

The Coattails Phenomenon: Getting Character From Others

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My high school classmate Tom Gordon was everyone's choice for least-likely-to-succeed. He drank too much and drove too fast, and got busted for petty theft again and again. He skipped school as often as he showed up, and was too undisciplined for sports or other organized activities. When he did get hired for part-time jobs, he'd either quit or get himself fired soon after. He was a loser.

So imagine my bewilderment when I ran into Tom (whose name I have changed) some years later. He was sitting in a local diner, drinking coffee and reading several newspapers, including the *Wall Street Journal*. It turns out that, a couple years out of school, he had married one of our quieter and more studious classmates. He had started surrounding himself with her solid and conscientious friends, leaving the bad boys of high school behind. He no longer hung out, and he rarely had a drink. He was an engaged father and had a small business. He lived a life of moderation.

Many people know a Tom Gordon, or did at one time, and most of their stories do not have such happy outcomes. Indeed, most kids with poor self-control grow up to be adults with poor self-control. So what turned Tom around? Why didn't his undisciplined nature lead him inevitably into a life of trouble and failure, as we all predicted?

New research may offer some insights into Tom Gordon's mysterious turnaround. A team of Duke University psychological scientists, headed by Grainne Fitzsimons, has been studying people with poor self-control, and in particular the idea that the Tom Gordons of the world may be aware of their shortcomings—and compensate for them. Perhaps, they suggest, Tom deliberately chose a new social circle—both wife and friends—as a self-regulatory strategy, riding the disciplinary coattails of the more fortunate.

They ran a couple laboratory experiments, plus a study of actual couples, to see how lack of self-control shapes our views of other, more disciplined people. In one study, for example, Fitzsimons and her colleagues used a standard lab manipulation to deplete volunteers' reserves of self-control. With their mental discipline temporarily weakened, these volunteers (and controls) read stories about three office managers, one highly disciplined, one undisciplined, and one in the middle. All the volunteers evaluated the three managers.

The results were clear. The volunteers who were lacking in self-control viewed the highly disciplined managers more positively than the moderately disciplined managers, who they favored over the undisciplined ones. In other words, undisciplined people seem to be attracted to others, even strangers, who possess the emotional resources that they themselves lack.

Now granted, this was a somewhat artificial laboratory situation, exploring a temporary depletion of self-control. What about people, like Tom Gordon, for whom this is a persistent character trait? Will they also show a preference for role models of self-discipline? To test this, the scientists used a different lab

test to measure self-control as an enduring trait, separating the disciplined and undisciplined volunteers into two different groups. Then they all read stories very similar to those in the first study, and rated the person in these stories: Would they be excited to meet this person? Might they become friends? Could they work together?

As predicted, those who were by nature undisciplined—these volunteers were much more positive toward people with high self-control, people unlike themselves. Notably, volunteers who were themselves very disciplined by nature showed no preference for this trait—or lack of it—in others. In terms of my old classmate Tom, it's at least plausible that he knew on some level that he should be around people unlike himself. He used his wife and new friends to regulate his own destructive impulses.

Of course Tom is real, and these are both lab studies. To bring their inquiry closer to the real-life Tom Gordons of the world, Fitzsimons' team decided to study actual romantic couples. They asked more than a hundred couples—both partners—to complete a self-control inventory, and also a measure of their dependence on their partner. By dependence, they meant: To what extent is your partner, and only your partner, able to fulfill your needs?

The findings reinforced the lab results. As described in a forthcoming article in the journal *Psychological Science*, those partners with low self-control were more dependent on their partners—much needier—but only when their partners were highly disciplined. Those who were themselves disciplined showed no differences in their emotional dependence. They apparently didn't have the same powerful need for a partner who would make up for their own impulsiveness.

Taken together, these studies offer evidence for a social self-regulatory process, by which we draw close to others to compensate for our flaws. These scientists are not suggesting that such reliance on others will or can trump impulsiveness, not entirely. Indeed, overwhelming evidence suggests the opposite—that self-control deficits are very difficult to overcome. But these findings do at least raise the hope that naturally impulsive people might play an active role in overcoming their own weaknesses—rather than just accepting their unhappy fate.

Wray Herbert's book, [*On Second Thought*](#), is about irrational decision making. Excerpts from his two blogs—"We're Only Human" and "Full Frontal Psychology"—appear regularly in [*The Huffington Post*](#) and in *Scientific American Mind*.