A faithful friend is a strong defence, and he that hath found such an one hath found a treasure... A faithful friend is the medicine of life.

— Ecclesiasticus

This book is about friendship in its rich and varied forms, but it is also about the role of friendship in contemporary society. Not only do we investigate and describe relationships between friends, we also examine the relevance of friendship for current debates about social integration and the state of community today. Using the findings of our study we reveal the persistence of *hidden solidarities* and question some of the gloomier analyses of our times.

We began with a problematic involving both public issues and private troubles. In the private sphere, there are fears that relationships today have become fleeting and transient, that people have become socially isolated. Depression and other mental health problems, for example, have been claimed by the World Health Organization (WHO) to be the most rapidly growing form of ill health in recent years.[1] In the public sphere, politicians and policy makers have been alarmed by a supposed lack of civic responsibility and a retreat into self-absorbed individualism. Our interest in friendship, therefore, has been fuelled in part by a feeling that, although friends have been studied at the level of individual relationships, the role of friendship in providing a kind of social glue has largely been ignored. Consequently, we set out to examine friendship in depth and to rethink its broader sociological and political significance.

FRIENDS, FRIEND-LIKE TIES AND PERSONAL COMMUNITIES

As part of our study of friendship we have, of course, probed the nature and quality of relationships between friends who are not related to

each other by blood or marriage – but our study is not confined to these non-kin ties. Because friendship may be found between spouses, partners, siblings, cousins or parents and their children, we have also explored friend-like qualities in a broader set of social relationships. We compare cases where friends and family play rather similar roles with cases where they occupy a distinct and separate place in people's lives.

So this book is about friendship in its broadest sense, but it is also about friendship in the context of the significant others who inhabit our micro-social worlds. We call these sets of significant others *personal communities*[2], and examine the role of friends and friend-like ties within them. Because of this focus, our book deals with those friendships that are considered important in people's lives; our research does not tell us much about the dark side of friendship, about unsatisfactory, competitive or destructive relationships, though this is undoubtedly an important theme. Our study has also focused on adult friendships, rather than friendships among children, adolescents, and in old age, since these have been the subject of many other studies.

Friendship in the Wider Social and Political Context

Given our interest in the role as well as the nature of friendship, we have set our findings against the backdrop of contemporary fears about a decline in the quality of personal and communal life. Perhaps it is part of the human condition to claim that things 'ain't wot they used to be'. Perhaps it is a way older generations claim authority by asserting that the quality of social life has deteriorated markedly since their youth. Perhaps governments need to create a degree of dissatisfaction and unease to justify the continuation of their power and authority over us. Perhaps, finally, we are indeed living in a world which can be shown – with the aid of hard empirical evidence – to be in many significant and important aspects qualitatively different from a better world we have lost or may be in the process of losing.

It is not hard to show that, for as long as recorded history, there has been a perennial concern with the way people live, which has provided the motivation and the power of priests, shamans and prophets. Now, in a more secular age, social science has added new voices. It is true that the traditional vocabulary of sin, falling from grace, and the hope

of salvation still has considerable resonance in many quarters – some would even argue that the idea of the loss and recovery of community lies at the heart of Western millennial thought[3] – but a new vocabulary of social disorder and disruption emerged with the rise of social science in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. Furthermore, the development of various rigorous research techniques has made possible the generation and collection of empirical evidence to support or, indeed, refute such perceptions of social ills. However, as we shall see, much depends on what is measured and on how we interpret the evidence.

Our aim in this book has been to challenge the views of those social theorists and commentators who have adopted an overwhelmingly pessimistic, if not despairing, response to the society they describe. Inevitably, this has meant that we have concentrated on commentators who take the most negative readings, giving less attention to others who have questioned such dark interpretations. However, lest some accuse us of Panglossian complacency, we recognize that our stance is more one of modification than of complete rejection. To claim that society is eternally enduring and unchanging would be absurd. However, we feel that there has been a serious misunderstanding of the dynamics of micro-social worlds, and particularly of the role of friendship and trust. Such issues have not figured greatly in the magisterial sweep of theorists of social change, who have, perhaps, concentrated more on identifying the overarching spirit of the age.

Of course, we recognize that there are good reasons for this. Detailed ethnographies of different social groupings and communities did not develop until well into the twentieth century. Initially, these were little more than elementary social surveys, spliced with gossip, and it was only with the rise of a rigorous social anthropology that a more nuanced and subtle understanding of the complexities of micro-social worlds could emerge. One only has to read the essay by William Foote Whyte, reflecting on his classic study, *Street Corner Society,* which he began in 1937, to see how untrained he was, and how 'baffled' he felt on finding his way into an inner city 'slum'. Whyte recalled that, at that time, studies of 'the community as an organised social system did not exist'.[4] While the collection of detailed ethnographies still remains relatively sparse, these kinds of studies unquestionably provide a more rooted view of society than was available to earlier generations of social commentators, particularly those of the nineteenth century.

We also believe that the broad sweep of classical social theorists should be challenged because of the dramatic and exciting developments in historical demography and historical anthropology over the past forty years.[5] Evidently, the founding fathers of social science did not have the detailed understandings of families and communities in former times which are now available, but, even today, some contemporary social theorists show little recognition of this body of knowledge in their work, relying on unspecified notions of traditional society when referring to the past.

A Qualitative Approach

It is important to recognize that the empirical findings reported in this book take the form of qualitative rather than quantitative data. We adopted a qualitative approach partly because, in attempting to rethink the contemporary salience and significance of friendship, we had to confront the fact that there is no clear agreement on what precisely the term 'friend' means. In some studies this problem is simply ducked. For example, people may be asked how many friends they have, or invited to give details about frequency of contact with their three closest friends, or the age, sex, occupation or ethnicity of those friends, but the word 'friend' is not defined, nor is any check made on how the term is being used. This is why it is difficult to make sense of conflicting statistics about the average number of friends we are supposed to have nowadays, and why we, perhaps, should take with a pinch of salt claims made by some in the public eye that they have the names of over a thousand 'friends' in their email address books.

Alternatively, in other studies, people are asked to define in detail what they mean by the term 'friend' and to list the qualities they associate with friendship. In most cases, however, these qualities refer to some general or idealized concept, or to cultural stereotypes, rather than to actual flesh-and-blood relationships. Our challenge, therefore, was to look at friendship in depth, to establish how people use the term, and to examine the content of particular relationships. A qualitative approach also gave us the flexibility to explore the complexities of friend-like ties, where categorical labels like brother, sister, parent, cousin, colleague or neighbour might mask additional friend-like qualities. Through open-ended, in-depth interviews, we were able to identify cases where family members are also considered to be friends, and, indeed, where friends take on a family-like status.

In the main study we conducted a total of sixty interviews with men and women of different ages, at different stages in the life-course, from different socio-economic and ethnic backgrounds, and living in different parts of Britain, including the northwest and southeast of England as well as the Welsh borders. With this purposively selected sample, our aim was to paint as broad a picture as we could in order to understand the nature of friendships and the diversity of people's personal communities today.[6] We made a special effort to include some people who were at risk of being socially isolated, as well as those with robust personal communities, and interviewed two young people brought up in care, a woman with mental health problems, a man who suffered from aphasia following a stroke, and a young man with drug and alcohol problems. We did not, however, interview homeless rough sleepers, travellers, asylum seekers or international jet setters, so our study may fail to capture the personal communities of the most isolated or the most global citizens.

Given the rich diversity of cultures and backgrounds in Britain today, we also had to make some key decisions about the range of ethnic groups we could incorporate. We concluded that it would be better to understand a few situations well, rather than spread our resources too thinly, and, consequently, we interviewed people from white British and from black African and Caribbean backgrounds. Although this means we have no data for other minority ethnic groups, because of the way we present our evidence, readers from other backgrounds should be able to judge the extent to which our findings are applicable to them.

The fact that our data are qualitative has implications for the kind of evidence we portray, and for the way readers should judge its wider relevance. In each of the chapters that describe our findings we present two different kinds of material: a set of analytical concepts and cases which illustrate these ideas. It is important to stress that the themes and concepts presented throughout the book have emerged through clear and explicit procedures of analysis, which are fully explained in the appendix. If these themes and concepts have resonance, we believe this is because they reflect people's experiences; but their easy acceptance should not mask the fact that they have been rigorously devised. There are no numbers, percentages or statistical tables. Although we aim to identify recurrent patterns, we do not rely on traditional variable analysis, where the aim is to account for most rather than all of

the variance. On the contrary, we are interested in the range and complexity of people's situations and relationships: this means we also investigate the outliers, since apparently atypical or negative cases can sometimes hold the clue to patterns which recur in the data.

Readers may well ask whether British data can have relevance for other societies, particularly the United States, which is sometimes considered to be the embodiment of an individualized, isolated society. They may further question the wider relevance of a nationally focused qualitative study. We argue that our study does indeed have broader relevance, precisely because it is qualitative and because of the nature of generalization within qualitative research. In small-scale, purposively sampled studies, the reader makes a qualitative judgement about the wider applicability of the findings based on the detailed description of concepts and cases. Essentially, the reader decides whether the concepts have wider analytical or explanatory power by looking in detail at both the setting of the initial study and other settings where the findings might be applied, by comparing those contexts, and by judging whether the analysis and interpretation found in the initial study can help make sense of other social milieux.

We are not making any claims about the frequency or ubiquity of any particular kind of friendship or personal community, simply that a range of types and patterns exists. We are mapping the territory, if you like, and the reader's main concerns should be: Can I recognize the map? How well does the map fit my situation or are some parts of the map less relevant? Are some parts of the map missing? By giving details of how the concepts and patterns were identified, and illustrating each with cases from our research, we enable the reader to check the wider applicability of the map. It is important to remember that, even in the case of a large quantitative study carried out in Britain, there could be no automatic generalization to other countries, since a British sample would not be representative of other populations. In this case, the reader would still have to make a qualitative judgement about the transferability of findings, and might well have less detailed information on which to make such a judgement.

A Guide to this Book

From conversations with our colleagues, friends and families, we have gathered that the subject of friendship and personal communities fascinates others and well as ourselves. We have therefore written this

book with both a general and an academic audience in mind. To make it more accessible to general readers, we have tried not to clutter the main text with too many references to the literature. For academic readers, however, we have put a great deal of very detailed information, as well as many interesting references, in the endnotes for each chapter.

A guide to individual chapters, however, might help different readers navigate their way through the book. Chapter 1 explores some of the main concerns that have been expressed about the state of society today, outlining some of the moral panics over the quality of our social life as we move through the twenty-first century, and making the case for a detailed study of people's micro-social worlds that focuses on the role of friends and friend-like ties. Chapter 2 gives an account of some of the factors that influenced the way we carried out our study, and gives an initial picture of the kinds of personal communities we identified. Both these chapters inevitably contain some discussion of theoretical ideas, but we have tried to keep this discussion interesting and accessible. Readers who are mainly interested in learning about friendship may prefer to skip this part of the book and begin with chapter 3, perhaps returning later when they have satisfied their curiosity.

Chapters 3–6 present the main body of our findings, illustrated through case descriptions, but putting more technical matters and references in the notes rather than the main text. Chapter 3 explores the nature and diversity of friendship and introduces the idea of a friendship repertoire, or the range of different types of friends that people have. Chapter 4 looks at friendship over the life-course and at different patterns of friend-making. Chapter 5 examines friendship and family relationships, exploring the notion of suffusion and the extent to which family and friends play distinctive or overlapping roles. In chapter 6 we then take the ideas discussed in earlier chapters and present a set of seven different kinds of personal community. Chapter 7 addresses the question of how personal communities may in general be shaped by factors such as age, gender, social class and geographical mobility. Finally, in chapter 8, we consider the wider implications of our findings, returning to debates about community, social capital and social integration. Again, these two final chapters incorporate some references to the literature, but we hope that our overall discussion of these key themes will appeal to both our audiences. For those who would like to know more about how we carried out the study, there is a full appendix.

The order in which the authors' names appear should not be taken to imply that one of us has made more of a contribution than the other. It is simply that we have written a number of papers together on this subject and Ray Pahl's name has appeared first on other occasions. It is true that we have made different contributions, but these reflect our different strengths and interests. Liz Spencer has spent thirty years conducting and championing qualitative research and passionately believes in its power to inform and illuminate. She has taken major responsibility for the analysis and presentation of our findings. Ray Pahl has a breadth of knowledge and scholarship that has enabled us to set these findings against an expansive backdrop, incorporating recent historical and anthropological as well as sociological debates.

Finally, as long-term friends ourselves, we welcomed an opportunity to work together and to pursue a long-held interest. In Ray Pahl's case, friendship is a subject he has already investigated and written about over a period of more than thirty years; for both of us it holds a personal as well as a professional fascination. A grant from the Economic and Social Research Council, and a home at the Institute for Social and Economic Research at the University of Essex, enabled us to carry out the research on which this book is based.[7]