

PostEverything

Heroin addiction sent me to prison. White privilege got me out and to the Ivy League.

Second chances don't come this easily to people of color.



By Keri Blakinger January 21

Keri Blakinger is a prison reform activist and felon living in upstate New York. She is a staff writer at The Ithaca Times and a regular contributor to substance.com.

I was a senior at Cornell University when I was arrested for heroin possession. As an addict — a condition that began during a deep depression — I was muddling my way through classes and doing many things I would come to regret, including selling drugs to pay for my own habit. I even began dating a man with big-time drug connections that put me around large amounts of heroin. When police arrested me in 2010, I was carrying six ounces, an amount they valued at \$50,000 — enough to put me in prison for up to 10 years. Cornell suspended me indefinitely and banned me from campus. I had descended from a Dean's List student to a felon.

But instead of a decade behind bars and a life grasping for the puny opportunities America affords some ex-convicts, I got a second chance. In a plea deal, I received a sentence of 2½ years. After leaving prison, I soon got a job as a reporter at a local newspaper. Then Cornell allowed me to start taking classes again, and I graduated last month. What made my quick rebound possible?

I am white.

Second chances don't come easily to people of color in the United States. But when you are white, society offers routes to rebuild your life. When found guilty of a drug crime, white people receive shorter sentences than black people. And even after prison, white men fare better in the job market than black men with identical criminal records.

It was prison that clued me in to just how much I benefit from systemic racism in our society. Until then, I hadn't thought much about white privilege, which is exactly how privilege works — as a white person, I could ignore it. But sitting behind bars, I saw how privilege touches almost everything, especially the penal system.

It starts at the gate — or rather, who comes through the gate. When I moved into the state prison, the racial disparity was immediately obvious. I was surrounded disproportionately by people of color. While blacks represent just 13.2

percent of the New York State population, they are nearly half of the state's prison population. Reasons for the disparities are clear: Nationally, blacks are more likely to be pulled over, more likely to be searched, and, if arrested, likely to be sentenced to more time for the same crime. Although whites and blacks use drugs at about the same rate and although whites are more likely to sell them, black youth are 10 times more likely to be arrested for drug crimes than are their white counterparts.

Once in prison, minorities are at an even greater disadvantage. Some corrections officers (though hardly all) were overtly racist. Some used racial slurs. One was rumored to sport a tattoo of a black baby in a noose. Even if the rumor wasn't true, it says something about the prison's racial climate that prisoners believed it conceivable enough to repeat.

In one case, I watched prison officials send a black inmate to solitary confinement for wearing her pajamas at 10 a.m. Apparently, there was a little-known rule prohibiting inmates from wearing pajamas after a certain hour, despite the fact that they looked nearly identical to regular state-issued clothes. I never even thought about when to change out of my pajamas, so I'm sure I wore them after the appointed hour, too. But nobody ever troubled me about it, let alone sent me to solitary. There were many times that black inmates were hassled for things that white inmates weren't.

To be clear, it is not only minority inmates who could get sent to solitary for little to no reason. Whatever their race, inmates routinely get put in solitary for trivial rules violations such as having too many postage stamps, missing appointments, or talking back. Overall, though, black inmates are treated worse. In New York State, they make up 49 percent of the prison population but 59 percent of the solitary confinement population. And the superintendents who decide how long prisoners will spend in solitary are overwhelmingly white in my experience. I knew of only one African-American superintendent or deputy superintendent in the five female facilities that existed when I was locked up. (The New York Department of Corrections and Community Supervision says they have two black superintendents now).

Of course, race alone doesn't explain my story. There were other factors that led to my reduced sentence and my return to Cornell. I was arrested in in Tompkins County, a liberal jurisdiction with long-standing commitment to alternatives to incarceration and progressive sentencing. (If I had been arrested in any of the surrounding counties, my sentence could have been three to four times as long.) In another stroke of luck, New York rolled back parts of the notorious Rockefeller Drug Laws the year before my arrest. Had I been prosecuted under those laws, I would have gotten 15 years to life.

Although Cornell has a process governing the readmission of suspended students, they never explained exactly what persuaded them to allow me to return. When I was arrested, officials told me that it is standard to suspend any student who is arrested, though the Campus Code of Conduct doesn't specify that punishment. Readmission is

allowed on a case-by-case basis. I gathered letters of recommendation from former professors, my parents and my parole officer and sent them to the judicial administrator. I provided samples of my freelance writing to show I was working to support myself. I answered a standard set of written questions about what I had learned, what I had done to change my path and what safeguards were in place to make sure I don't recidivate. I had a 20-minute or so phone interview with the judicial administrator and then waited on pins and needles for a response. It came in the form of a brief e-mail: "I am pleased to report that you have been approved to finish your Cornell degree, starting in January 2014."

It's impossible to know if a black or brown student in the same circumstances would have been allowed back in. But I think it's likely. Through its Prison Education Program at a maximum-security state facility, Cornell allows inmates to earn Cornell credits. Clearly, it is a school interested in second chances.

I regularly encounter people who deny that things like racism and privilege still exist, who believe that we are living in a post-racial world. And yes, I dream of a world in which every ex-con could enjoy the opportunities I have. But I saw firsthand how deep and structural biases shaped our criminal justice system. For some, the battle is about ending racism and privilege — behind bars or anywhere else. But for others, the battle is simply acknowledging that there is a battle at all.

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Checking My Privilege: Character as the Basis of Privilege

Tal Fortgang '17

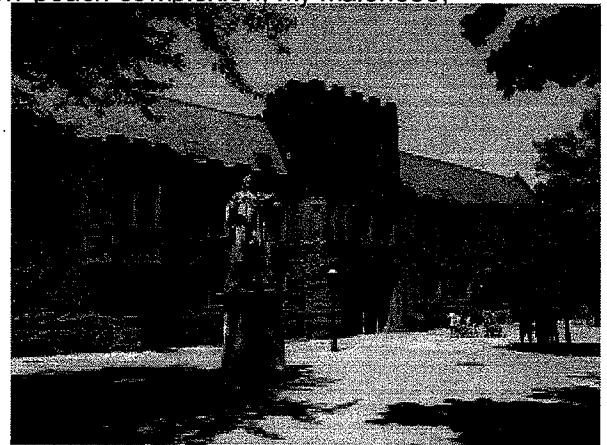
There is a phrase that floats around college campuses, Princeton being no exception, that threatens to strike down opinions without regard for their merits, but rather solely on the basis of the person that voiced them. "Check your privilege," the saying goes, and I have been reprimanded by it several times this year. The phrase, handed down by my moral superiors, descends recklessly, like an Obama-sanctioned drone, and aims laser-like at my pinkish-peach complexion, my maleness, and the nerve I displayed in offering an opinion rooted in a personal Weltanschauung. "Check your privilege," they tell me in a command that teeters between an imposition to actually explore how I got where I am, and a reminder that I ought to feel personally apologetic because white males seem to pull most of the strings in the world.

I do not accuse those who "check" me and my perspective of overt racism, although the phrase, which assumes that simply because I belong to a certain ethnic group I should be judged collectively with it, toes that line. But I do condemn them for diminishing everything I have personally accomplished, all the hard work I have done in my life, and for ascribing all the fruit I reap not to the seeds I sow but to some invisible patron saint of white maleness who places it out for me before I even arrive. Furthermore, I condemn them for casting the equal protection clause, indeed the very idea of a meritocracy, as a myth, and for declaring that we are all governed by invisible forces (some would call them "stigmas" or "societal norms"), that our nation runs on racist and sexist conspiracies. Forget "you didn't build that;" check your privilege and realize that nothing you have accomplished is real.

But they can't be telling me that everything I've done with my life can be credited to the racist patriarchy holding my hand throughout my years of education and eventually guiding me into Princeton. Even that is too extreme. So to find out what they are saying, I decided to take their advice. I actually went and checked the origins of my privileged existence, to empathize with those whose underdog stories I can't possibly comprehend. I have unearthed some examples of the privilege with which my family was blessed, and now I think I better understand those who assure me that skin color allowed my family and I to flourish today.

Perhaps it's the privilege my grandfather and his brother had to flee their home as teenagers when the Nazis invaded Poland, leaving their mother and five younger siblings behind, running and running until they reached a Displaced Persons camp in Siberia, where they would do years of hard labor in the bitter cold until World War II ended. Maybe it was the privilege my grandfather had of taking on the local Rabbi's work in that DP camp, telling him that the spiritual leader shouldn't do hard work, but should save his energy to pass Jewish tradition along to those who might survive. Perhaps it was the privilege my great-grandmother and those five great-aunts and uncles I never knew had of being shot into an open grave outside their hometown. Maybe that's my privilege.

Or maybe it's the privilege my grandmother had of spending weeks upon weeks on a death march through Polish forests in subzero temperatures, one of just a handful to survive, only to be put in Bergen-Belsen concentration camp where she would have died but for the Allied forces who liberated her and helped her regain her health when her weight dwindled to barely 80 pounds.



Perhaps my privilege is that those two resilient individuals came to America with no money and no English, obtained citizenship, learned the language and met each other; that my grandfather started a humble wicker basket business with nothing but long hours, an idea, and an iron will—to paraphrase the man I never met: “I escaped Hitler. Some business troubles are going to ruin me?” Maybe my privilege is that they worked hard enough to raise four children, and to send them to Jewish day school and eventually City College.

Perhaps it was my privilege that my own father worked hard enough in City College to earn a spot at a top graduate school, got a good job, and for 25 years got up well before the crack of dawn, sacrificing precious time he wanted to spend with those he valued most—his wife and kids—to earn that living. I can say with certainty there was no legacy involved in any of his accomplishments. The wicker business just isn’t that influential. Now would you say that we’ve been really privileged? That our success has been gift-wrapped?

That’s the problem with calling someone out for the “privilege” which you assume has defined their narrative. You don’t know what their struggles have been, what they may have gone through to be where they are. Assuming they’ve benefitted from “power systems” or other conspiratorial imaginary institutions denies them credit for all they’ve done, things of which you may not even conceive. You don’t know whose father died defending your freedom. You don’t know whose mother escaped oppression. You don’t know who conquered their demons, or may still conquering them now.

The truth is, though, that I have been exceptionally privileged in my life, albeit not in the way any detractors would have it.

It has been my distinct privilege that my grandparents came to America. First, that there was a place at all that would take them from the ruins of Europe. And second, that such a place was one where they could legally enter, learn the language, and acclimate to a society that ultimately allowed them to flourish.

It was their privilege to come to a country that grants equal protection under the law to its citizens, that cares not about religion or race, but the content of your character.

It was my privilege that my grandfather was blessed with resolve and an entrepreneurial spirit, and that he was lucky enough to come to the place where he could realize the dream of giving his children a better life than he had.

But far more important for me than his attributes was the legacy he sought to pass along, which forms the basis of what detractors call my “privilege,” but which actually should be praised as one of altruism and self-sacrifice. Those who came before us suffered for the sake of giving us a better life. When we similarly sacrifice for our descendents by caring for the planet, it’s called “environmentalism,” and is applauded. But when we do it by passing along property and a set of values, it’s called “privilege.” (And when we do it by raising questions about our crippling national debt, we’re called Tea Party radicals.) Such sacrifice of any form shouldn’t be scorned, but admired.

My exploration did yield some results. I recognize that it was my parents’ privilege and now my own that there is such a thing as an American dream which is attainable even for a penniless Jewish immigrant.

I am privileged that values like faith and education were passed along to me. My grandparents played an active role in my parents’ education, and some of my earliest memories included learning the Hebrew alphabet with my Dad. It’s been made clear to me that education begins in the home, and the importance of parents’ involvement with their kids’ education—from mathematics to morality—cannot be overstated. It’s not a matter of white or black, male or female or any other division which we seek, but a matter of the values we pass along, the legacy we leave, that perpetuates “privilege.” And there’s nothing wrong with that.

Behind every success, large or small, there is a story, and it isn’t always told by sex or skin color. My appearance certainly doesn’t tell the whole story, and to assume that it does and that I should apologize for it is insulting. While I haven’t done everything for myself up to this point in my life, someone sacrificed

themselves so that I can lead a better life. But that is a legacy I am proud of.

I have checked my privilege. And I apologize for nothing.

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Sundevil May 3, 2014 at 6:54 pm

I admire your reflections that brought you to your successes today, and their validity to the person you are is unquestionable. Let me share an experience of mine that I hope you find valuable.

When I started college, I thought myself as consciously aware of systems of privilege. After all, I am Jewish, a woman, and a lesbian—all of which are minorities, groups that experience prejudice and subjugation in society. I did not see myself as a contributor to the dominating white, male privileged oppressive society we live in. I was the exact opposite... I was also not racist, not ageist, not sexist. I didn't discriminate against people of faith or color.

The point you are missing here, which took me a number of courses to see, is that privilege is a covert SYSTEM that involves far more than race or religion and we ALL participate in it. It involves all conditions that make up our identities such as income, race, sexual orientation, gender/gender expression, religion, age.... It is all over our world, overt (banning gay marriage) and in ways we cannot see until they are pointed out to us. Examples: Binary gendered bathrooms. The phrase "you guys." identifying a person as "that asian/black guy over there in the white hat." (which we don't do for white people) the visualizations we have in our mind when we think of a profession (cop, firefighter, park ranger... what gender did you think of?)

Privilege ebbs and flows with context. Depending on the situation, I as a woman may have privilege over you, or a person with a disability even though I have epilepsy. We as Jewish people can hold privilege over others. The issue is not about YOU having privilege. The issue is about awareness, opening your eyes to circumstances of power and privilege, identifying the oppressive, overt and covert biases that may be taking place and TALKING about it. Realizing my own privilege did not equate to guilt. I never once felt guilty. Being aware of the conditions of privilege I have, such as an education, a part time job, being a white person, coming from an upper middle class family—these are simply just real, despite conditions that also knock me down a couple pegs. Understanding social problems through this lens has empowered me to watch what I say, what I joke about, how I address others... it's taught me to "check my privilege" for the better. I am able to be an informed advocate because I know when I need to listen instead of giving my white-ass two cents, and I am learning when and how to speak up as inclusively as possible.

Comments
in
response
to
"checking
my
Privilege"
article

My advice to you is to back up for a second and stop taking this phrase as a personal attack. Nobody is undermining you and your accomplishments. By assuming this, you are misunderstanding what the phrase means.

Learn how to listen instead of defending your honor, and you might just get the hang of this. Also, read the "Invisible Knapsack."

[Reply](#)



Alterna May 10, 2014 at 10:07 pm

Wonderfully put Sundevil <3

[Reply](#)



Kevin G. Magana May 3, 2014 at 6:54 pm

How about, freshman totally misses the point? No one diminishes his family's tragic story of persecution by the Nazis. Heck, African Americans were oppressed for over 300 years in these United States of America. Native Indian populations were exterminated all throughout North, Central, and South America by European conquistadors. My own family was run out of El Salvador because of a civil war that was the proxy "hotspot" of the Cold War between the U.S. and USSR. BOO the FUCK who. Do you see me complaining because I've been told in one form or another to check my heterosexual, male, middle class privilege? Do you see me saying, well, you know, your "check your privilege" comment doesn't apply to me because I'm a minority, whose parents grew up dirt poor, and had to toil and struggle up every single god damn inch out of El Salvador, for years, to build up the amazing opportunities that come with the middle class American Dream? NO. That's NOT THE POINT, you obnoxious kid. Even if, at the end of "checking your privilege" you conclude you've got nothing to "apologize" about, due to your family's hardships (which apparently, hardship seems to be hereditary to you; they went through it, and through story-telling time, so did you??), then I find the most probable cause to be that your head was lodged in so far up your ass that all you could fart out was: I'm not sorry. No one asked you to be sorry, stupid. Totally

missed the point. And now your idiot-ness, especially because you go to Princeton, justifies it for a bunch of others who perhaps thought held your view but never had the courage to express or articulate just how stupid they were in public. Congratulations.

[Reply](#)



Mister K. May 3, 2014 at 6:58 pm

Two runners of exactly equal speed and ability compete in a medium distance race. Runner A is permitted to start the race 100 yards in front of Runner B and goes on to win the race by a 105 yard margin. After the race, Runner A, proudly wearing his gold medal, congratulates his opponent on an admirable effort, but proudly points out his substantial margin of victory. Runner B responds by telling Runner A to check his privilege.

Seems pretty straightforward. If Runner A implies that merit alone is responsible for the result, it seems reasonable for Runner B to point out the obvious. It is a bit twisted to say that Runner B has somehow abused Runner A. (And if the guilt is too much to bear, Runner A can always choose to level the playing field.)

Underneath all the noise is a simple truth. Privilege is a factor in success. You don't have to be a student at an elite university to see that. And it seems reasonable to ask a bright, capable student to reflect on that fact and use it to illuminate his life and inform his decisions and actions. Even as he continues to enjoy the advantages of privilege.

[Reply](#)



Dan L. May 13, 2014 at 10:51 am

From my perspective, there are three issues with the whole "privilege" movement and I'll put them in terms of your metaphor.

1. It seems the advocates for the privilege movement aren't

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asking for the runners to use the same starting line, they're asking for Runner B to be given a medal too because it is assumed he would've or should've won the race had the starting lines been the same. Of course this will be true in many cases — but it won't be true in every case.

Progressives seem to advocate redistribution of outcomes as a just reaction to an unequal playing field. That is absolutely unjust and inconsistent with a meritocracy. I don't see how imposing a second injustice (taking medals from some and giving them to others) is any less immoral than the first injustice (different starting lines).

I would argue we need cultural and educational reform in this country that will level the playing field. Let's stop letting teacher's unions run the educational system. We've TRIPLED spending on education in the past 40 years without changing anything. We need an educational system that provides access to high-quality education, holds teachers and administrators accountable, promotes innovation (because that's how things improve), and gives parents choices.

Let's promote two-parent households that dramatically reduce the likelihood of living in poverty. Let's encourage all communities and all families to promote education and then provide the best educational options to parents and children. These are the things that will narrow the gap between the starting lines.

2. There seems to be an assumption that the distance in the starting lines is not something that is controllable by the runners. If the Runner B's of the world would stop voting for politicians who do absolutely nothing to reduce the starting line gap and instead just want to take medals from some people and give them to others, the gap will always remain. Those politicians KNOW their policies don't reduce the gap. They KNOW it. They don't care. They just want to remain in office and if giving people medals keeps them in office, that's what they'll do. It is immoral and disgusting.

3. The greatest disservice that the redistribution of medals has is that it deprives people of earned success — and earned success is the key predictor of happiness. So let's do the hard work of reducing the gaps between in the starting lines but stop taking people's medals away and giving them to people who didn't win. The truth is, there are plenty of

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medals to be won — we don't need to take them from some to give them to others. We just need to give people a fair start and then let the fastest runners reap their benefits. Forcibly taking medals from some and giving them to others assumes that the person doing the taking and giving KNOWS who is faster. Or, it assumes that no one is any faster than anyone else. The first assumption is impossible to make accurately and the second assumption is demonstrably false. Therefore, it is immoral to take medals from some and give them to others.

Now, I've made some assumptions in this post. I've assumed that as a "privilege" promoter, you are a leftist. I may be entirely wrong. My point is simply that I don't deny that some people have an easier time of it and more advantageous circumstances than others — but I do take issue with the reaction that many people have to that. Their reactions is to take from some (through force of law) and give to others based upon their own (inevitably flawed) perception of the situation.

I don't know anyone who doesn't want ALL people to be given a fair shake and given a fair opportunity to rise or to fall based upon their own merits and their own performance — well, except for redistributionists.

Let's fix the starting line issue — then the medal issue takes care of itself.

Wonkblog

Poor kids who do everything right don't do better than rich kids who do everything wrong

By Matt O'Brien October 18, 2014

America is the land of opportunity, just for some more than others.

That's because, in large part, inequality starts in the crib. Rich parents can afford to spend more time and money on their kids, and that gap has only grown the past few decades. Indeed, economists [Greg Duncan](#) and [Richard Murnane](#) calculate that, between 1972 and 2006, high-income parents increased their spending on "enrichment activities" for their children by 151 percent in inflation-adjusted terms, compared to 57 percent for low-income parents.

But, of course, it's not just a matter of dollars and cents. It's also a matter of letters and words. Affluent parents talk to their kids [three more hours a week](#) on average than poor parents, which is critical during a child's formative early years. That's why, as Stanford professor [Sean Reardon](#) explains, "rich students are increasingly entering kindergarten much better prepared to succeed in school than middle-class students," and they're staying that way.

It's an educational arms race that's leaving many kids far, far behind.

It's depressing, but not nearly so much as this:

Even poor kids who do everything right don't do much better than rich kids who do everything wrong. Advantages and disadvantages, in other words, tend to perpetuate themselves. You can see that in the above chart, based on a new paper from [Richard Reeves](#) and [Isabel Sawhill](#), presented at the Federal Reserve Bank of Boston's annual conference, which is underway.

Specifically, rich high school dropouts remain in the top about as much as poor college grads stay stuck in the bottom — 14 versus 16 percent, respectively. Not only that, but these low-income strivers are just as likely to end up in the bottom as these wealthy ne'er-do-wells. Some meritocracy.

What's going on? Well, it's all about glass floors and glass ceilings. Rich kids who can go work for the family business — and, in Canada at least, [70 percent of the sons of the top 1 percent](#) do just that — or inherit the family estate don't need a high school diploma to get ahead. It's an extreme example of what economists call "[opportunity hoarding](#)." That includes everything from legacy college admissions to unpaid internships that let affluent parents rig the game a little more in their children's favor.

But even if they didn't, low-income kids would still have a hard time getting ahead. That's, in part, because they're targets for diploma mills that load them up with debt, but not a lot of prospects. And even if they do get a good degree, at least when it comes to black families, they're more likely to still live in impoverished neighborhoods that keep them disconnected from opportunities.

It's not quite a heads-I-win, tails-you-lose game where rich kids get better educations, yet still get ahead even if they don't—but it's close enough. And if it keeps up, the American Dream will be just that.

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Matt O'Brien is a reporter for Wonkblog covering economic affairs. He was previously a senior associate editor at The Atlantic.

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