

== Chapter 1 ==

Alone in America? The Issues at Stake

IN MID-2006, a story on findings from a survey spread through the media: “Study: 25% of Americans Have No One to Confide In,” announced *USA Today* on June 23. “Americans Have Fewer Friends, Researchers Say,” reported ABC News on the same day. National Public Radio headlined “Social Isolation: Americans Have Fewer Close Confidantes” on June 24. The *Boston Globe* took two bites at the story: “It’s Lonely Out There” on June 23 and a column by Ellen Goodman on June 30, “Friendless in America.” “Nearly a Quarter of American Adults Have No Close Friends, Survey Finds,” added Reuters on June 27. Last, but now making it officially a fact, the *New York Times* declared on July 2, 2006, that “The Lonely American Just Got a Bit Lonelier.”¹

These stories—and many more—reported the conclusions of an article published that year in the *American Sociological Review*. Miller McPherson and his colleagues Lynn Smith-Lovin and Matthew Brashears compared data from the 2004 General Social Survey (GSS) to those from the 1985 GSS. (The GSS is a repeated survey that has collected representative data on the American population about every other year since 1972.) The authors focused on a question the GSS asked in both 1985 and 2004: “From time to time, most people discuss important matters with other people. Looking back over the last six months, who are the people with whom you discussed matters important to you?” The finding that stirred such notice was that the percentage of respondents who said that they had discussed important matters with *no one* tripled—from about 8 percent to about 25 percent from 1985 to 2004—and the average number of names that respondents gave dropped from about three to about two. “Friendless in America” indeed.² It later turned out, although the media ignored it, that this finding was controversial. I argued in a 2009 publication that the results were anomalous, that the dramatic difference between the two surveys was probably due to changes in procedures, a technical problem, or perhaps both.³ By the time this book appears, a GSS

experiment conducted in the 2010 survey should have shed some light on what happened in the 2004 survey.

Whatever the outcome of that study, the breathless coverage of the first report demonstrates readers' interest—mirrored by journalists—in personal relationships. The stories tapped Americans' long-term fascination with and concern about “community,” a concern evident in the reception of books such as Robert Putnam's *Bowling Alone* (2000), *Habits of the Heart* by Robert Bellah and his colleagues (1985), and, going back sixty years, David Riesman's *The Lonely Crowd* (1950). Academics' interest in this topic burgeoned in the last few decades, and the number of social science articles focusing on “social networks” grew rapidly.⁴

For some scholars, social networks are theoretically important because they describe the framework of society: underneath the wall-board, plaster, and paint of social values and cultural practices is the timber skeleton of interconnections. Society *is* a network linking nodes, and people are nodes in the network. Other scholars are interested in social networks because they describe the personal environment of individuals and provide a way of mapping the social worlds in which they operate. With that tool, researchers can understand how individuals are supported, stressed, and generally shaped by their social milieus and, reciprocally, how individuals select their associates and structure their social milieus.

Policymakers, too, have found the network concept useful. For example, in the early 1980s the California State Department of Mental Health tried to capitalize on research showing that having close family and friends seems to bolster health. It mounted a campaign encouraging Californians to develop friendships, because “Friends Are Good Medicine”—the slogan appeared on bumper stickers and shopping bags—and could, officials thought, replace state health spending.⁵ More recently, experts have turned to social network analysis as a tool for, among other things, tracking terrorists and tracking teenagers who spread AIDS.⁶ The focus of this book, however, is more prosaic: we will be looking at changes in Americans' connections to family and friends between 1970 and 2010. Did Americans have more or less contact with kin? Did they gain or lose friends? Did they find more or less support from their close ties? Did they find more or less intimacy?

Changes in the Personal Ties of Americans

Periodically, the media find a piece of social science research that seems to reinforce the prevailing cultural theme that social bonds are fraying away, leaving individuals cut off and alone. In the 1970s, the journalist Vance Packard's best-selling book *A Nation of Strangers* warned that

Americans had become so mobile and so rootless that they were losing personal connections and becoming alienated and subject to all sorts of ills—even though, in fact, rates of residential mobility had been steadily *declining* for at least two decades. In the 1970s and the 1980s, too, “loneliness” was a topic of concern. The *New York Times* health editor, Jane Brody, wrote in 1983:

Loneliness is now a national epidemic, according to many sociologists and psychologists, who point to such contributing causes as our highly technological society where many workers interact more with machines than with other people; to our mobility, with the average American moving 14 times during a lifetime; to the impersonality of large urban settings where many people don’t even know their immediate neighbors; to the prevalence of divorce, which now ends half of American marriages.⁷

In the late 1990s, Robert Putnam’s work, culminating in his 2000 book *Bowling Alone*, garnered tremendous coverage for reporting that between the 1950s and the 1990s Americans became much less civically active. Although Putnam’s findings were focused on political and organizational participation, the changes he reported were mostly of modest size, and his analysis was nuanced, the message that reviewers and readers took home was that community ties were (still) shriveling. The final example, from the 2000s, is the report on “Social Isolation in America” by McPherson and his colleagues in which they record stark declines in Americans’ lists of confidants. (Oddly, in all four cases, my own initial response was “Not so fast.”⁸ Twice is a coincidence, three times a habit, and four times must signal an obsession.)

Understanding what happened to Americans’ personal networks is not only a matter of curiosity. There are broader intellectual claims at stake here. Has, for example, “post-industrial” or “postmodern” life, with its supposed cultural fragmentation and myriad distractions, frayed Americans’ social ties?⁹ Or has the turn of the millennium instead enabled individuals to choose from a wider array of people and groups and thus enriched their social lives?¹⁰ Or has an expansion of social choices only confused and discouraged Americans?¹¹

And there are pragmatic concerns at stake too. Despite the overhyping of California’s “Friends Are Good Medicine” campaign, our physical and psychological health are in some ways bolstered by the practical and emotional support of our family and friends.¹² To be sure, the very same people can also undermine our health.¹³ (In the social world from which I came, illnesses were often explained as the consequence of “aggravation”; aggravation, in turn, was caused by refractory children.) Still, it is usually better to be socially engaged than not.

The answer also matters for, we might say, the national psyche. Americans seem discouraged about the general state of relationships. They tend to believe, for example, that American family life is in decline. (Note, however, that Americans exempt *their own* families from this sad judgment. It is *other Americans'* families and friendships that are fraying.¹⁴) It would be perhaps valuable to national morale to have an accurate sense of what has happened to Americans' social bonds.

Obviously, this topic fits into the vast discussion around the "decline of community." I will not address that subject explicitly here—I have done so elsewhere¹⁵—because that controversy is about long-term changes, perhaps starting when gentlemen wore powdered wigs, and it is about a broader set of issues, including civic life, politics, and national culture. This book has a more modest agenda. Specifically, it asks whether relationships with family and friends changed between 1970 and 2010 in terms of how many kin and friends Americans had, how often they saw or communicated with family and friends, the extent to which they received practical or emotional support from family and friends, and how they felt about their relationships.

Sources of Possible Change

Why might Americans' personal ties have changed significantly? There are many ideas about the forces that may have been at play, ideas that usually predict a deterioration of personal relationships. For the most part, this book does not test explanations, mainly because the available data make it very hard to do so. For example, it is difficult to distinguish whether a change in how often young adults see their parents is the result of new forms of communications or the result of Americans marrying later; both trends developed rapidly between 1970 and 2010. This book focuses on just getting a sense of the forty-year changes in social ties themselves. Still, it is important to at least outline the new circumstances that might have altered Americans' personal relationships. There are many, gathered here into four categories.

Technological Changes

The most visible development of the last forty years has been technological innovation. Modern cars and planes, email, cell phones, text messaging, video links, and social networking sites vastly expanded, sped up, and lowered the cost of social interaction. To technological enthusiasts, this meant that individuals' relationships multiplied and deepened as they revived high school friendships, saw grandchildren a continent away babbling on a computer screen, joined online "communities" of people with shared interests or problems, and acquired

hundreds of Facebook or MySpace “friends.” To technological pessimists, this multiplication of virtual ties only dissipated and demeaned *authentic* human relationships. For example, the literary critic William Deresiewicz wrote in 2009:

Friendship is devolving, in other words, from a relationship to a feeling—from something people share to something each of us hugs privately to ourselves in the loneliness of our electronic caves, rearranging the tokens of connection like a lonely child playing with dolls. . . .

The more people we know, the lonelier we get. . . .

We have given our hearts to machines, and now we are turning into machines. The face of friendship in the new century.¹⁶

Absent definitive data, how much difference these technologies have made to personal relationships we will probably never know. But the media are rife with speculations about the new technologies’ consequences for personal relationships and personality. For example, in 2009 the *New York Times* reported that the Internet provided elderly people with life-invigorating social connectivity. “I was dying of boredom,” said one elderly woman, but online social networking “gave me a reason to keep on going.” An expert on aging told the reporter: “The new future of old age is about staying in society, staying in the workplace and staying very connected. . . . And technology is going to be a very big part of that, because the new reality is, increasingly, a virtual reality. It provides a way to make new connections, new friends and new senses of purpose.”¹⁷ The same year, however, the *Times* published an article on the toll that frequent text messaging was taking on teenagers; texting, according to one psychotherapist, “offers companionship and the promise of connectedness. At the same time, texting can make a youngster feel frightened and overly exposed.”¹⁸ What is the poor *New York Times* reader to believe?

Adoption of the new e-communications, then, may have profoundly altered Americans’ relationships. In chapter 6, I briefly review the research on the new technologies and connect its findings to the trends displayed in this book.

Demographic Changes

Americans consider marriage and parenthood as key steps in attaining adulthood.¹⁹ In 1970 the median American man married (for the first time) at age twenty-three and the median woman at age twenty-one; in 2009 the ages were twenty-eight and twenty-six, respectively.²⁰ Five more years of bachelorhood and spinsterhood had been added to the typical life cycle. (If we treat cohabitation as a sort of marriage, the change is not

as great, but unions of cohabiting couples in this period were not as stable as those of married ones.²¹) In the mid-1970s, about 30 percent of American women age twenty-five to twenty-nine had yet to be mothers; in the mid-2000s, about 45 percent of women of that age had yet to be mothers. So, about 2 million more twenty-something women were childless in the 2000s compared to the 1970s.²² Note that the total American birthrate changed little after 1973; the timing of births, however, moved forward.²³

So, in the 2000s more young Americans had yet to “settle down.” Many of them, especially those from the middle class, were spending their “emerging adulthood”²⁴—the time between age eighteen and attaining the job-and-family markers of full adulthood—getting more education and training for careers. Many in the working class were awaiting stable employment. Young adults were also spending much of that time avoiding commitments to institutions, such as work, politics, or church, and devoting a great deal of energy to their churning personal relationships.²⁵ This demographic development should have affected Americans’ overall ties to friends and families.

Three other demographic trends also deserve mention: immigration, aging, and residential rearrangement. One trend is the huge flow into the United States of immigrants, particularly from Mexico and Asia. Bringing with them their own social customs, recent immigrants focus their lives around family and fellow immigrants and, perhaps most important for our purposes, are partially cut off by language and culture from the great majority of Americans. Many of these newcomers do not appear in the national surveys we rely on because interviews are usually done only in English. Therefore, their effects on the trends we can measure are underestimated. In 2006 and 2008, however, the GSS did interview many respondents in Spanish. These interviewees reported considerably less social activity than did the English-language interviewees, even those interviewees who were Hispanic.²⁶ To the extent that immigrants affected the social life of the English-speakers living around them, they probably reduced the average volume of social activities a bit.

A second demographic trend is the changing “population pyramid”—that is, the distribution of Americans by age—created by changing birth and death rates. As I noted, American birthrates changed little after 1970, but they had dropped considerably in the decade before, reducing the proportion of young people in the population. Also, from 1970 into the 2000s, the life spans of Americans, especially of American men over age sixty-five, grew by a few years.²⁷ Thus, the overall American population aged. And older people tend to have fewer social connections. (Some observers might claim, however, that sixty-five is the new fifty-five.) Birth

and death rates also affected how many relatives Americans had—a point I return to in chapter 3.

The third demographic trend after the 1970s is the continuing shift in where Americans live: fewer live in rural areas, and more live in suburbs—although the scale of this rearrangement is not close to what Americans experienced earlier in the twentieth century. Based on what we know about place and relationships, the post-1970 residential redistribution might have nudged the average American involvement with kin and neighbors down a bit and raised the average involvement with friends up a bit.²⁸

None of these three demographic influences was probably as consequential as emerging adulthood, but all need to be considered in interpreting trends in social connections.

Economic Changes

The early 1970s are notable in part because they marked a significant turning point in American economic history. It was the end of the postwar economic boom and of the large-scale government activism that had vaulted a large chunk of the population into the middle class—the middle class of families with a salary-earning husband and his homemaker wife who were financially secure, suburban, home-owning parents of college-bound children. And it was the beginning of a now-longer period of negligible economic advancement for most Americans marked by stagnating wages for men and, partly as a result, increasing employment for married women. The proportion of married women age twenty-five to sixty-four who worked rose from about one in three in 1960 to about two in five in 1970—still a minority—and then to about seven in ten in the mid-1990s and beyond.²⁹ Where employed wives had been an exception, they were now the norm. Cultural shifts (discussed in the next section) helped motivate this march out of the kitchen, but feeling financially strained also moved women to seek paid work. The massive shift of so many wives and especially mothers of young children from the home to the workplace should have set into motion many changes in their relationships—and those of their husbands—such as, perhaps, turning their attention from neighbors to coworkers.³⁰

Over the same period, more Americans worked nonstandard hours—nights, weekends, odd combinations of hours—as the U.S. economy moved toward a 24/7 schedule. Although some of that shift-shifting provided flexibility that workers could use to ease work-family tensions, much of it was involuntary. And in any case, odd hours put people literally out of sync with many of their family and friends.³¹

Shrunkened or stagnating incomes and wealth—or at least, the sense of financial constraint—probably also affected relationships. Financially

comfortable people can afford to travel more, go out more, entertain more, stay in touch more, and thus expand their networks more than those who are financially strained. Alternatively, well-off people can forgo borrowing from or entertaining friends and family because they have the money to buy it all in the marketplace—they can hire a moving company rather than ask friends to help them move, or spend a weekend in Atlantic City or Las Vegas rather than endure a house visit with the in-laws. Empirically, wealthier people have more social relationships—specifically, more nonkin relationships—than less affluent people. To the extent that average Americans lost ground economically—or at least felt that was happening³²—the change might have narrowed their circle of friends.

Cultural Changes

Cultural shifts independent of economics, demography, or technology may also have altered Americans' ties to family and friends. The leading candidate for such a consequential shift is the changing role of women. Along with joining the workplace, women have redefined the terms of most American institutions, marriage and family most of all, grasping more independence and more power. Much of the movement toward gender equality occurred before 1970, but it accelerated in the years afterwards.

Other cultural influences are perhaps too glacial and long-lasting to have made much change in the 1970 to 2010 window. One is the development in the West of what Abram de Swaan called “widening circles of identification”—increasing sympathy for ever-more-distant people, such as AIDS victims in Africa.³³ Similarly, some historians describe a long-term change in Americans' emotional makeup, including the development, especially among the nineteenth-century bourgeois, of greater emotional sensitivity and self-control.³⁴ Even vaguer are the frequent references to the “zeitgeist” of a historical period—the 1960s were years of counterculture and free love, the 1980s were years of greed, and so forth—or the “ethos” of a generation: the generation that grew up in the 1930s and 1940s is industrious and family-oriented, the 1960s generation is alienated and individualistic, and their children, the “Me Generation,” are self-absorbed and hypersocial.

It is difficult to study cultural shifts of this sort empirically. Often, they appear as the residue of explanations: changes that cannot be explained by economics, demography, technology, or historical events scholars then attribute to a vague cultural force. And yet, as hard as it is to pin down such effects precisely, there is something about “climates of opinion” that sociologists find real.

These four categories do not exhaust the possible explanations for changes in social relationships that we may observe. Political events and

their consequences, for example, might shape personal life by arousing popular disillusionment, through scandal and war, with civic life. But these four categories cover much of the speculation and permit us to think about the broader social changes that could have affected personal ties and how they did so.

Resilience

For all the societal changes in America since 1970, it may turn out that people's ties to family and friends were robust and that social connections survived, kept their shape, and kept their functions—in other words, that not much changed. Perhaps a few of the developments I just reviewed counterbalanced one another. For example, maybe new communications technologies offset tighter family budgets to leave Americans with about the same means to pursue social connections. Maybe having more mothers in the workforce reduced Americans' involvement with neighbors but expanded their involvement, to about the same degree, with coworkers. More profoundly, these technological, demographic, economic, and cultural developments, however significant they appear, may have been insufficient to significantly disrupt people's ties to family and friends because those ties are especially important to people and are therefore especially *resilient* to change.

As people encounter new circumstances—new devices, economic restructuring, social fashions, and so forth—they adapt in ways that sustain their key relationships. “Adapt” has two different English meanings. As a transitive verb, people adapt something “to make [it] suitable . . . for a specific use”; as an intransitive verb, people adapt to a circumstance.³⁵ We can presume that people place their close friendships and, especially, their immediate families very high among their priorities (see chapter 3). People thus try to adapt their environment, notably new technologies, to the purpose of sustaining those relationships. That may mean, for example, using new media to remix the combination of calls, letters, and visits with family and friends so as to sustain about the same level of total involvement as before, at the level each individual prefers.

Intransitively, people adapt themselves and their habits when they cannot change the environment. A key example is how American mothers dealt with a new economy, new norms for women's roles, and higher expectations for children (see chapter 3). Prioritizing their children, they made other adjustments in less critical or at least more malleable activities—notably, doing less housework, sleeping less, entertaining less, and spending less time with their spouses. Some things must change in people's lives when external conditions change sharply, but people protect their core relationships. As one review of the social consequences of

the Internet concluded, "Some of the most important parts of life [close ties] . . . are comparatively stable . . . and resist change."³⁶

Lower on the priority list, and thus more vulnerable to fluctuation, would be the more peripheral relationships that people have—the "weak ties" with "consequential strangers."³⁷ There is the growth, for example, of Facebook-type "friends." Very occasionally, one of these people enters a person's inner social circle, but for the most part social networking ties are casual associations. (Social networking scholar danah boyd has reminded blog readers that Facebook-type "networks" differ considerably from "personal networks." For example, your mother may be in the latter but not the former.³⁸) This is the region of people's social worlds where we would expect major expansion and contraction as even minor changes in circumstances occur. Say, if the cost of computing or emails goes down or up, the volume of acquaintanceships might sharply balloon or shrink in response, while the number of close ties stays the same.

To be sure, family and friendship bonds *do* change under radically new conditions. There is evidence, for example, that Chinese relationships changed significantly when a market economy rose to replace the Maoist command economy; evidence also shows that the privatization of Russian agriculture in the 1990s led to new patterns of social ties among villagers.³⁹ I know of no hard data on how other major events—say, the division of India in 1947, the Rwandan genocide, or, for that matter, America's Great Depression—altered personal relationships, but I assume that there were important social consequences. Indeed, people in stormy seas probably hold on even more tightly to immediate family and friends. Societal changes can significantly alter personal relationships, but people value family and friends highly, and they presumably try to adapt circumstances and adapt themselves as much as necessary to preserve those "resilient" ties.

Strikingly, while the question of whether and how Americans' close bonds changed in recent years is a subject of much talk, it is the subject of little systematic research.⁴⁰ The major exception is Robert Putnam's landmark work, *Bowling Alone*, to which this study certainly owes a great deal.⁴¹ I do not address the central topic of Putnam's book—Americans' participation in formal organizations and political activities—but much of what follows here builds on and extends chapter 6 of *Bowling Alone*, entitled "Informal Social Connections." This book expands the range of data and pushes forward the time frame—and it comes to somewhat different conclusions.