


Fall 2007

## The Functions of the Social Bond

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### Original Citation

Chriss, J. J. (2007). The functions of the social bond. *Sociological Quarterly*, 48(4), 689-712. doi:10.1111/j.1533-8525.2007.00097.x

### Repository Citation

Chriss, James J., "The Functions of the Social Bond" (2007). *Sociology & Criminology Faculty Publications*. 25.  
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# THE FUNCTIONS OF THE SOCIAL BOND

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## Abstract

Travis Hirschi's control or social bonding theory argues that those persons who have strong and abiding attachments to conventional society (in the form of attachments, involvement, investment, and belief) are less likely to deviate than persons who have weak or shallow bonds. Later, Gottfredson and Hirschi moved away from the social bond as the primary factor in deviance, and toward an emphasis on self-control. In short, low self-control is associated with higher levels of deviance and criminality irrespective of the strength or weakness of one's social bonds. In this article I argue that Talcott Parsons' AGIL schema easily incorporates Hirschi's social bond into its broader analytical framework. Furthermore, from within the logical framework of Parsons' system, Hirschi's move from an emphasis on social bonds to an emphasis on self-control is wholly compatible with, and even anticipated by, the AGIL schema. The article illustrates, and argues for, the continuing importance of theoretical subsumption in sociology and criminology. Lastly, a set of testable hypotheses is generated based upon this theoretical reformulation.

## INTRODUCTION: CRIMINOLOGICAL THEORY AND THEORETICAL SUBSUMPTION

Criminological theories are, by their very essence, middle-range (or lower-level) theories, which seek to explain those specific features of human social systems related to criminality.<sup>1</sup> The aspects of crime or the criminal that are pertinent to any particular criminological theory are established by way of the theory's initial and scope conditions, whether these are stated formally or discursively (see Smelser 1969; Walker and Cohen 1985; Gibbs 1994; Wagner 2000). Most proponents of this middle-range approach to criminological theory argue that criminal behavior is a complex affair that requires specialized, lower-level theories to adequately deal with the specific types of human conduct and social situations that are said to be characteristic of criminality or deviance.

Among the competing visions of what the proper aims of science are or should be, one of the better known is the ideal of a comprehensive or "grand" theory that would integrate all the domains of science in terms of a common set of principles. This comprehensive theory would in effect serve as the foundation for all less-inclusive theories (Hovard 1971).<sup>2</sup> In his discussion of theoretical reduction or subsumption, Nagel (1979:336–7) states that "... in any case, the phenomenon of a relatively autonomous theory becoming absorbed by, or reduced to, some other more inclusive theory is an undeniable and recurrent feature of the history of modern science," and "there is every reason to suppose that such reduction will continue to take place in the future."

\* For their helpful suggestions for improvement of earlier versions of this paper, I thank Teresa LaGrange, Thomas Fararo, Victor Lidz, and the three anonymous reviewers of *The Sociological Quarterly*. Direct all correspondence to James J. Chriss, Department of Sociology, 2121 Euclid Ave., Cleveland, OH 44115; e-mail [j.chriss@csuchio.edu](mailto:j.chriss@csuchio.edu)

Talcott Parsons spent a long career producing such a general theory, one which he claimed was inclusive enough to provide explanations not only for all of sociology's major phenomena, but for those of neighboring social and behavioral sciences as well (see, e.g., Parsons 1991). Notwithstanding the bombast and sociological imperialism of some aspects of Parsons' theoretical agenda, no one in sociology has yet to match Parsons' accomplishments in sustaining a viable program of grand, general, or systems theory (Münch 1981, 1982; Alexander 1983; Hamilton 1996; Lidz 2000; Treviño 2001). Much of the criticism and ultimate rejection of Parsons that occurred beginning in the late 1950s was based on ideological or noncognitive points of contention (see especially Mills 1959; Gouldner 1970) as much as (or more than) on cognitive criteria (i.e., rigorous tests of elements of the theory by way of the criteria of logical analysis, cognitive significance, or predictive power; see Hempel 1965; Stinchcombe 1968; Dubin 1969; Gibbs 1972; Cohen 1989).<sup>3</sup>

The revival of interest in Parsons' body of work has been steadily growing since the early 1980s, and, concomitantly, issues that were once considered "settled" are being revisited anew. Theoretical reduction is one such issue that deserves to be revisited. It is in this spirit that I describe Hirschi's (1969) control theory and later self-control theory (Gottfredson and Hirschi 1990) as subsumable under Parsons' general theory.

## **HIRSCHI AND PARSONS: A LITERATURE REVIEW**

It has been over 35 years since Travis Hirschi (1969) first presented his widely discussed and influential control theory of delinquency and crime. Interestingly, however, during all this time there has been no explicit recognition—either by Hirschi himself or by others in the criminology or social theory fields—of the sharp convergence between Hirschi's notion of the four dimensions of the social bond and Talcott Parsons' AGIL schema. I say this, of course, knowing fully well the vastness of the literature, as both Hirschi and Parsons are heavily discussed and cited authors. It is certainly possible that somewhere someone has acknowledged their convergence in print. However, no one in the major criminology, criminal justice, and sociology journals that I have reviewed has done so.

Nevertheless, a few authors have noted broad parallels between Parsons and Hirschi, and these deserve brief mention. In his overview and summary of the concept of social control, Robert Meier (1982) argues that Parsons' notion of social control was part of the functionalist response, which made explicit, much more so than in previous formulations, the association between social control and deviance. Parsons and the functionalists conceptualized society as a more or less stable system which, in order to counteract deviant or destabilizing tendencies, evolved sanctioning mechanisms for the purpose of restoring and maintaining the orderly operation of the system. It is then a small step to go from explicitly linking social control and deviance functionally to a normative conception of deviance and social control (following Durkheim and Freud), whereby deviance and social control are both explained as outcomes of socialization: When socialization works well, persons are drawn into closer contact with conventional society (Meier 1982:46). This latter move is, in essence, the control theory of Hirschi (1969).

Here, we see Meier linking Parsons to Hirschi indirectly through the socialization theories of Durkheim and Freud.

This is similar to the argument of Debra Umberson (1987), who argues for the indirect influence of social control as experienced through informal pressures to conform as exerted primarily through the family. Umberson (1987:309) groups Parsons and Hirschi (along with a few others) under this model of self-control attained through socialization and the internalization of norms and values within the context of family and other informal agents of control.

In a similar vein, Charles Tittle (1977) proposes a list of variables, representing various theoretical and research traditions, which has been used to explain some aspect of conformity and its counterpart, deviance. For example, functionalist theorists, led by Parsons, argue moral commitment to norms and values is one of the primary determinants of conformity. Another theoretical tradition, which Tittle refers to as social integration, emphasizes the importance of relational bonds in reducing or checking deviance. The classical innovator of this tradition is Durkheim, and Hirschi follows his lead by stressing the extent of individual integration into ongoing group life as the prime determinant of the willingness to conform (Tittle 1977:581). Again, although Tittle does not make explicit the connection between Parsons and Hirschi in this article, their indirect linkage through Durkheim is readily visible.

In addition to these articles, there have been several attempts to integrate social control theory with other prominent theories of delinquency and crime, including labeling, social learning, routine activities, differential association, and strain or anomie theory (see, e.g., Cernkovich 1978; Aultman and Wellford 1979; Segrave and Hastad 1983; Giordano 1989; Fararo and Skvoretz 1997; Akers 1998; Hawdon 1999; for a summary of this literature, see Liska, Krohn, and Messner 1989; Williams and McShane 1999:201–202). However, none of these works deal explicitly with Parsons.

## THE ELEMENTS OF THE SOCIAL BOND

Going beyond prior analyses, which hint at parallels between Parsons and Hirschi, I argue that there exists a deep and abiding linkage between the two theorists. The explicit point of contact is the close correspondence between Hirschi's four dimensions of the social bond and the four functions of Parsons' AGIL schema. Not only is Hirschi's control (or social bond) theory subsumable under Parsons' more general and abstract AGIL theory; his later turn toward an emphasis on self-control (see, e.g., Hirschi and Gottfredson 2000) is wholly predictable based upon the logic and framework of Parsons' elaboration of the cybernetic schema, which in effect clarifies the analytical relations among the four functions.

The alignment of the dimensions of the social bond and the functions is as follows: *attachment* serves the function of integration (I); *commitment* serves the function of goal-attainment (G); *involvement* serves the function of adaptation (A); and *belief* serves the function of latent pattern-maintenance (L). This will be elaborated more fully shortly.

TABLE 1. Elements of the Social Bond<sup>a</sup>

Level	Element	Description
Behavioral	Involvement	Time spent in conventional activities
Cognitive	Commitment	Rational calculation of the costs of lawbreaking for future goals
Affective	Attachment	Emotional closeness to family, peers, and schools
Evaluative	Belief	Ideas that support a conventional orientation

<sup>a</sup>Adapted from Hirschi (1969) and Livingston (1996).

Hirschi's social control theory is in essence an extension and refinement of Durkheim's ([1897] 1951) notion that persons are more likely to deviate when they are poorly integrated into ongoing group relations. Indeed, Hirschi (1969:16) cites approvingly the following passage from Durkheim ([1897] 1951:209):

The more weakened the groups to which [the individual] belongs, the less he depends on them, the more he consequently depends only on himself and recognizes no other rules of conduct than what are founded on his private interests.

Hence, control theory assumes that deviance—or delinquency specifically for purposes of Hirschi's argument—results when an individual's bond to conventional society is weak or broken. This concept, the social bond, is the central analytic in Hirschi's schema. Hirschi's control theory is summarized in Table 1.

To summarize briefly, Hirschi suggests that the more *attached* persons are to other members of society, the more they *believe* in the values of conventional society, and the more they *invest in* and are *involved in* conventional lines of activity, the less likely they are to deviate. Needless to say, there has been an enormous amount written over the years about Hirschi's social bonding theory and later general theory of crime (which shifts the focus from social control to self-control). Tests of the theories have produced a wide assortment of findings, much of which are supportive, while others are mixed or negative (see, e.g., Hindelang 1973; Hagan and Simpson 1977; Wiatrowski, Griswold, and Roberts 1981; Matsueda 1982; Thompson, Mitchell, and Dodder 1984; Greenberg 1985; Friedman and Rosenbaum 1988; LaGrange and Silverman 1999; Geis 2000; Nakhaie, Silverman, and LaGrange. 2000; Marcus 2004). My purpose here, however, is not to contribute to the already vast literature regarding the veracity, validity, reliability, or utility of Hirschi's control theory. Rather, I intend to show that Hirschi's earlier control theory, as well as Gottfredson's and Hirschi's later general theory of crime (which emphasizes self-control rather than social bonds), are both special cases of, and can be subsumed under, Parsons' AGIL schema and his later cybernetic hierarchy of control.

## PARSONS' FOUR PHASES

Although some authors make the claim that Parsons' turn to cybernetics later in his career represents an analytical break from functionalism per se, I would argue that Parsons' cybernetic turn supplements, but does not replace, the basic functionalist orientation of his general theoretical project. Peter Hamilton (1996) concisely captured the various phases of Parsons' career, referring to them as Parsons<sup>0</sup>, Parsons<sup>1</sup>, Parsons<sup>2</sup>,

and Parsons<sup>3</sup>. Parsons<sup>0</sup> represents the earliest, preparatory phase of Parsons' career (before 1935), where his major contributions were not only in the field of economics but also in social theory (e.g., his translation into English of Weber's *Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism* in 1930). The next phase, Parsons<sup>1</sup>, running from the publication of *Structure of Social Action* in 1937 on through to the mid-1940s, represents the beginnings of Parsons' general theoretical project, particularly as this related to the development of a voluntaristic theory of action, which sought to incorporate subjectivist elements that had been "squeezed out" of theories of human action under the sway of positivism, behaviorism, and utilitarianism. The full elaboration of a functionalist and social systems orientation was launched in the Parsons<sup>2</sup> phase, represented in the works of Parsons and his collaborators published in the decade from 1951 through the early 1960s. Finally, Parsons<sup>3</sup>, the cybernetic phase, ran from the mid-1960s until Parsons' death in 1979.

Even with the advent of the last Parsons<sup>3</sup> phase, however, commitment to the major aspects of functionalist theorizing, especially the AGIL schema, remained intact. What the cybernetic turn accomplished for Parsons was the clarification of the *relationship* between the four functions within various subsystems of the social system, as well as the human social system in relation to the cosmos and beyond, as represented in the "human condition" paradigm, the final elaboration of Parsons' (1978) grand theory. In this last phase, Parsons was influenced most directly by Norbert Wiener (1961), who pioneered the application of cybernetics to explanations in social science. The cybernetic principle states simply "things high in information control things high in energy." A good example of this principle is the thermostat. A thermostat is high in information in that if it is set at 68 degrees, it will regulate the heat of the room, which is high in energy. Cybernetics assumes that human and nonhuman organizations constitute systems which are goal-seeking and which attempt to maintain a moving or stable state equilibrium, such as the thermostat maintaining the room's temperature at 68 degrees (Deutsch 1963:95).

As depicted in Figure 1, the four subsystems of the human condition represent the most general level possible for purposes of social analysis in that there is a physical or chemical realm (A), an organic realm (G), an action realm (I), and a nonempirical realm (the telic system, which serves the L-function). If one begins at this most abstract, human condition level, one may then descend to lower analytical levels by way of any selected subsystem. In Figure 1, the I-subsystem of the human condition, namely the action system, can be broken down into its own subsystems (depicted in the box on the bottom right portion of the figure), each serving one of the four functions of AGIL. One may then continue on and select one of these subsystems (the social system for example), which again can be broken down into a still lower-level subsystem (the box on the bottom left), and so on.

Parsons argued that with regard to the frame of reference of the general action system, the cultural system (L) stands at the pinnacle of the cybernetic hierarchy because it is high in information and "controls" virtually everything connected with the meaningful and purposive behavior of human beings.<sup>4</sup> With the function of latent pattern-maintenance standing at the top of the cybernetic hierarchy, the next level down is the function of integration (I), which at the frame of reference of the general action system

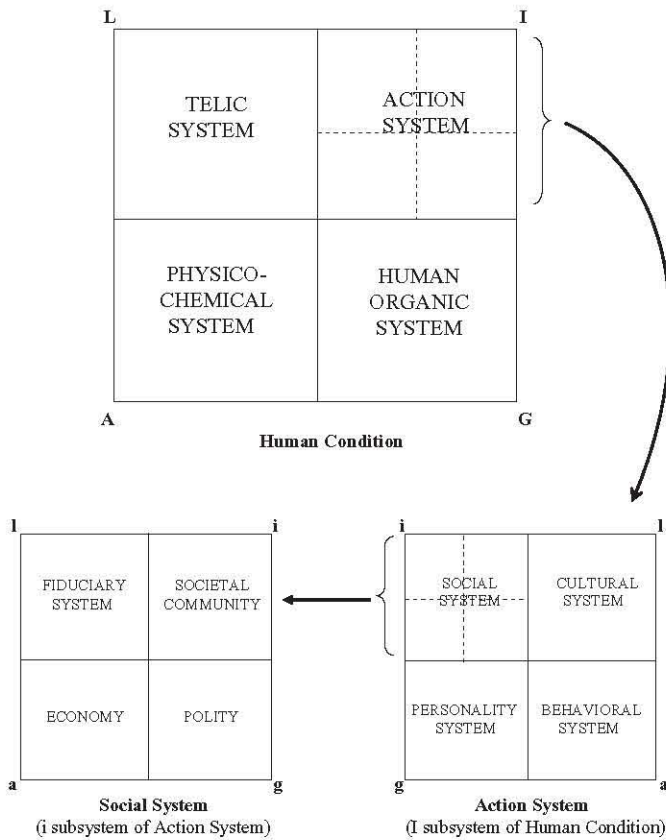


FIGURE 1. General Paradigm of the Human Condition and Selected Subsystems.

is represented by the social system itself. Culture in a sense is the ultimate and most generalized medium of interchange, which circulates throughout the social system, and the social system itself represents the most general but nevertheless concrete patterning of human energy. Social systems, in effect, represent the integration of human beings moving about in space and time.

The next level down in the cybernetic hierarchy of control is the function of goal-attainment (G), and with regard to the frame of reference of the general action system, this is represented by the human personality. The human personality represents the integration of need-dispositions, this being accomplished as a result of the human organism's experiencing the socialization process whereby he or she learns a particular set of cultural norms, values, and standards.

At the lowest level of the cybernetic hierarchy stands the function of adaptation (A), which is represented by the behavioral system. When a baby is born, he or she is a blank slate, which, although high in energy, has no guidelines for organizing or directing his or her behavior. Only with socialization can a cultural code be internalized and integrated into the personality.

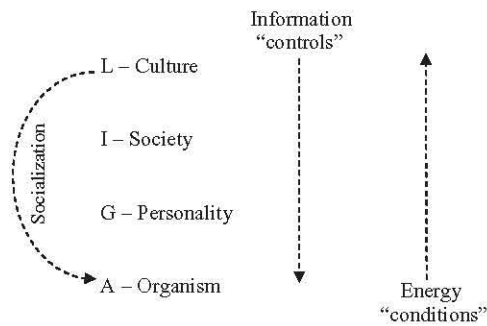


FIGURE 2. Cybernetic Hierarchy of the General Action System.

Hence, we see Parsons applying the principles of cybernetics to explain the human action system, and how information and feedback mechanisms provide modifications and growth of both human beings themselves and the social systems which evolve from their concerted behavior. Culture, high in information and serving the function of pattern maintenance (L), is passed down to the human child who is high in energy and who through his or her behavior adapts (A) to the environment and responds to a variety of stimuli as he or she goes through the socialization process. The behavioral system of the child gets organized one level higher up when the personality—the motivational system—is formed through ongoing socialization, as the child’s behavior is channeled toward the seeking of certain goals or end states (G) appropriate to the social context and the prevailing cultural heritage. Finally, the activities of each person, endowed with personalities which direct them toward the attainment of certain goals, create a tapestry of interlocking role relationships which produces the patterned regularities which we know as social institutions and, ultimately, social systems (I). (This process is depicted in Figure 2.)

## PARSONS AND ATTACHMENT: A CLOSER LOOK

In order to understand how Hirschi’s theory of delinquency “plugs into” Parsons’ more general and abstract theory of social systems, it is first necessary to understand the “action frame of reference.” For Parsons, the analytical elements of social systems must be understood from within the frame of reference he called “action.” The action frame of reference incorporates the essential levels of reality involving the human organism’s relation to its environment, to subjective orientations and states of mind of actors, to the social system as a collectivity, and to the cultural systems of meaning prevalent in any social system. In effect, action treats human behavior as “goal-oriented,” as “adaptive,” as “motivated,” and as guided by symbolic processes (Parsons 1961:32).

Keeping in mind the four functions and the cybernetic relationship between them, we now return to Hirschi’s theory of the social bond and an examination of the parallels between it and Parsons’ theory. Table 2 summarizes the parallels between Parsons’



TABLE 2. A Comparison of Parsons and Hirschi

Functions (Parsons)	The social bond (Hirschi)
Latency (L)	Belief
Integration (I)	Attachment
Goal-attainment (G)	Commitment
Adaptation (A)	Involvement

four-function, or AGIL schema, and Hirschi's theory of the social bond. In effect, what can be specified are the functions of the elements of the social bond from within the action frame of reference. In other words, with the help of Parsons' schema, we may now explicate the functions of the elements of the social bond.

From the perspective of the social system itself, the primary "goal" of the system is to prepare persons to take on the statuses or positions required to maintain the system as a going concern. Society as a goal-directed system will seek to maintain equilibrium and to avoid disequilibrium and, in the worst-case scenario, disintegration. As important elements or units within the system, human beings must be motivated to behave in ways that contribute to the continuing operation of the social system. The two main classes of mechanisms assuring such motivated action are the mechanisms of socialization and the mechanisms of social control. As Parsons, Shils, and Olds (1951) go on to explain,

The mechanisms of socialization are those mechanisms which form the need-dispositions making for a generalized readiness to fulfill the major patterns of role-expectation which an individual will encounter. (p. 227)

Since no empirical system is in perfect equilibrium, there will be inevitable failures of the socialization system to motivate conformity across all units (Parsons 1951:298). The failure of socialization (e.g., the Freudian notion of stunted or incomplete socialization which produces in the child an underdeveloped Superego) is disruptive of the social order, and it is the function of the mechanisms of social control to maintain the system in a state of stable or moving equilibrium (Parsons et al. 1951:228). However, social control does not arise merely in those situations where a clear breach of the social order has occurred (in the case of legal violations which set into motion the machinery of the criminal justice system). The orderly and routine workings of the socialization process provides a steady stream of symbolic equivalents of the expectations of the group, both general and specific, which are inculcated and made visibly present from the beginning. In essence, primary socialization, occurring within the contexts of family, church, peers, and so forth, is equivalent to informal social control. It is within these early critical stages that the personality of the child is formed, through contact with agents of primary socialization. Nevertheless, these value orientations must be continually reinforced against pressures toward disruption in both the personality and social systems, and hence, a formal system of control arises as a parallel to the informal system.

The most important point to take from this discussion is that, for Parsons, socialization and social control are analytically very similar. For example, Parsons (1951) states that

There are such close relations between the processes of socialization and of social control that we may take certain features of the processes of socialization as a point of reference for developing a framework for the analysis of the processes of control. (p. 298)

For the most part, social control is preventive or forestalling in nature in that it consists of teaching actors not to embark on processes of deviance, while socialization is positive in the sense of teaching persons how to do rather than how not to do. Even further, both social control and socialization are processes which involve human actors adjusting to strains. From the point of view of the motivational complex of the personality system, strain provokes four basic types of reaction: anxiety, fantasy, hostility or aggression, and defensive measures. A crucial element in the mechanisms of social control is “support,” which provides a basis of reassurance such that less severe reactions to strain—for example, anxiety or fantasy—will not escalate into aggressiveness or defensiveness. As Parsons (1951) explains,

Support may be of various kinds, but the common element is that somewhere there is the incorporation or retention of ego in a solidary relationship so that he has a basis of security in the sense of the above discussions. (p. 299)

What Parsons is suggesting is that if persons reacting to strain can find support in the form of, say, a loving parent, close friends, or even the therapeutic alliance forged with a therapist, they will be less likely to engage in the kinds of serious deviance that call forth agents of legal control. This is roughly equivalent to the attachment dimension of Hirschi’s social bond. Of the four elements of the social bond, attachment most directly implicates primary groups such as families and peers. Attachment is, again, the affective or emotional aspect of the social bond. In this sense, attachment serves an integrative function with respect to the social bond more generally.

## **HIRSCHI AND THE SPECIAL IMPORTANCE OF ATTACHMENTS AND BELIEFS**

Hirschi (1969:83–109) devotes an entire chapter to youths’ attachment to parents, and a brief summary of these findings are in order. As Hirschi (1969:83) states, “Control theory assumes that the bond of affection for conventional persons is a major deterrent to crime.” Children’s attachment to their parents is, according to Hirschi, one of the single best predictors of delinquency: as attachment to parents weakens, delinquency increases. Granted, being attached or bonded to a parent means that the child is likely to be more heavily supervised and more often in the presence of parents than children with weaker bonds. However, delinquent acts do not take much time to commit, so this sort of “direct control” explanation is only partial at best.

Even more important is the moral element in the attachment and this is where the content of *beliefs* within relationships play a crucial role. The idea is that even though a parent may be physically distant from a child who is considering committing a deviant act, the parent nevertheless could be psychologically present when such temptations arise. A child who asks himself or herself “What will my parents think?” at the moment of temptation, tends to exhibit more strongly the moral component of attachment than

a child whose conscience does not prompt him or her in the same way. This sort of “indirect control”—by way of beliefs—is more important than attachments represented, for example, by the direct, supervisory activities of parents seeking to restrict the activities of their children. A person who identifies himself or herself as a conventional person, that is, as one who cares about what others think about him or her, and who has properly internalized the expectations of significant others within his or her personality system (specifically within the self or Ego), is less likely to deviate. Such persons are also more likely to consider the long-term consequences of their actions and indeed, as suggested by Hirschi and Gottfredson (1993:49) many years later, this predisposition is an important indicator of self-control. In sum, the acceptance of the moral validity of society’s rules, represented by respect for significant others in the concrete and respect for law in the abstract (i.e., legal socialization), is a crucial element in the production of norm-conforming behavior (Le Banc and Caplan 1993).

## CYBERNETICS AND THE SOCIAL BOND

As discussed earlier, the cybernetic ordering of the four functions of Parsons’ AGIL schema is always in the direction of  $L \Rightarrow I \Rightarrow G \Rightarrow A$  (see Figure 2). Likewise, the cybernetic ordering of the elements of Hirschi’s social bond is (from high in information to high in energy) belief  $\Rightarrow$  attachment  $\Rightarrow$  commitment  $\Rightarrow$  involvement (see Table 2). The social bond is best placed within what Parsons called the societal community, which is the integrative subsystem of the social system (see Figure 1). Where power is the generalized medium of the polity (to be discussed more fully below) and money is the generalized medium of the economy, the societal community’s generalized medium is *influence*. As a generalized medium, influence consists in a specialized type of performative capacity. As Lidz (2001:161) explains, influence “. . . involves an actor’s capacity to invoke relationships of solidarity with other actors as means of affecting their decisions regarding present or future courses of action.”

The generalized symbolic medium of influence anchored in the societal community is to be understood as concerned primarily with the enforcement of norms, but in the sense of using persuasion within the context of small groups and other aspects of collective solidarity (i.e., informal control). Another sort of norm enforcement, reflecting the workings of formal control, emanates from the polity (or government), and seated here is the generalized medium of *power* (Parsons 1967). Influence as a medium of informal control works as an appeal to conscience within the context of solidarity relations. On the other hand, the legal system specifies a range of formal norms (laws), which are *binding* on citizens, in that violation of laws may generate negative sanctions such as fines, imprisonment, or even death. Regulated enforcement of laws are left to specialized agents of formal control, hence the specialized institutions fulfilling the goal-attainment function for the polity—in the special case of enforcement of legal norms—are the criminal justice system (with its subsystems of courts, corrections, and police) and the juvenile justice system.

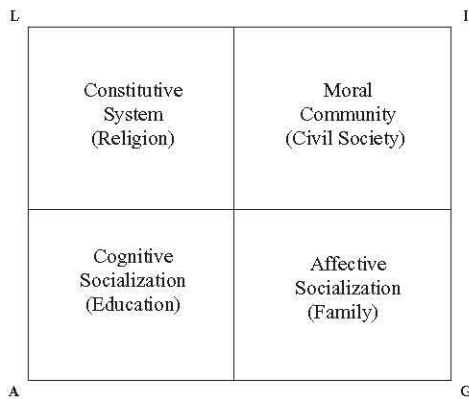


FIGURE 3. The Fiduciary System.

Even though the social bond, as an integrative system, is located within the societal community, there are of course important interchanges going on between elements of the social bond and the polity (G) as well the fiduciary system, which is the (L) or latent pattern-maintenance subsystem of the social system. There are four institutional subsystems located within the fiduciary system: education (A), family (G), civil society (or what Parsons calls the “moral community,” which fulfills the I function), and religion (L; see Figure 3). Each of these institutions serves socialization functions; hence, the symbolic medium operating here is value commitments. The family is concerned primarily with affective, or expressive, socialization, while educational institutions, for example, are concerned primarily with cognitive (or instrumental) socialization.

This is a fiduciary system in that all of the institutions located here are investing their own resources for an anticipated later “pay off” for the social system more generally. The resources of education (A) are invested for the development of a well-informed citizenry and the placement of individuals within the economic system. The resources of the family (G) are invested for the development of stable, well-adjusted personalities. The resources of the civil society (I) are invested for the development of a stable citizenry, whereby persons are attached to political institutions and participate in the civic life of the community. Finally, the resources of religion (L) are invested for the spiritual well-being of persons as well as the ultimate “pay off” of salvation or grace for those who faithfully follow the teachings of their religion in this life.

Since socialization institutions such as the family are concerned with assuring the value commitments—or the fiduciary bonds—of and between their members, it is obvious that the starting point for assuring stable social bonds to conventional others is a level of belief in the goodness or justness, or even the validity of the immediate structures of primary groups as well as of society in the abstract (as discussed above). Following the logic of the cybernetic hierarchy, then, belief is “highest” in information relative to the other elements of the social bond. Next highest in information is attachment, which is the integrative element of the social bond, and which families especially attempt to ensure

through the socialization of their young. Commitment is the goal-attainment element of the social bond, and it is lower in information and somewhat higher in energy in relation to belief and attachments. As the primary socialization agent, the family enters here to the extent that through socialization, personality is formed, meaning that individuals are provided guidance as to which goals should be pursued. As Parsons and Platt (1973:21) suggest, "Thus, sociologists commonly think that a primary function of kinship, especially of the modern nuclear family, is to order the motivations of individuals in relation to their social roles." Finally, involvement serves the adaptation function of the social bond, and is "highest" in energy relative to the other elements of the bond.

## THE MOVE TO SELF-CONTROL

In their *A General Theory of Crime*, Gottfredson, and Hirschi (1990) abandoned explicit reference to social bonds in favor of self-control as the primary factor in the explanation of crime and delinquency. By admission of Hirschi and Gottfredson as well as outside commentators, it appeared that the move from social control (by way of the social bond) to self-control was radical, something akin to an epistemological or analytical rupture (see, e.g., Taylor 2001). Why was this change made? Hirschi (2004) explains that

After examining age distributions of crimes and analogous acts, Gottfredson and I reversed my original position, concluding that these acts are, after all, manifestations of low self-control on the part of the offender. (p. 540)

According to the original social bonding theory of Hirschi, delinquency and crime were more a manifestation of the strength or weakness of the social bonds between the offender and others than of the particular characteristics of the offender. For Gottfredson and Hirschi, the stable differences in crime rates across group and individual levels that they discovered (see Hirschi and Gottfredson 1983) seemed to suggest that, rather than social bonds, the strength of which can fluctuate over time and with changes in the social and economic situations of individuals, the explanation of crime would more likely be found in one's level of self-control.

But where does self-control come from? Gottfredson and Hirschi admit that it begins early in life and is relatively impervious to change later in life. Indeed, the authors adopted a "child-rearing model" to account for the origins of (or conversely, the failure to learn) self-control (Hirschi 2004:541). This move places great emphasis on the importance of primary groups and especially the socialization function of the family. Gottfredson and Hirschi never traced out the implications of the continuing importance of the family for the formation and stability of social bonds, or for the establishment of self-control. To the extent that Hirschi's theory is now subsumed under Parsons' AGIL schema, we would expect that both the social bond and self-control will be highly correlated with each other since they are both products of the socialization system (as understood within the Parsonian framework). The suggestion, then, is that it is helpful to trace out the linkages between the family as an institution and the personality system, as reconstructed via Parsons' AGIL schema. The personality system becomes an important part of this analysis because self-control is a psychological concept. As viewed through the framework of

Parsons' system, the move from social control to self-control is neither as radical nor as surprising as it has been made out to be (see, e.g., Taylor 2001). Indeed, the move "makes sense" once the logic of the cybernetic hierarchy of control is brought to bear.

### THE LINK BETWEEN FAMILY AND PERSONALITY

Reiterating a point made earlier, for Parsons, the family and personality are intimately connected. Here is some of what Parsons (1955) has had to say on this issue:

The most important implication of this view is that the functions of the family in a highly differentiated society are not to be interpreted as functions directly on behalf of the society, but on behalf of personality. . . . [Families] are factories which produce human personality. (p. 16)

Figure 4 offers a schematization of the linkages between the family and the personality system according to Parsons' AGIL schema. As we have seen, the personality system

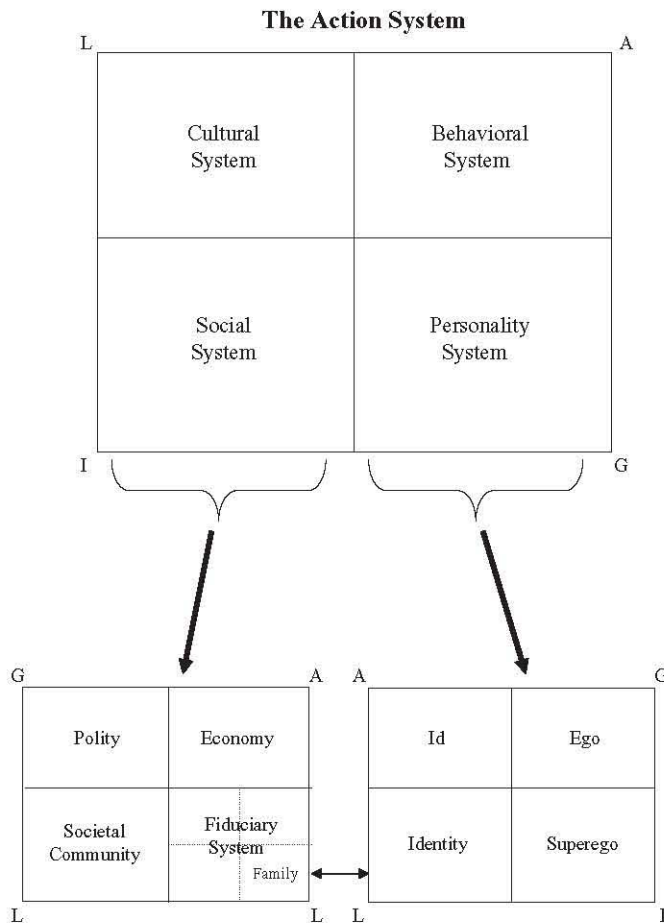


FIGURE 4. The Family—Identity Connection.

fulfills the function of goal-attainment at the action system level. As the integrative subsystem of the action system, the social system is involved in a double interchange with the personality system, and this double interchange Parsons and Platt (1973:435) describe as the “motivational integration system.” This simply refers to the fact that social systems are populated by human beings who, because of socialization, have an integrated set of need-dispositions (the personality) that steers them (typically) toward engaging in norm-conforming behavior.

Following the logic of Parsons’ schema, each of these action system subsystems—social system and personality—are broken down one further level into their own four subsystems. For our purposes, we are especially interested in the L-subsystem of the social system, which is the fiduciary system. Likewise, the personality system is broken down into the subsystems of Id (A), Ego (G), Superego (I), and identity (L). Parsons (1968b) follows Freud in conceptualizing the personality as composed of the functional components of Id, Ego (or self), and Superego (the conscience), plus identity, the latter of which stands at the pinnacle of the cybernetic hierarchy of the personality system insofar as identity is the organized attributes of all the resources embodied in the three lower-level Freudian components. In addition, identity (or one’s self-concept in a particular role or social situation) is considered to be the most stable feature of the personality system, and hence, at this analytical level, it provides both pattern maintenance and tension management for the person.

Notice not only that identity fulfills the L-function for the personality system, but also that families, which as we have seen reflect that aspect of the fiduciary system primarily concerned with the affective socialization of young children (but also with the stabilization of adult personalities), are the primary “factory” for the production of personality. Even further, Parsons conceives of “affect” as the generalized medium of interchange circulating in the social system, where affect is understood as a contentless medium mediating the relations of actors from the perspective of the internal environment of action (Parsons and Platt 1973:83). The family, of course, specializes in affective socialization of the young, while Hirschi’s notion of attachment fulfills the integrative function for the social bond, which in turn is conceptualized at the affective level (as opposed to the evaluative, cognitive, or behavioral levels).

The personality system has its own medium of interchange, which Parsons and Platt (1973:435) refer to as “performance capacity.” As Parsons and Platt (1973) explain,

The basis for considering performance-capacity a scarce medium that circulates [in the personality] is essentially the same as that just outlined for intelligence [for the behavioral system]. . . . [F]or performance-capacity, the compensating income category is cathexis of objects—motivational commitment to act appropriately in relation to them. (p. 78)

The part of the personality known as the Superego (serving the integrative function), embodies the end product of all these various levels of affect operating at the social system level, the family level (i.e., at the fiduciary system level), and elsewhere: socialization that is complete and which delivers an appropriate moral template reflecting the value-standards of that society will inculcate a conscience in the child by a particular age

(about age eight according to both Mead and Piaget). Yet, this is not the complete story. If it were, the social bond would have continued to be the most important resource serving to keep youths from engaging in delinquency from the perspective of Hirschi's theory. This is not the end of the story because, as we have seen in Parsons' system, there is an even still higher level of organization of the personality that sits at the pinnacle of the cybernetic hierarchy. This is the identity, and it coincides with the evaluative level of the social bond, namely belief. Both serve pattern maintenance and tension management functions for their respective areas.

## **A WORD ABOUT SELF AND IDENTITY**

Before moving on to the last section, some words are in order regarding the concepts of self and identity, especially as they have been treated in the above discussion. From the symbolic interactionist perspective, by the "self" is meant the process of reflexivity emanating from the internal dialogue between the "I" and the "Me" (Gecas and Burke 1995). The self arises out of this process of reflecting back on one's own thoughts and actions in interaction with others.

Whereas the self represents this process of reflexivity and embeddedness in ongoing group activities, the "self-concept" can be thought of as the sum total of the individual's thoughts and feelings about him- or herself as an object (Rosenberg 1979; Gecas and Burke 1995:42; Reitzes and Mutran 2003). However, since the self is through and through a product of society, the meanings attached to whom or what kind of person one is cannot be limited to self-concepts alone. "Identity," then, represents the various meanings attached to oneself by self and others. In this sense, "identity is the most public aspect of self" (Gecas and Burke 1995:42). Another way of thinking about this is that identities are meanings attributed to the self as object (Stets 1995).

Although Parsons has occasionally claimed that his social psychology is compatible with the Meadian-influenced sociological social psychology summarized above, many observers simply do not accept this claim.<sup>5</sup> This is because Parsons (1964, 1968b, 1977) draws much more from Freud than he does from Cooley, Mead, and other pragmatists and symbolic interactionists for his working understandings of the social psychology of the person and of social interaction more generally. For example, Parsons rarely writes about the "self," preferring instead Freud's Ego to refer to the active and reflective human subject who can take himself or herself into account as an object as well.

For Freud, the Ego balances the raw passions fueled by libido energy (from the Id) and the requirements of living and operating in an outer social world (the Superego). This is the "reality principle" and Ego is the rational component of the personality system because of the work it does in synthesizing inner needs and outer reality (Allport 1968:29). When Parsons locates Freud's Ego in the G-subsystem of the personality system, this is also where the self—the self of symbolic interactionism—should be located. Yet confusions may still exist. Note, for example, that interaction theory explains the stability of the personality by way of Mead's "self" (i.e., stable meanings toward



oneself as an object), while Parsonian action theory explains it by way of Freud's "identity" (stable orientations toward oneself as an object; see Turner [1974:287]). In the Parsonian framework, identity represents the highest-order stability of the personality (influenced by Freud) while symbolic interactionists tend to see the self as the most stable locus of social psychological processes and attributes. In other words, observers may still be left to wonder where the "self" truly belongs in Parsons' personality system. Here, it is important to sort out any lingering confusions with regard to the concepts self, identity, and Ego in Parsons' theory.

One thing we know for certain is that within the personality system, Parsons places identity in the L-subsystem and Ego in the G-subsystem (see Figure 4). This means that although Parsons rarely explicitly refers to the self, it should nevertheless be seen as equivalent to Freud's Ego, and hence, belongs in the G-subsystem. If this is the case, how can self-control properly be conceptualized if the self is relegated to the relatively low level (cybernetically speaking) of goal-attainment? This seeming conundrum is easily solved if it is kept in mind that identity is a higher-order aspect of self. The self in effect provides the conditions (being itself higher in energy) for identity, which is higher in information. Indeed, structural social psychologists such as Sheldon Stryker and Peter Burke view identity as more stable than the self as well (see, e.g., Stryker 1981; Burke 1997; Stryker and Burke 2000).

Burke's (1997, 2004) identity control theory conceptualizes human social interaction as a cybernetic system in which information from the environment, from other actors, and from the self is compared to actors' internal identity standards (the "comparator"). It is out of this system that identities (or self-concepts) in roles emerge, and in this sense is similar to Parsons' own cybernetic system of personality. Indeed, it could be said that Parsons' theory is an identity control theory, different from Burke's version only to the extent that Parsons draws on Freud for key elements of the theory. What this implies is that if Parsons is compatible with symbolic interactionism at all, it is with the Stryker/Burke wing of structural social psychology (see, e.g., Stryker 2001). In Parsons' system, then, the "self" of symbolic interactionism is assimilated to the Freudian Ego and located in the G-subsystem of the personality system. This makes Parsons' theory of personality a true identity control theory, to the extent that identity sits atop the cybernetic hierarchy of control.<sup>6</sup>

Although this formulation of Parsons may indeed violate standard symbolic interactionist notions of self and identity—and the analytical connection between the two—for purposes of this discussion whether or not Parsons maintains fidelity to the Meadian line on self and identity is irrelevant. What *is* relevant, however, is how Parsons' formulation impacts the attempt to subsume Gottfredson and Hirschi's (1990) conceptualization of self-control and by extension, the self, under his own AGIL schema. Although, with respect to the Median self, Parsons is all thumbs, so are Gottfredson and Hirschi. Gottfredson and Hirschi in fact are purposely oblivious to the conceptual issues regarding the self that have been discussed in this section. For them, the "self" is simply the human person, and that is about the extent of it.<sup>7</sup> Stripped to its bare essentials, this means that the Gottfredson/Hirschi self is easily incorporated into Parsons' more conceptually elaborate

framework for explaining self and identity processes. Subsumed under Parsons' theory in this way, Hirschi's self-control is now treated as identity control.<sup>8</sup>

## **CONCLUSION: GENERATING A SET OF TESTABLE HYPOTHESES**

Now that it has been demonstrated how Hirschi's social bond and self-control theories can be subsumed under Parsons' AGIL schema, it is now time to indicate the sorts of hypotheses that logically can be derived from the theoretical reformulation. Some of these hypotheses are consistent with the criminological literature that has tested various aspects of Hirschi's theories, while others—especially those that predict there should be strong associations between the strength of the social bond and levels of self-control—are new. Here, then, are some of those hypotheses.

Hypothesis 1. Among the four elements of the social bond, belief (as appropriately operationalized) will be the single best predictor of delinquency/deviance rates.

Hypothesis 2. Among the four elements of the social bond, attachment will be the second best predictor of delinquency/deviance rates.

Hypothesis 3. Among the four elements of the social bond, the additive effects of belief and attachment will better predict rates of deviance or delinquency than the additive effects of commitment and involvement.

Hypothesis 4. As belief increases, self-control increases.

Hypothesis 5. As attachment increases, self-control increases.

Hypothesis 6. As the additive effect of belief and attachment increases, self-control increases.

Hypothesis 7. As the strength of the social bond increases, self-control increases.

Hypothesis 8. The additive effects of belief and attachment will better predict levels of self-control than the additive effects of commitment and involvement.

Hypothesis 9. As self-control increases, rates of delinquency/deviance decrease.

Hypothesis 10. Because in patriarchal societies boys are less heavily supervised than girls (as part of the routine workings of socialization), boys will have weaker social bonds than girls.

Hypothesis 11. Because in patriarchal societies boys are less heavily supervised than girls (as part of the routine workings of socialization), boys will have lower self-control than girls.

Hypothesis 12. Because in patriarchal societies boys are less heavily supervised than girls (as part of the routine workings of socialization), boys will have higher delinquency rates than girls.

Hypotheses 1–3 reflect the cybernetic ordering of the elements of the social bond, and because belief and attachment are the highest in information relative to the other two elements of the bond (commitment and involvement), it is argued that they will play a more prominent role in predicting rates of delinquency and/or deviance more generally. Hypotheses 4–8 reflect the fact that since belief and attachment are more important (i.e., higher in information cybernetically) relative to the two other elements of the social the bond, when they increase either independently or in tandem,

self-control is predicted to increase as well (the obverse of the relationship between these two elements of the social bond and delinquency covered in Hypotheses 1–3). Although many more hypotheses logically can be derived from the two groups of hypotheses, Hypotheses 1–3 and Hypotheses 4–8, Hypothesis 9 is one such example of how the relationship between self-control and delinquency can be predicted. Finally, Hypotheses 10–12 are logically derived from Parsons' discussion of the nature of gender socialization (see, e.g., Parsons 1955, 1964), which predicts both lower rates of self-control and higher rates of delinquency for boys relative to girls.<sup>9</sup>

An article by Longshore et al. (2004) finds empirical support for many of these propositions, even as the authors fail to notice the relevance of Parsons' theory with regard to its subsumption of both the social bonding and self-control theories of Hirschi. For example, the bivariate relationship between low self-control and juvenile drug use was fully mediated by substance-using peers as well as by moral belief. In fact, belief (serving the L-function within the Parsons' schema) was always the strongest predictor of delinquency among the four elements of the social bond. Additionally, all four elements of the social bond were significantly related to self-control, just as predicted in our newly integrated theory.

Longshore et al. (2004) intimate that for the sake of parsimony, an integrated theory incorporating both social bonding and self-control theory is needed. As I have shown, such an integrated theory is already available in the guise of Parsons' systems theory. Even with the strongly supportive evidence found in the Longshore et al. (2004) study, because of the probabilistic nature of social phenomena, no sociological theory will approach even close to 100 percent accuracy regarding its predictions. There will always be negative cases, and because of this, research which fails to confirm any number of hypotheses derived from a particular theory should not necessarily eventuate in a rejection of the theory at that point. DiCristina (2006) points out that although most social scientists adhere to Popper's notion of falsifiability—namely, the attempt to accumulate “facts” that challenge a theory—it has never been clear how many negative cases are needed before a theory can be rejected. If the evidence is either positive, weak, or mixed—but certainly not consistently negative—as is the case for Hirschi's self-control and social bonding theories, then it is irrational to reject a theory on the basis of these “crucial” tests alone.<sup>10</sup>

As this article represents only a starting point in the attempt to develop a systematic approach, which integrates both self-control and social bonding theory under Parsons' AGIL schema, much work remains to be done, especially in terms of the operationalization of key concepts of the theory. Indeed, perhaps the single leading factor producing variations in the support (or lack thereof) of Hirschi's social bonding and self-control theories has been the varying ways such key concepts as self-control, attachments, beliefs, commitments, and involvement have been operationalized by different researchers (see Kempf 1993; Le Banc and Caplan 1993; Marcus 2004). Now subsumed under a more general, overarching theoretical system, it is anticipated that greater consistency and precision will be brought to bear not only with regard to operationalization, but also on the whole range of issues touching upon deviance and its relation to self-control and the nature of the social bond.

## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

For their helpful suggestions for improvement of earlier versions of this paper, I thank Teresa LaGrange, Thomas Fararo, Victor Lidz, and the three anonymous reviewers of *The Sociological Quarterly*.

## NOTES

<sup>1</sup>Hence, even Gottfredson and Hirschi's (1990; Hirschi and Gottfredson 2000, 2001) so-called "general theory of crime" is middle-range in that, even though it purports to treat the totality of phenomena encompassing crime and deviance, deviance itself is merely one aspect of the greater totality of human phenomena that theorists such as Talcott Parsons have endeavored to explain under a single, comprehensive metatheoretical framework (Wellford 1989).

<sup>2</sup>Hirschi (1979) and Liska et al. (1989) use the term "up-and-down integration" to refer to this deductive form of theoretical integration. As Liska et al. (1989:10) explain, this form of theoretical integration "is accomplished by identifying a level of abstraction or generality that will incorporate some of the conceptualization of the constituent theories." Hirschi (1989) is generally opposed to the sort of theoretical integration or reduction being discussed here.

<sup>3</sup>For purposes of brevity, I state several of my working assumptions here. First, the debate between proponents and critics of Parsons that began in the 1950s is so well known to sociologists that it needs no further elaboration here (see Turner 2001). Second, I assume that readers of this article are familiar with the basic points of both Hirschi's and Parsons' theories since they are both sociologists and are both heavily cited and discussed. Third, the justification for selecting Parsons' grand theory over other candidate theories in sociology (e.g., Luhmann, Giddens, Bourdieu, or Habermas) is that it is best to subsume a functionalist micro- or meso-level theory (which Hirschi's control theory is) into a functionalist grand theory, and among the leading grand theories Parsons' is clearly the most purely functional. Fourth, Parsons' work, and functionalism more generally, are still pertinent to contemporary theorizing and research in sociology and elsewhere. For recent writings that argue for the continuing viability of functionalism in general and Parsons' thought in particular, see Gerhardt (2000, 2002, 2005), Hare (2003), King (2004), Fish (2005), Fox et al. (2005), Toby (2005), Chattoe (2006), and Kinkaid (2007).

<sup>4</sup>Culture, in this sense, is to the social system what DNA is to the organism. DNA, which is high in information, "controls" the constitution, makeup, and appearance of the organism (ontology). Additionally, DNA is, like culture, passed down from generation to generation as organisms procreate and pass on their genetic heritage to offspring (phylogeny).

<sup>5</sup>For discussions of Parsons' relation—or lack thereof—to symbolic interactionism, see Blumer (1975a,b), Parsons (1968a, 1975), and Turner (1974, 1975).

<sup>6</sup>In essence, Freud's singularly important insight for Parsons was that the internalization of group norms at the level of the Ego become the self's more general identity (Manning 2005:110).

<sup>7</sup>This is closest to James's (1890) notion of the "material self," although Hirschi has never framed his understanding of self in this way.

<sup>8</sup>This means that Burke's identity control theory is also now subsumable under Parsons' more general and abstract theory. By reason of limitations of space, however, this argument cannot be explored here.

<sup>9</sup>Hayslett-McCall and Bernard (2002) argue that the otherwise disparate concepts of self-control and attachment (especially in the case of boys) can be successfully linked by overcoming the

underspecification of the concept of “self” inherent in Gottfredson and Hirschi’s (1990) treatment. They do this by utilizing the developmental psychology of John Bowlby (1969), which is consistent with the way Parsons understands and interprets Freud. Although there is no problem with this in and of itself, Bowlby provides a link from self-control to only one dimension of the social bond—attachment—while Parsons provides links to all four dimensions.

<sup>10</sup>For more on falsifiability and the irrationality of rejecting theories on the basis of the existence of weak or mixed support in the test of hypotheses, see Wagner (2000) and DiCristina (2006). For a comprehensive overview of the empirical status of Hirschi’s self-control and social bonding theories, see Kempf (1993).

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