What in everyday life are mostly unarticulated, intuitive distinctions must be taken seriously in sociological research. The discipline is about ‘defamiliarizing the familiar’ (Bauman & May, 2001), about reflecting on everyday interactions, social processes, trends, and their meanings with the intention to feed clarifying reinterpretations back into social life. In that context it is well to remember what Alfred Schutz (1973) had to say about the relationship between common sense thinking and social science knowledge. In everyday life we use abstractions, constructs, and concepts that help us cut through the complexities of daily living; they help us select meanings relevant to given situations. What differentiates common sense and the social sciences is, according to Schutz, that ‘the constructs used by the social scientist ... are constructs of the second degree, namely constructs of the constructs made by the actors on the social scene whose behavior the scientist observes and tries to explain’ (Schutz, 1973, p. 6, my emphasis). Social scientists not only describe common words in their own terms, but also seek to understand the patterns of behaviors, practices, and attitudes they denote. Moreover, as Anthony Giddens (1984, p. 284) has made clear, the concepts that may result from social science research may become re-appropriated by people in the context of their everyday lives by way of the ‘double hermeneutic’, the interpretive feedback loop between research and everyday understandings.

This has nothing to do with telling people how to think. Contemporary sociology is suspect of ‘normativity’, and that with some reason. There is today a great sensitivity to approaches that pretend they can offer blueprints for living, or to make judgments from up above about ways of life here below. Thankfully that is no longer what sociologists are
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about. But a more empathic and inclusive stance, with its now extraordinary sensitivity to agency – something that is likely to be not only a matter of advanced method but also a defensive stance versus the ever-looming charge of social determinism – has at times also meant that the semantics of concepts have become so diffuse that it is often difficult to use them in any meaningful way. Whatever it is that people do or say is given credence to such an extent that unreflected upon actions are taken as if they are ready-made concepts that are no longer in need of interpretation. As we will see, usage of the term ‘friend’ is a good example.

Conceptual clarity is no less important in studies that are ‘essayistic’ or theoretical than in ‘applied’ research. Concepts need to refer clearly to concrete social relationships. ‘Theory is of value in empirical science only’, wrote Herbert Blumer nearly sixty year ago,

to the extent to which it connects fruitfully with the empirical world. Concepts are the means, and the only means of establishing such connection. ... If the concept is clear as to what it refers, then sure identification of the empirical instances may be made. ... Thus, with clear concepts theoretical statements can be brought into close and self-correcting relations with the empirical world. Contrariwise, vague concepts deter the identification of appropriate empirical instance, and obscure the detection of what is relevant in the empirical instances that are chosen. Thus, they block connection between theory and its empirical world and prevent their effective interplay. (1954, pp. 4–5, my emphasis)

Blumer breaks with a positivist tradition that seeks to narrow the complexities of social life by subsuming interactions under quasi-natural laws, and by narrowing the range of meanings attributed to ‘definitive concepts’. Blumer advocates instead for what he calls ‘sensitizing concepts’ – concepts that rather than ‘provide[ing] prescriptions of what to see ... merely suggest directions along which to look’ and ‘rest on a general sense of what is relevant’ (1954, p. 7). Taking my lead from Blumer, I seek to construct a conception of friendship that has interpretive purchase because it is understandable from a lay perspective and hopes to clarify some of the more entrenched notions regarding the relationship type.

I begin by approaching the subject matter from a general level and then narrow that approach to friendship itself. The first step in that process is to think, with Max Weber, about friendship as a social