

Critical Analysis 2:  
Strangers and Friends

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## Abstract

In our second Critical Thinking Paper we will attempt a critical evaluation of Alan Peshkin's book, *The Color of Strangers, The Color of Friends*. This evaluation should include the following. First, what are the goals of the book, what is Peshkin trying to achieve? Second, does he succeed or fail to persuade you of his main arguments? Specifically, you might consider some of the following. How does Peshkin use the imagery of strangers and friends? Why is Riverview an interesting setting for a study on ethnic diversity? How does he see ethnicity operating in Riverview High School, its effects both on students academic lives and their social lives? Finally, there may be other issues you would like to touch on in this discussion, feel free to do so.

## Introduction

Alan Peshkin's *Color of Strangers, Color of Friends* attempts to bring out the issues of race and ethnicity in a post-industrial town. By analysing the various ethnic groups in the town, Riverview, and going into the high school, he is able to make some discoveries on how the "locals" deal with race and ethnicity on a day-to-day basis.

The races include Non-Sicilian Whites, Sicilian Whites, Black, Mexican and Filipino. Throughout his year-long study of Riverview High School and the city, he finds that there is a strange mix. Not one of a melting pot, as many proclaim of America, but, rather, a stew. Where each ethnic group "mingles" but there are still discernable factors so as to be able to readily identify each individual. In effect that "social interactions that normally, elsewhere, occur within an ethnic group, can and routinely do take place across ethnic groups at RHS [Riverview High School]."

## Riverview

Riverview is an interesting setting for this kind of field work mainly due to its long history of diversity. But more so, diversity that's manageable. It provided a place where you can see what's going on with out getting lost, as you would, for example, in New York City. In 1930's for example, you had the Sicilian influx; late 1940's you had the Mexican and black contingent; in the late 1960's the Filipinos entered the scene in Riverview.

Furthermore, RHS gave a nice measure of social “ethnicization.” In other words, it gave a strong indicator of to what degree interpersonal relationships were shaped by people’s view on ethnicity. It displayed the stigmatisation, by both foreigners and residents, of all of the issues (including ethnic) that plagued the city. i

People who lived in Riverview saw the schools, academically troubled, the town as full of crime, and poverty. However, in all of this stigmatism, there was a defensiveness. It was more of an acknowledgement of the situation in Riverview, but an objection to not be treated differently because of it. [p. 25]

Although ethnicity, says Peshkin, plays a role in the lives of those at RHS, it’s not a central bonding theme. By many of the students it was played down and sidestepped. It was made into a passing thought, or by-the-way-ism.

## **Strangers and Friends**

Throughout the book, Peshkin weaves a common thread of people as strangers or friends. He makes notes of various things that people do to demarcate them as strangers or friends, for example, intergroup mingling.

Peshkin states that foreign language is an indicator of being a stranger. Whereas speaking English, is one of being a friend. [p. 180] The newcomers see this as their biggest stumbling block in America. They are stigmatised, both from within, and externally. They are forced to speak English to move from stranger to friend.

For the Filipino students, Peshkin points out, “FOB’s” are strangers and not friends. This conflict stems from a recognition that the Filipino ‘friends’ went through their fair share of hardships, or initiation into the American life. The Filipino friends have no regard to the fact that the “FOB’s” are of their own ethnic background. In many ways, it seems like the already Americanised individuals see the Filipino newcomers as an embarrassment. One Filipino states that he looks at some newcomers sometimes and knows that this is the way he used to be: “...with a big question mark on my face.” [p. 207]

## **Ethnicity**

The ethnic groups at RHS were more of a mesh. They were interweaved together in the social scene (ie: hanging out at lunch, or in casual discussions.)

In fact, many of the students don't hang out with each of their kind because, in addition to the reasons above, they are turned off to being "too *x*" Their feelings toward race and ethnicity, is that it's not necessarily a direct factor; it is, however, a complex one.

For example, the Filipinos would not see themselves as "acting white" when they were learning English, and joining non-ethnically oriented groups. They were just trying to move from the status of stranger to friend. There's a distinction when it comes to parent and school life. Where at school they all experience a similar socialising experience, at home they have varying degrees. There's a juxtaposition between themselves at home and at school. Although Filipino students may associate with their "home" or language (Tagalog) they have less of an accent on the first word of "Filipino-American."

The black ethnic group, however, was in the most complex of all situations. They were usually faced with the issues of "acting white" and "acting your colour." Ironically they, although, not in all cases (as Peshkin is quick to point out,) were stigmatised both, from within and with-out. With this kind of stigmatism, students that have a mix of friends become skilled at "fitting in." [p. 188] There is a distinction between "acting white" and wanting to be white (to become a "wanna-be".)

Many of the black students feel that "acting white" is a prerequisite for getting around and ahead in this world. This is in contrast with some of the other ethnic groups who do not feel the need to "act white." However, they are just acting American! Many state that they want to "fit in" and be like everyone else, so long as that "everyone else" is a socially acceptable group. [p. 182] When ranked against the other ethnic groups as to the important attributes that define themselves, blacks ranked the race issue higher than any of the other ethnic groups. This seems to correspond with the fact that some of the black pen-pals placed a pointer to their race in the letter (although it was more of a by-the-way-ism, along with other identifying attributes.)

## **Conclusion**

Although Peshkin makes some very good points about the ethnic play at Riverview High School and the surrounding town, he points out something that seems to be almost disparaging. That this isn't the way it's going to be outside of Riverview. Riverview is a place of friends, Peshkin points out. They are much less likely to meet people outside of Riverview, or Riverview

High School that are as friendly and receptive; their high expectations will lead to disappointment.

Domhoff points out well that the race and ethnicity is treated by the way and that many people have this “need to know” of someone’s ethnicity. This, however, is just to get one’s bearings, it’s more out of curiosity than anything else.