black men or minority groups is that you chose to focus on a group that already cycles, rather than sort of looking into barriers and perceptions among people who don't cycle, I feel is probably the more common approach. So why did you go with that?

AO: Good question. I was very, I think, obviously, with research, we kind of always, with a lot of research, we always kind of want to know, like, why things aren't happening. But I think with, there's just such little amounts of research on barriers to cycling for Black men, I thought it would might be more beneficial to actually understand the barriers that Black men are already facing in the cycling world to see what we can do to improve that. And see whether there are any learnings I guess, from those that are already cycling, or wherever we can use those learnings and the findings from obviously my research to see whether we can do anything to improve the ability to cycle for those that aren't cycling already. So it was the main reason, and I think also even from a methodology perspective, it's, it was easier kind of to actually go for those to try and find people that are already cycling as well. I did in my research, I did try to get people that people that cycled quite a bit and then those that cycled maybe once or twice a week or once or twice a month, and those that cycle just less occasionally. So I did try to at least try and get a wide range of cyclists to try and see if there were any differences between them.

DP: And how did you find the people? because I think, because obviously, language around cycling is already quite political. And our, framing already kind of sets certain parameters. I found that, certainly in my research that when I went out there and said, I'm looking for cyclists, that immediately kind of like leads to certain type of sample. So how did you go about yours?

AO: I mean, I was, initially I was quite ambitious, I really wanted to do research, like, a whole bunch of Black men. But I was quickly told that it's way too ambitious.

DP: Maybe we should point out to listeners this was a qualitative study.

AO: So the way I went about it was I just went through loads of different circles mostly word of mouth, but also, primarily, I used social media to kind of spread the word and I was telling people to tell other people that they knew if they knew any other Black men that cycled some, I think one or two participants were people that were mutual friends. But mostly through social media, I got people and like, I think it was obviously kind of lucky, in a sense, weirdly, that, I think, because it was still around the time of the Black Lives Matter movement. There were so many Facebook groups already set, not necessarily around cycling, but around Black people in London, for example, I think there was one that I use that was said about Black businesses, Black-owned businesses in London, and there are thousands and thousands of people on that Facebook group, including myself. So it was, that was really helpful and just trying to get people quite quickly. So social media was really useful.

DP: Yeah. And obviously, your participants identified as black men, but that in itself is quite a broad category. So maybe you can tell us a little bit about like, who did you have in your sample? And maybe the benefits and disadvantages of that?

AO: Yes, I think, yeah, it is true, because I think with, obviously, the term Black men, it can mean obviously, people from African descent, Caribbean descent, first-generation immigrants, it could be people that were born here. I think that's one of the things that I really wish, that's one of the reasons why I wanted a much broader sample size so that I could do more research and differentiate, find, like similarities and differences between different groups. And unfortunately, I didn't have the sample size to do that. But the majority of, of my participants, were British-born. I think the ones a few that were especially older, weren't British-born ones. But there was a mix of those that were from African descent and Caribbean descent. I don't think there was any others, any other Black men in there. But yeah, it's, again, it's one of the great, it's like if I could do this, again, I would do. And if I had more people, I would love to do a much bigger sample size and try and like get people from especially focus on the differences in terms of whether they're British born, or if they're from particular countries and so forth.

DP: But it still tells us quite a lot in terms of sort of your position in society. And regardless of you sort of your country of origin and your heritage and so on. You're still racialised in a similar way, which I expect perhaps shapes the experience of these men, in a similar way. So did you find that?

AO: Yes, yes, I think that's the thing, I think a lot of the findings, I could see that it was most of the findings were based on people's experiences of how they felt people treated them simply because they were Black. And that was kind of like, almost like a ceiling. It'd be like, like they were, that being Black is what came first, regardless of their age or anything else. So in this sense, and I kind of knew this as a cyclist myself, but certainly I sense whilst it would have been great to have had a larger sample size to, again, understand the differences between different Black men, there were still a lot of findings and lots to research. The common theme was simply the fact that they were Black men, and the findings were quite similar.

DP: Yeah, can you give me an example?

AO: I would say probably the biggest example was probably stop and search, which is quite sad. Probably the amount of participants that brought up stop and search, and how they felt that that was mostly due to the fact that they were Black men. And this was, this was to be fair more common with younger participants. And actually the younger, it was almost like the younger the participant, unfortunately, the worst experience was from the youngest participant, for example. The youngest participant on the day of his interview, he was actually stopped and searched, whereas the oldest participant didn't quite believe that he would be stopped and searched purely based on the colour of his skin. So it was, that was really interesting. That was definitely something I would love to research more again.

DP: that's, yeah, that kind of low level intersectionality, I guess, where age interacts with race. Yeah, I found that really interesting, because that wasn't something that came up, came up in my research, as you might expect. And that probably aligned with sort of general statistics about stop and search, women don't tend to get stopped and searched at the same rate at all. However, there is some, like underlying similarities in the experience of the people who who participated in our respective projects. And that's sort of how, sort of the racial and racist dynamics and sexist dynamics as well, in the case of women who have participated in my research, interact with the cycling experience. But you said, I think somewhere in the paper, or maybe it's one of your interviews, who said that ‘it's not so much even about cycling, just about taking space, like existing in a public space?’

AO: Yeah. Which is, again, it's such a shame, but I think that was another thing. And I think one of my participants did mention that, in that it's not just because we're cycling, it's simply being a Black man in the public space, it just makes you susceptible to racism. And that comes in its many forms. And that includes stop and search. So it was really interesting. And I think it also then makes a comeback to readers as well, it does make you think, okay, so if they were walking, would they have the same experiences? And is it? Would it be better, would there be more likely to be stopped and searched or less likely if they were walking or cycling on a different form of public transport? So I guess, in a sense, again, I feel like this could be a common theme in that again, I wish I could have researched even more. And I would love to do more on, just Black men in the public space as well. And I guess, for example, in the kind of job that I do, we reported research on Black men on scooters, we found, probably unsurprisingly, that Black men are far more likely to be stopped and searched and to have their scooters, taken from them if they're Black compared to white men and Asian men. So it does draw you back to in a way, that it's not necessarily that they're on bikes, it's just the pure fact that they're in a public space.

DP: Are they perhaps more visible, maybe, or something?

AO: Yes, yeah, I think. And that kind of draws to, for example, the issue of clothing, which is what some participants picked up on. And again, this was more of the younger participants, and that some of them were more get scared in a sense, for example, where, for example, jogging bottoms, or like track suits, because they thought that would give them more of a, like, a stereotypical look of being of doing something illegal, or like they're about to commit a crime compared to if they were dressed in more like other clothing as well. So and I think that combined with being on the bike, for example, I think one of our participants said that if he was wearing a tracksuit on a bike, he'll probably be perceived as a drug dealer or something of the sort. So, cycling definitely does come into it in a sense, but I think there’s a good arguments to say that the very root of it is simply being in the public space as a Black man.

DP: Yeah. And the type of bike as well, that drew my attention that you made kind of contrasted mountain bikes with like, you know, very sort of, racey frames. And then yeah, that maybe it shapes the experience, of the riders.

AO: Which is, was just a shame because it almost came across as like, it's almost like a lose-lose situation because if you have this rich, expensive bike, people may just assume you've stolen it whereas you have a much more poorer-looking bike, people may just might assume you are poor. And it goes back to the whole issue of status and riding a bike. So which was really sad. But yet, it just really goes to show that just even the type of bike you have, can really impact someone's experience of cycling.

DP: Let's talk about status. Because I thought that's interesting, because it was kind of brushed off in interviews that I did. It didn't come across as a significant barrier or an issue, for the women that I interviewed, although they mentioned that it might be an issue within their communities. And I wonder, again, I'm just kind of drawing conclusions here. But whether there, if it’s a difference, again, like a gender difference in terms of like, how much status matters, and how much you communicate your status through sort of your material possession and so on. And yeah, I'm just guessing whether that is perhaps a bigger factor among men and one that Black men, in particular, exhibited through your research?

AO: Yeah, I think it kind of boils down to, in, in many Black communities, I think men are still viewed as the breadwinner, or they still have to be the breadwinner. And especially if they're younger and coming from single parent households, they're sometimes seen as like the man of the house. But again, it comes down to like they can be seen as they lead the house, or they have certain responsibilities that are different to women in the house. And therefore, that usually comes down to, they have to sort out the transportation for certain family members. And I think with that, there's like certain jobs. There's just this idea that if you're cycling, then how are you going to take the whole family out? And again, as well, I think one of my participants said that having a car kind of shows that it's almost like you've made it in life, and or the family has made it in life, and has climbed like the social ladder, whereas cycling, which is still something that is not obviously common in a lot of Bblack communities in the UK, it's still seen as like, kind of a poor man's activity, or that you clearly haven't made it, then if you're doing something…. One of my participants, at this time, what was really interesting in that, it's, how could you have made it if you're cycling, because cycling is free? Well, arguably, free as in you ride the bike just using your physical efforts. So it's kind of seen as like, but that's obviously a poor man's activity. You know, cars? Well, I guess it's kind of common knowledge now that like cars is still marketed as, like this luxurious form of transport. And again, you could put many people in the car. So it was interesting. I think it's, I could definitely see why that will come across more in my research compared to your research, due to, having been focused on Black men. I think also, it was interesting that it was it seemed to be across different classes and genders as much as ages. There was from my memory, I don't remember there being any intersections with that, with status, which is, I guess it was, it was hard to hear to be honest, because I resonated with it because even my own family still carry some of those. So unfortunately, I've had it so many times. And even like when I've done research, previously to do with public transport, that status is it's still a common theme, as well. So I wasn't surprised.

DP: I mean, there's a long history behind that. Migrant communities have traditionally been doing like sort of physical and laborious physical labour. So this kind of idea of like exerting yourself voluntarily, it kind of like a feels like a middle class or a foreign concept. You only do physical work because you have to, and you haven't made it, you're not a white collar worker. Yeah, my other half of my family in Cuba, I remember when I went there and they asked me about my car and I said, I don't have a car I cycle everywhere and then silence. And then someone said, ‘Isn’t she humble?’ Imagine, to have to admit that, they turned an awkward situation into like, a kind of a strength that I was, I was showing some kind of humble quality by admitting that I don't drive a car.

AO: Yeah, I have very similar stories like my dad lives in Ghana, still to this day. So he says to me like when are you going to drive? Like I don't understand. Like, there's no need to drive and I don't intend to. And my, my sister actually, which is really interesting, she equates not just the status, but she was, like, quite evil (laughs). She’s always saying like, ‘Oh, no one's going to marry you. Unless you drive’. I’m like, well, I hope that's not true. But again, it just goes back to like the status that is attached to driving and that status simply is just not attached to cycling. If anything, there's a negative.

DP: And there's a lot of research, I think about sort of the masculine, masculinity and cycling or rather how cycling is not seen as a masculine activity, it’s kind of infantilised, and then Black men have that history of being infantilised as it is. So to, yeah, to come across this sort of grown man, you don't want to be like, you know, on your BMX.

AO: But yeah, even my mum, she just doesn't - it took a very long time when I started cycling the pandemic to just get our head around it. She still has some reservations. Yeah, it just goes to show that there's, I guess, there's a lot of work to do in our communities as well, which is really interesting, in my view, such that it's not just other communities in the sense of racism, but there's also work to do within our communities as well.

DP: Yeah, yeah, totally, I found that as well with the women who I spoke to, that some of these somewhat, some of these barriers are internalised and they, they come from the sort of the wider society, and there's deep rooted biases and racism, but a lot of it also comes, is internal, and comes from within communities. And it was maybe a bit more common among Asian women who had who came from families with more traditional views of gender roles. So that was probably another perhaps difference, both cultural difference, because I looked at Women of Colour, which included also women of Asian background, whereas you looked at more like African and Caribbean men, but also something that's quite, quite specific to, to women, probably. Another thing that didn't come across maybe as much as transport planners talk about it, I mean, safety. But I did come across it a little bit in my research with women, although interestingly, and this is not specific to Women of Colour, I think it's specific to women in general, that when they talk about safety, it's not just safety from traffic, it's also safety, like personal safety, from harassment and stuff. Other than the policing angle, what sort of safety theme in your research did come up?

AO: That's really interesting to bring up. The short answer is it did not come up that often, safety. I think, when safety was talked about, it was mainly in the form of infrastructure, especially cycle lanes. And a big, obviously, obviously, there were some participants that said they felt a lot safer, more likely to cycle where there are cycle lanes, but it was not, It didn't come across that often. Or was it a significant part of interviews, I would say. And I know some participants, they did actually make a, I remember like, at least two mentioned how certain infrastructures were a lot better in areas like Walthamstow, and Hackney in East London, compared to South London, where there are Bigger black populations, as they perceive it, so that was interesting, but safety as a whole, in terms of especially harassment from the public, did not come up that often. Although somebody else, at least one participant did mention racism from other road users. Like at least once or twice.

DP: Yeah, it seems to remember actually, I think there was somebody who talked about sort of white van drivers. Yeah. But yeah, that was an interesting one, because when I was reading it was like, white vans, they try to get from one place to another in the shortest possible timeframe. And they are, yeah, a menace to everybody. But, But yeah, he was, in the interview there was kind of like seeing the aggression that he felt like from a kind of a racial perspective, even though there wasn't anything explicitly sort of racist about that interaction. And he did make me think that the women in my research had with, it’s not the same example, but similarly, they had the second guessed themselves, and were kind of wondering whether an incident was a racial or racist one or not. And I thought that's kind of the reality of living as minoritized, as a racialised community member, is that you're never 100% sure, yeah. That's rarely explicit. Sometimes it is. But most the time it probably isn't.

AO: Yeah, that is true. And that reminds me back to, one of the participants in, when he was saying that, like, the like, if anything happens, while cycling, with another road user, you just always have to be, you just always have to be careful what your reaction is. And you always have to think twice because you as a Black person, you're more, you're more likely to get in trouble with authorities, or you're more -

DP: so like for minor infringements.

AO: Exactly. And, and you're more like, some participants felt that they're more likely to receive probably like backlash from other road users, if they've got into an argument, for example. So they've got that, they'll just, if anything went wrong, just to apologise or anything like that. And just keep going, rather than retaliate, however they wish they could or wish they would if there was never race, which is very interesting. But I think as well as a Black man myself feel like it did make me think like, these are things that sometimes as well, so internalised right in the that there was so much in this research like for, I also think this way, but it's so internalised in you from such a young age, you forget that this isn't normal, right? Not everybody else thinks this way. There's a reason why, which was really interesting. And again, it just made me pick up and wish I could do more research. This is so much more. And even in the paper, there was so much I kind of had to like cut, you had probably the same thing. You just have to keep condensing and cutting out so much from the paper because there's so much you could put in. But yeah, it's really, it's really interesting to hear and all these accounts.

DP: Yeah, yeah. And not related to cycling, per se, but, but I remember during lockdown like and during the time when most people were still like wearing face masks. And I think there was some research on sort of the negative impact and perception of Black men in particular because it was more difficult for them to use facial expression to kind of signal, I don't know what you call it, like friendliness, lack of hostility, because they're covering their faces. So, they already like, you know, are already kind of perceived as being hostile or threatening. And then when you they had the face mask on that kind of like, reinforced that perception. Yeah,

AO: that's really interesting, again very sad to hear. It's not surprising that research is there. Yeah, I wish I had asked if COVID had any effect on cyclists or if that sort of changed anything, again I wish I had done more research.

DP: Well, one thing that came up in my research that I wonder if you had sort of similar stories, maybe not because you focus in London while I went outside London, as that when during lockdown, where, where you were not supposed to leave your local area and but it was never defined what local area was left to people's judgement. And, you know, if you're, if you're walking or you're cycling, local area can feel very different, you know, obviously can cover a lot more ground when you're cycling. Especially like some of the people who I spoke with are like endurance cyclist and ultra cyclists. So it's like local area, is it like 50 or 100 or 500 kilometres? So, so yeah, one of the women, talked about like living, like on the border of Leicester and Leicestershire, okay, Leicester is very diverse and Leicestershire is not. So for her, technically going to Leicestershire is her local area, but she became very self-conscious. And her cycling buddy was somebody who wore a hijab. So they stopped cycling, and was like, it's kind of a very sad consequence and the reverse experience of like, what has been touted as you know, there's been this like uptick on cycling. So many people have taken up and cycling during the lockdown. And then at the same time sort of hearing even though it's a slight one anecdotal experience, but still, that they had to reduce their cycling, not because of the distance in terms of kilometres, but the distance in terms, of the extent to which they would be perceived as local because they didn't look like they belonged in Leicestershire, so, but your participants were all from London. So probably didn’t have that experience.

AO: That didn't come up. And especially in regards to COVID. That didn't come up. Although one of the participants did. I think his was not the same. But he did mention something a bit different in terms of how he was more scared to cycle in certain areas. Because he felt like if he cycled in areas such as Chelsea, which is seen as more upper-class and more white, he felt like if he was to cycle there that he could be perceived as probably a drug dealer or like, and definitely someone that is not from there. And like he said that he’d fear that people will be thinking like, what are you doing here, like you must be here, must be up to no good if you're cycling here, again, which is really sad to hear. So it's, I did wish I did speak about COVID experiences, but I think I can imagine that. So again, amongst younger participants were like, they probably feel there's more this perception that young Black men on bikes might be up to criminal activities, I can imagine that some of them may feel a bit scared to cycle in different areas. But then again, now that I remember, there was another participant as well, who actually said that in certain areas in North London where he’s from, he wouldn't cycle to when he was younger due to like gang violence. And if people realised he wasn't from that area, that could lead to certain issues. Actually, there was two, participants that brought that up, which is really interesting. So that even within our own communities, there can be issues while cycling. So he was this is more again, on the younger ones. But when they were reciting their teenage experiences, which is something they really wish I could do next, which is to research Black men and Black teenagers. And it's like, because I could imagine that there would be very different things.

DP: Oh, totally. Yeah, that would be amazing. Go for it. Yeah, I've been thinking a lot because I saw this film about, #BikeLife is their hashtag where, you know, there's kids who are doing wheelies. Oh, yeah. And that being like this huge subculture. And again, it's kind of perceived, put in as kind of, at best a nuisance. But sort of in reality, it's a lot more constructive than, you know, what other options that will be available to a lot of these young kids. And also they are insanely talented, you're the kind of tricks they can do just because they happen to be in an urban environment. Riding their BMX whereas, you know, someone else would just be like, you know, driving the SUV to some like mountain bike track and do like, you know, similarly impressive stuff, but it's just like, yeah, it's funny how the environment and who's doing it kind of shapes the status that we attach to the activity.

AO: Yeah, which is so true. Because I think if you put it down to you know, cyclists are more probably way less likely to cause an accident. So, a BMX rider, a young, a Black child is probably far less likely to cause any damage to somebody than an SUV. Right? It is just so sad, but people just have such negative, I guess negative thoughts in them. And I've one thing I have noticed, if you've noticed this in London, is that there seems to be such a big uptake in the amount of BMXers on the streets, which is so amazing to see. Now it's a chance for planning. But it’s so amazing to see, especially from Black backgrounds I've noticed and not even just that as well, like, I'm always seeing, like all these rollerblading and roller-skating groups as well. So, again, it'll just be really interesting to do more research on young people, especially and then I feel like especially the next few years, I could actually see a lot more.

DP: Yeah. Before it becomes like completely appropriated as a mainstream activity. Yeah, exactly. So I liked where you talked about sort of invisibility, and I think you use the term hypeR-visibility as well. And I like it, because I also talked about this. So clearly, I'm not just inventing this, and I think it's interesting because often narratives want to simplify people's experiences, and as soon as there's a contradiction, they see that as, something de-validates the experience, whereas, you know, our lives are full of contradictions. But I think in this example that you're using, in your research, are based on the experience of the people who participated in your research. Can you talk a little bit about that contradiction between the invisibility and hypervisibility?

AO: Yeah, I love this as well. In that it's, as you said, as well, it's almost like they contradict each other. But I think only when they explain it makes a lot more sense. And that I think, a lot of Black men in my research thought they were hyper-visible, in terms of because there were so few of them in the cycling space, they stood out so much more, and especially the fact that like, they felt like people perceive them differently. So they felt that when they are cycling, that, even if they were cycling with a big group of white men that they will see a different set of rules, a different set of perceptions apply to them. And that came across in many forms, even like a lot of, for example, a lot of participants spoke about how, I guess they were, they felt they couldn't do anything wrong on the bike, because they knew the consequences could be a lot worse for them. And this went from everything, especially to just stopping at red lights. Because I think we all know, I'm sure all cyclists have been guilty of this once upon a time, just going across on the red light. And some of my participants felt like they always thought twice about doing that, because they are hyper-visible, that they could be more likely to be stopped by somebody. In terms of other cyclists or another road user or a police person, where they thought, that they were hyper-visible in terms of because they are one very few Black men in that space, that they could be more likely to receive harassment, especially in the form of racism, as well. I think one participant said how he often goes up to do rides in Epping, which is seen as a much more White area, and that him and his friends are seen as just sticking out in the crowd in Epping, it's a very popular place for people to cycle, especially at weekends. And they felt like people were staring at them or giving them second looks kind of like oh, never seen you guys here before kind of thing. Whereas on the flip side, some of the parts that they were invisible, whether that’s in, how other road users have treated them in that almost it does a disservice, a disregard for their safety, because they felt like being a Black man that was seen as lesser than or kind of like inferior. So there was less regard for their safety or people may be more likely to do for example, like a close pass. And if even if it's not safety, just the representation of Black men in cycling, not just on the road, but in terms like magazines, and cycling clubs, and so forth. They just felt like they simply weren't there in that representation. And also things to encourage Black men to cycle simply just is not there in the numbers that it needs to be. So it's really interesting, this idea of that how, as a Black man cycling , you can be very hyper-visible, but also invisible. Yeah, at the same time.

DP: Yeah, I totally get it because yeah, I had the same kind of findings and how they also actually, like feed each other. In that example, that you just gave as well. And there's been some cases like recently with like, I think it was Muslim hikers. And I think it was like Black women hike groups, Black girls hike groups, who've yeah, who go like in the countryside, and then they've had like major backlash, because, you know, BBC has done a documentary on them or something because they're not seen. People are not used to seeing non-white people in the countryside. So there's probably something similar happening there. I think it’s mentioned in your paper contrasting the experience of like, you know, going somewhere like Epping Forest with, with other Black men versus then just like cycling in, like a mainstream cycling club maybe as the only Black man. And then you know how relatively less attention you get when you're kind of like maybe shielded by that sort of, you're just you're just a minority, you don't call attention the same way as if you go sort of with the with other Vlack men and people from your community into an area where people are not used to seeing you.

AO: Yeah, I think this is something that came across my focus group, I'm not sure if I managed to put this in my paper. But I do. I remember, like people in the focus group, they were talking about how, in these cycling groups, when there are so few Black people in the group, that there's a fear that like other men, or other people in the second group may be treated differently in comparison, being the Black men in the group. And other Black men in the group may be seen as, maybe they might be perceived as they might be slower or just different, there might be like different treatment. And also this, a big, there was also a bit of these White, mostly White cycling groups go to areas where the Black cyclists may feel less comfortable. And I do remember one participant reciting an incident that happened to him, I think it was somewhere in Devon, somewhere south of England. Like a racist incident, and it becomes this kind of, again, this idea of like, they want to go to places where they don't feel so hyper-visible. So then, therefore, they feel like they're more likely to be a victim of a racist incident. So yeah, I think there's this almost like a bit of being like the only Black person in the club, I think, again, that kind of goes outside of cycling, I think that’s in lots of spaces, especially in the public realm, that you kind of want to, you don't want to be hyper-visible, basically. So there's, there was a lot of calls for more Black cycling clubs, as well. And even the ones we do have, a member in the focus group, there was saying, like, it's great that we're already starting to have some, but we need more, because it kind of goes back to this idea of, you know, Black men are not just a monolithic group, there are so many different intersections that we need cycling groups to kind of represent that as well. Yeah, there's a lot to do. Yeah.

DP: Yeah, and you, you nicely called it a Black cycling ecosystem. And I think this is a really important concept. And you probably had a lot of this in your transport planning circles where there tends to be, I find at least in cycling campaigning, that's the most of the focus is on infrastructure. And yeah, something you know, safe spaces, like what do they feel like? They'll have sort of a fussy, weird qualitative concept. But yeah, based on my knowledge, and, and research and also sort of engaging with various groups, they are quite a significant part, an enabler for people from marginalised communities to take part in cycling and other activities as well. And as we just talked earlier, about sort of the relative significance or lack of significance of safety in sort of infrastructure terms. And we talked a lot more about feeling comfortable and feeling safe in a lot more, of a psychological away. So yeah, tell me a bit more about this cycling ecosystem.

AO: Yeah, this yeah, cycling ecosystems. It's a brilliant idea. Actually, I have to give credit where credit's due, it did come from one of my participants, but it's amazing idea. And it's, it's just like, it's this concept, in that, you know, to kind of get more Black men cycling, you kind of have to, like start at the bottom. So, they've been thinking of like, we need to think of ways where we can talk about cycling, in places where black men are, basically so we need to go into Black communities. Whether that is schools in Black communities or whether that’s barber shops, which is a place where especially in Black communities, it's not just a place people are going to cut their hair. I mean, places where people just go to sometimes just to hang out churches, community halls, places in communities and actually talk to Black men and Black women, I guess this goes beyond just Black men, about cycling and how they can get into cycling. And also, I think, going up a level which is then okay, so how can we get a cycle, a bicycle? And the idea of maybe having like Black owned cycle shops. I think this also, especially this, well, this research is mostly done in 2020, and I think it kind of jumps off this idea of having more Black owned businesses in Britain. And, you know, trying to lift that community. And some of the participants said, they wish they could go to Black owned cycle shops, so we can pour money into these shops, and hopefully, they would reinvest in our communities and get some more Black people to cycle. But also, it's this idea of going to someone that can help you get cycling, and also the idea of becoming a role model. Because already, we're not represented in mainstream media when it comes to cycling. So just going to a Black-owned shop, we're going to go and get a bicycle, we're going to fix your bicycle, and seeing a Black person there, it kind of reinforces this idea that this is for me as well. Like, this is not just a White man's activity, which is commonly an idea that's thrown around. I think this idea of an ecosystem that we're going to the communities, and we're already in our communities, and there's going to be role models, and then the next level up where then we're having, you know, mass cycle rides, like, for example, there's an annual cycle ride, the Black Unity Ride, which I attended a part of this year, which I absolutely love, and I can't wait for, it's just getting bigger and bigger every year. And it's just so great how they go through London to really promote, promote cycling month, but it also just hammers down this message that cycling is for everyone, and including Black men and Black women. And I think just doing more and more of these rides in different areas, would be such a beautiful thing and just really get this message across that you know, it's cycling is something for us. I think it's just having that ecosystem, because then once you've hammered down that message that second is for people that can get more people involved. And if already in the communities with cycling shops and talks and so forth, then, you know, we've got this kind of ecosystem going. I just wish I could put into reality.

DP: Yeah, well, I mean, it's, it's part of a long process, isn't it? Yeah, and that kind of challenges, the old kind of idea maybe, that, you know, that build it, and they will come idea, which I think is true to a point, but you will reach a saturation point at one point. And then there are those people who will not come whatever you build. And, and yeah, a lot of the stuff that you've just used as examples. They're like the bike shops and the community rides are to do with, with sort of their social interventions, right? And I loved how you spoke about bike shops, I'm pretty sure there's a lot of research into bike shops, but it's not just, you know, you just go into any kind of, you know, big chain and having a Black person there to kind of like, you know, to tune up your bike, it's recognising the role that local bike shops often have in communities in general, just like organising rides, and, you know, developing the relationship with the community, maybe campaigning for things as well. And that I think, makes you see it a lot more in a different is less transactional. And there's a lot more about being part of that community. So yeah, I think it's, I don't think I appreciated the importance of that as much until I started doing my research. And it is a shame that whenever there are funding cuts, it's usually the social interventions that will fly out of the window first.

AO: Yeah, that's true. I think one thing that I really want to hopefully highlight with my research, it's not just the physical infrastructure actually, one thing that surprised me, was infrastructure did come up in my research, but nowhere near as much as all these other interventions. And a bit, that just goes to show that, you know, a lot of research always comes down to fact that we need more cycle lanes, and of course we do, but there's so much more around it. And these things are all intertwined. So it's it was really interesting to kind of realise that it's not just infrastructure, and maybe, I guess, again it calls for more research. But maybe infrastructure isn't necessarily the top of the list in the priority for things that we need. But even if it is more infrastructure was really interesting that some of that participants brought up the fact that even when we do talk about cycling infrastructure and Black areas are at least perceived – I don’t think there’s data presented yet – to be a lot less in Black areas compared to White areas, especially the difference between South London and North London, as well, which is really interesting.

DP: Yeah. Yeah. I think Adonia Lugo talks about social infrastructure, which is, I think, is very similar to that cycling ecosystem as a concept. So maybe to start finishing off, you've kind of said several times that you'd love to do a bit more research into this, but obviously, as a full-time transport planner, do you know how much time you've got? But if you were to look into doing some further research, what would you focus on?

AO: What would I do? I think if yeah, if you asked me to do this tomorrow, I think my number one piece would definitely be the barriers and cycling amongst teenage Black men. I think there's so much to learn, as well. And of course, you know, if these are our future generations, we need to ask them what we need to basically get the experiences. And if my research has shown that already, that the younger the participant in my research it seemed to be the more negative the experience was, it just kind of gave me some fear in that, okay, if this was like 20, something-year-old, only God knows what a teenager is going through when cycling. So that would definitely be my next step. If I could do more research, I would imagine there's probably a lot more to do with stop and search, but also probably a lot more to do with fear from families, especially because obviously, most of these teenagers still be living at home. And I know one of my participants who said in the I think he leads some a few groups like a youth group or something along the lines of that. And he was saying how you when he was younger, and this is the same for the teenagers in his groups that their parents install a lot of fear in their kids about cycling, whether it's just the fact that they've been in the public space, but also cycling in a public space. And they'd much rather they just didn't go, ideally. But if they did go like they didn't cycle, they are just a bit, there's just so much fear installed in young teenagers. So, it'd be really interesting to be such more on that and see, see what interventions can be made?

DP: Yeah, and I think the beauty of this grant Justice in and for Active Travel was because it was made open to anybody so that's how both of us kind of ended up doing it. Without I don't know if it - were you in academia at the time? No, no. Okay, so neither was I. So I think, yeah, it's probably added something like a different perspective, because you kind of come to it, like from a professional perspective, and then hopefully, also take that into your professional life. And you already mentioned some of the work that you're doing with Possible. And even in the research on scooters. With some sounds really important, because a lot of this data in the UK is not collected.

AO: Yeah, yeah. Because I know, even with that research I didn't lead on that piece my Director did. But trying to get the data from the police was like, it took forever, I think he used a FOIA request to get it in the end, potentially. But I know it was really hard.

DP: And then they often say that we didn't collect it. Exactly, which I think is -

AO: Which is what they did in the beginning. So it was really hard, but I'm really glad we did get the data and it's you know, it was sad but not surprising what the data that we did see in the end, but I think it's good to just have the data to show people that this is just in our heads that this is the reality and I think scooters, especially e-scooters are such a hot topic at the moment. It's nice to see that research as well just to show that you know, there is issues and topics we do need to tackle if we are going to make e-scooters a thing.

DP: definitely and it also I think kind of makes a case for qualitative research because at least I've often understood, it’s often thought qualitative researchers do something that will provide a bit of bit more insight into quantitative research, but I mean, in this case it could be the other way round. Um, you know, you mentioned, you know, the sample size is quite small and so on, but you're looking into something that there is not really any quantitative research in the UK context. Yeah. Yeah. And hopefully, someone will pick it up. And eventually we'll have government data on it as well. Yeah. Excellent. All right. Well, I think we're coming to the end. Are you cycling back?

AO: I wish, I wish actually I’ve got a new Brompton. But I didn't come by it today. I wasn't sure. I knew there was cycling parking spaces here. But because I haven’t been here so long, let me not risk it today. I'll be getting the tube back.

DP: Okay. Fair enough. And yeah, in case you can hear, or you're wondering, I think there's so much happening in the background. So that's probably a good point to end. And before the roaring starts interrupting our flow. But yeah, thanks very much for joining me, Akwesi, it was lovely to speak with you.

AO: Lovely to speak with you too, thank you for having me.