

Exaggerated Emotional Coherence (Halo Effect)

If you like the president's politics, you probably like his voice and his appearance as well. The tendency to like (or dislike) everything about a person—including things you have not observed—is known as the halo effect. The term has been in use in psychology for a century, but it has not come into wide use in everyday language. This is a pity, because the halo effect is a good name for a common bias that plays a large role in shaping our view of people and situations. It is one of the ways the representation of the world that System 1 generates is simpler and more coherent than the real thing.

You meet a woman named Joan at a party and find her personable and easy to talk to. Now her name comes up as someone who could be asked to contribute to a charity. What do you know about Joan's generosity? The correct answer is that you know virtually nothing, because there is little reason to believe that people who are agreeable in social situations are also generous contributors to charities. But you like Joan and you will retrieve the feeling of liking her when you think of her. You also like generosity and generous people. By association, you are now predisposed to believe that Joan is generous. And now that you believe she is generous, you probably like Joan even better than you did earlier, because you have added generosity to her pleasant attributes.

Real evidence of generosity is missing in the story of Joan, and the gap is filled by a guess that fits one's emotional response to her. In other situations, evidence accumulates gradually and the interpretation is shaped by the emotion attached to the first impression. In an enduring classic of psychology, Solomon Asch presented descriptions of two people and asked for comments on their personality. What do you think of Alan and Ben?

Alan: intelligent—industrious—impulsive—critical—stubborn—envious

Ben: envious—stubborn—critical—impulsive—industrious—intelligent

If you are like most of us, you viewed Alan much more favorably than Ben. The initial traits in the list change the very meaning of the traits that appear later. The stubbornness of an intelligent person is seen as likely to be justified and may actually evoke respect, but intelligence in an envious and stubborn person makes him more dangerous. The halo effect is also an example of suppressed ambiguity: like the word *bank*, the adjective *stubborn* is ambiguous and will be interpreted in a way that makes it coherent with the context.

There have been many variations on this research theme. Participants in one study first considered the first three adjectives that describe Alan; then they considered the

last three, which belonged, they were told, to another person. When they had imagined the two individuals, the participants were asked if it was plausible for all six adjectives to describe the same person, and most of them thought it was impossible!

The sequence in which we observe characteristics of a person is often determined by chance. Sequence matters, however, because the halo effect increases the weight of first impressions, sometimes to the point that subsequent information is mostly wasted.