



Why I Check My Privilege, and Why You Need to Check Yours: A Response to Tal Fortgang

The following are excerpts from anonymous submissions on a Facebook page titled UCSB Microaggressions :

“I saw a group of guys I recognized ... They were a group of dark-skinned Hispanics, South Asians, and Middle Easterns all huddle in front of a gate. Behind that gate, a bunch of white guys held the gate shut and were yelling, ‘WHY DON’T YOU JUMP THE FENCE, MEXICANS?!’ over and over again at the group of guys I knew.”

“After coming out of the closet, I keep hearing people tell me, ‘I like how you act manly like an actual guy, I fucking hate it when gay people act gay around me.’”

“One quarter, I had a TA who told me that if I had cystic fibrosis, I shouldn’t even be enrolled in school, and that I should just drop out because I missed a single lab, and emailed her to explain why.”

“I was pulled over by a police officer, and when he reached my window, his first question was not ‘Can I see your license and registration?’ Instead, his first question was, ‘Do you speak English?’ I was really taken back by this. The only reason that he asked me is because I fit his stereotype of what a Mexican person ‘looks like.’ Sorry not sorry I don’t fit your definition of what an English Speaker ‘looks like.’”

“I hate going to parties mainly because white males approach me assuming I will instantly say yes. This dude once came up to me and said, “I don’t usually do this, but I think you’re really good looking even though you’re Latina.” ... Later that night I heard him talk to his friend about that ‘Mexican, fat-assed bitch’ he would bang that night.”

“NO YOU CAN’T TOUCH MY HAIR!”

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I have never experienced anything like the above. I am also white, heterosexual, cisgendered and able-bodied. Those two facts are not mutually exclusive.

A UCSB campus climate survey concluded that “white respondents, men, heterosexual respondents, and respondents without disabilities were more likely than their underrepresented peers to feel ‘very comfortable’ with the overall climate.” The results — to me and to anyone who does not fall under that category of white, male, heterosexual, and able-bodied — seem obvious. Others, though, apparently cannot comprehend how historical power structures relate to comfort level. One white man was quick to blame the discomfort on “fear mongering” within minority communities, rather than suggest any way in which the school could work to make those communities feel safer. Similarly, UCSB’s Take Back the Night organization posted sexual assault statistics on Facebook, and a different white man (wrongly) accused the group of posting misleading statistics in order to scare women. Um, no, actually, TBTN is trying to help women and change those statistics.

When a horrible gang rape occurred on campus in February, police reports identified the perpetrators as “Asian males” and distributed sketches of two “Asian males” based on limited identification information. As a result, an alarming number of people on campus channeled their anger into racism, which one API girl addressed in an op-ed in the *Nexus*. In her article, she discussed the intersections between racism and sexual assault, and brought up historic police disregard for minority communities. One commenter, rather than asking for more information or even considering that any of her thoughts may be legitimate, instead jumped to assert her wrongness, and

claimed police brutality or negligence isn't a problem at UCSB. The commenter was, you guessed it, a white man — someone who does not belong to any group that has ever received unfair targeting by police and is therefore in no position to contradict the real experiences of underrepresented students on campus.

Time and time again in class discussion sections, in talking with groups of friends or on virtual conversations over social media, white men question the experiences of others and insist that they have authority on the matter, when in reality they have no experience or facts to back up their opinions. Time and time again I see white people (I would say white men because they are the worst perpetrators, but white women are by no means exempt) taking up space where they shouldn't, speaking on matters that do not affect them and expecting to be taken as seriously or more seriously than the people who are forced to face those issues on a daily basis.

I follow the UCSB Microaggressions page because I believe in the importance of reminding oneself of the ways in which one is privileged, so that one does not remain complicit in the systematic oppression of the underrepresented.

So, here is what I have to say to Tal Fortgang, the Princeton freshman who does not share this belief of mine:

Tal, your family's story is beautiful. Your grandparents' struggle to survive and forge a new life and a better future for their grandchildren — for you — inspires me, it really does. I hope that I never face anything like the struggle they faced, and I hope that if I do I will have the strength they had.

However, your family's incredible story doesn't change the fact that you are a white man. As much as you will try to deny it, your complexion and your gender give you advantages — privileges, if you will — that others just don't have.

You have already written off the people of color who have told you to check your privilege, even insinuating that they are racist in doing so. They are generalizing you because you are white, and generalizations are ALWAYS wrong, right? So you write them off. Well, I, too, benefit from white privilege, and I can promise you that it is real.

I am privileged because growing up, the majority of my teachers looked like me. Not a single one ever made the assumption that I would not do well based on subconscious presuppositions about success rates of different ethnicities. Not only were my teachers white, but so were the politicians I saw in office, the police I saw on the streets and the faces I saw on my favorite television shows and in my favorite magazines. In school, the majority of the historical figures I studied, the authors I read, the scientists and mathematicians my teachers heralded, were white. Now the majority of my professors and administrators are still white. I am privileged because I have never walked into a store and found myself under constant surveillance by managers who suspect I might steal. I am privileged because I have never been "randomly selected" at an airport, despite having spent a much greater than average percentage of my life on airplanes (I am also privileged enough to be able to travel). I am privileged because when I was 12 years old, I walked past a cluster of police officers with a black friend and could not for the life of me understand why he got scared. He hadn't even done anything! Now, in Isla Vista, I am privileged because I know that I can look to the police as a source of protection, rather than a source of fear and unfair criminalization. I have privilege because as an undergraduate at UCSB, white students are an overwhelming majority and therefore I never feel alone in my identity. I don't have to create new spaces on campus in order to find solidarity and support. I am privileged because if I wanted to, I could (like you) go about my life ignoring my white privilege, when people of color must confront prejudice and discrimination on both a personal and an institutional level every single day.

Look at me, Tal. Look me in the eyes and tell me that none of the above examples of white privilege apply to you. What's that? A couple of them seem familiar? Exactly.

White privilege is not the only kind of privilege. This seems to be a concept that confuses you. Because of my

family history, there are many ways in which I have privileges that you do not. My ancestors did not flee persecution. I come from an financially affluent background. All of my grandparents spoke English as a first language and went to college.

There are ways in which you have privileges that I do not, as well. I do not have the privilege of walking alone, or even with other girl friends, at night in my college town and feeling safe, because I am female. Even during the day, I do not have the privilege of walking down the street alone without being harassed, evaluated based on my appearance and propositioned. I will spend my life being called a “bitch” or a “prude” when I turn down sexual propositions and a “slut” or “easy” when I don’t. As a woman in college, I face a one in four chance of being raped, and if that were ever to happen to me, I would not receive institutional support (look at all of the cases at colleges across the country right now), and my peers and the media would make me question whether my actions made me at fault.

You lay out the privileges that your family didn’t have in their struggle for survival, and that’s all very real, but that doesn’t excuse you from the benefits you get in this society because of your appearance and your identity. I’m sorry.

When someone alerts you to your privilege, they are not attacking your character. They are not calling you a bad person or reproaching your attributes. I know that I am hardworking, determined, smart and passionate, and when someone tells me to check my privilege it doesn’t undermine everything I have accomplished. It means that the reality of our society and our history gives me a leg up, and people who do not have my same privileges have to overcome more to attain the same level of success.

You are not the first white man to make the argument against white male privilege, Tal Fortgang. You are not the hundredth, and hundreds more will no doubt follow in your blundering footsteps. My college campus, as I have illustrated, is absolutely swarming with your ilk. (And by your ilk, I do not mean white men, but arrogant, ignorant, entitled white men who refuse to check their goddamn privilege.) I can only hope that the continued efforts of underrepresented communities and their allies to fight against white male supremacy will eventually ensure that your arrogance becomes irrelevant, rather than a threat to their struggle for liberation. And, if a white man reads this (or the many accounts of what life without white male privilege feels like written by people less privileged than I) and decides to check himself, all the better.

Tiana Miller-Leonard’s creed is “check yourself, before you wreck yourself.”

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