

How the Teacher's Race Affects the Teaching of Race

by Rucha Ambikar and Dennis Lunt

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Rucha Ambikar and Dennis Lunt recently joined the faculty at Bemidji State University, in rural Minnesota. Ms. Ambikar, who is from India, is an assistant professor of sociology; Mr. Lunt, a white American, is an assistant professor of philosophy and humanities. In the following exchange, they compare notes on their teaching of race in the classroom.

--Martin Leon Barreto for *The Chronicle*

Ms. Ambikar: Normally I am all for student feedback, but I had a strange experience at the end of my "Race and Ethnic Relations" course last semester. One of my students dropped by my office and said he would have liked the class better if I had talked about my own background in India. (I am Indian and moved to the United States for graduate work.) He said that since I was a "diverse person," my own ethnic background would have made the class more interesting.

Mr. Lunt: It's funny to think of a person as being "diverse." I look like most students' stereotype of a philosopher, even though I usually leave the toga at home — white, male, bearded, bespectacled. I guess my background is assumed to be boring. No one's ever suggested that class would be richer for my sharing it. Do you think it would have helped?

Ms. Ambikar: Helped in what way? In my case, I think the student was genuinely interested, but interested most in the ways that I was exotic or different from the white Christian world that is most common here. I can't imagine satisfying that interest and still maintaining my authority as an instructor who's trained to do this, can you?

Mr. Lunt: It's an uncomfortable truth, but the authoritative tone that comes with being an instructor at the front of the room makes a difference in these

conversations. Last year a student asked me why "so many" African-Americans smoke marijuana. All the evidence says that this assumption is actually false. Starting from that evidence, I could rephrase the question for the class: "Why do we assume that African-Americans smoke more? And why are they eight times more likely to be arrested for marijuana possession in Minnesota?"

In a strange way, that authority to assert facts makes the conversation more factual. It puts limits on what's going to be accepted as evidence. I think it prompts our students to review their assumptions before they enter them into the conversation.

Ms. Ambikar: You may be right. That "authoritative tone" makes a huge difference. But it's not equally available to all of us, is it? When I make assertions like the one you did, I am likely to be dismissed. For example, one day I quoted the civil-rights activist and legal scholar Michelle Alexander, whose work has shown that there are more black people in prison today than there were slaves in 1850. I was met with complete disbelief until I showed a video of her saying just that. I think the only facts that I am able to use are facts about India or from my own background. My facts are acceptable only if they relate to countries or cultures outside the United States. In all other contexts, not being white myself, even the facts I present are open to being questioned.

Mr. Lunt: Sadly, I have to agree. The authoritative tone matters, but I would be naïve if I pretended that much of my authority didn't come from my perceived race. I mean, one stereotype of white men is of neutrality, rationality, factuality — the political "clothing" that every instructor needs when they talk about race.

We like to think that the "Dr." in front of our names makes students more likely to listen to us. But let's be honest, the trust you're talking about usually comes less from academic factors and more from how we dress, how we talk — and, yes, our skin color. My race gives me some authority to set clear limits on what is accepted as fact. And it also gives me the ability to directly challenge racist assumptions, without students taking the criticism personally.

Ms. Ambikar: I think the point that we are dancing around is that talking about race is often directly affected by how our students are already

thinking about our race. When we stand in front of the classroom teaching race, we are already caught in a double bind. We need the ability to legislate what counts as evidence, to talk of race in terms of structural inequalities rather than just personal experience. If you are white, then you have at least some of that legislative power. You can employ some of your own privilege to examine racial privilege in the classroom.

The other side of that double bind affects people who are not white. If you are not white, your objectivity is in question, especially when you want to talk about race or ethnicity. Students won't always assume that you are biased. But they won't assume you are right, either, particularly when you need to "legislate" on what counts as a fact and what doesn't.

Mr. Lunt: At moments like these, I wish that race were an elephant in the room — dangerous, sure, but large as life and there to see. Instead, as a topic of discussion and as a social construct, race is rarely fully present. When it does appear, it's like a deer in the headlights (a Minnesotan metaphor if ever there was one). Racism is an assumption that is barely acknowledged by the student or the teacher using it. In my "Political Philosophy" course, I recently had a student say that "bombing all the Muslims" was not a solution to terrorism. He was earnest, and certainly not wrong. But I had to point out that neither I nor the reading had suggested that all terrorists are Muslim. The automatic, unspoken association of Islam, Arabs, and terrorism needed to be addressed before we could return to a policy discussion.

Ms. Ambikar: I know my capacity to teach about race in America is always in question. I made a conscious choice that I would downplay my own racial background and focus on my training to teach such a subject. As a pedagogic strategy this serves me well, but now I wonder if my own perceived racial identity and outsider status as a foreigner negates the impact of my teaching.

Mr. Lunt: My experience has been that race and racism are moving targets. They resist close examination — even superficial examination — because almost no one ever gives full voice to racial assumptions and images. As a new teacher, I expected prejudice to be blunt and stupid. But incidents like the ones above have been the exception, not the rule.

Ms. Ambikar: In the end, when discussing race in the classroom, do you feel that who we are becomes more important than what we teach?

Mr. Lunt: I think whiteness, as we so often tell our students, is a kind of privilege. This privilege affords me a certain authority in the class — so yes, my whiteness and perceived neutrality on the topic of race certainly matters. And if we are honest, sometimes it is what matters the most!