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The Halo Effect: How One Good First Impression C

Psicología y comportamiento · 17/11/2026 · Por Camilo Calderón

A good first impression can make us believe we know far more about someone than we really do. Learn how the halo effect works, why it influences our relationships and decisions, and how to keep first impressions from turning into mistaken judgments.

The Halo Effect: How One Good First Impression Can Change Everything We Think About Someone

Sometimes we learn just one thing about someone and, without noticing, start filling in the rest of their personality. We think they are intelligent because they speak well, trustworthy because they seem confident, or capable because they look professional. But how much of that image is supported by facts, and how much are we assuming?

Imagine this situation.

You walk into a meeting and meet two people. The first speaks confidently, is well dressed, uses precise vocabulary, and maintains eye contact. The second seems nervous, pauses while speaking, and does not appear as polished.

Without having worked with either one, you may already be thinking that the first person is more intelligent, organized, capable, and trustworthy.

But pause for a moment: what real information do you have to reach those conclusions?

You know how they introduced themselves. You have observed how they speak and a few details about their appearance. However, you still do not know how they work, whether they keep their commitments, how they respond to problems, or whether they are honest when no one is watching.

That leap from what we observe to what we assume is one of the places where the halo effect appears.

It is not simply judging someone by their appearance. It is a broader phenomenon: one striking characteristic can influence how we evaluate other characteristics that we have not actually verified.

And what is interesting is that it can happen even when we believe we are being objective.

1. What Exactly Is the Halo Effect?

The halo effect is a perceptual bias in which our overall impression of a person, object, brand, or situation influences how we evaluate its specific characteristics.

In other words, one quality that catches our attention can influence how we perceive everything else.

For example:

A physically attractive person may seem kinder, more intelligent, or more interesting.

Someone who speaks very confidently may seem more capable than we have actually been able to verify.

A person with professional prestige may automatically seem more credible, even outside their area of expertise.

A product with an elegant design may seem higher quality before we have used it.

A student who usually earns good grades may receive a favorable evaluation even when a particular assignment falls short.

In each case, one initial characteristic acts like a filter. We begin interpreting other dimensions through it.

The issue is not that the first characteristic is necessarily false or irrelevant. The problem appears when we give it more explanatory power than it has.

Good looks do not prove honesty. Fluency does not prove deep knowledge. Prestige does not guarantee that every opinion a person expresses is correct.

The halo effect occurs when we allow one piece of information to represent far more than it can actually tell us.

2. Where Does the Name Come From? The Origins of a Phenomenon Studied for More Than a Century

The concept has an interesting history in psychology.

In 1920, American psychologist Edward L. Thorndike published a paper titled A Constant Error in Psychological Ratings, examining how supervisors evaluated different qualities in other people.

Thorndike noticed something striking: when evaluators rated characteristics such as intelligence, leadership ability, physical qualities, and character, the scores tended to be related in an overly consistent way.

That is, if someone received a favorable rating in one area, they also tended to receive favorable ratings in others, even when those were dimensions that should have been evaluated separately.

In one part of his research, he analyzed evaluations of 137 aviation cadets. Their supervisors' ratings showed high correlations among characteristics such as intelligence, leadership, character, and physical appearance.

Thorndike proposed that the overall impression a person made could be contaminating specific evaluations.

This is where the image of a halo comes from: a kind of glow surrounding an object and making everything appear illuminated by the same source.

The metaphor is quite precise. One positive characteristic can spill over into the rest of our perception and make different qualities seem equally positive.

The original research is also interesting for another reason: these were not inexperienced

people. They were evaluators with real responsibilities who had to observe other people's performance.

This reminds us of something important: having experience does not automatically make us immune to judgment biases.

3. Beauty and the Halo Effect: The Experiment That Changed How Physical Attractiveness Was Studied

One of the best-known studies of this phenomenon was published in 1972 by Karen Dion, Ellen Berscheid, and Elaine Walster.

Their research was titled What Is Beautiful Is Good and examined how physical appearance could influence the expectations people formed about others.

The study explored whether people considered physically attractive were assigned more favorable personality traits and expectations about the events they might experience in life.

The results supported the existence of a stereotype: people perceived as more attractive tended to receive more positive evaluations on several personal characteristics and expectations of success.

Think about what this means.

When we see someone we find attractive, we may spontaneously attribute qualities such as:

Greater friendliness.

More intelligence.

Better social skills.

More confidence.

Greater professional or personal success.

However, none of these characteristics can be reliably inferred from physical attractiveness.

Appearance can influence how we interpret someone, but it is not proof of their character, values, or abilities.

A 2000 research review by Judith Langlois and colleagues combined eleven meta-analyses on physical attractiveness. Their results showed that people considered attractive tended to be evaluated and treated more positively than those considered less attractive.

This matters because the effect is not limited to a private impression: expectations can turn into real differences in how people are treated.

There is also a nuance worth considering.

In 2006, Angela Griffin and Judith Langlois investigated whether differences in evaluation were driven mainly by an advantage for attractive people or by a disadvantage for people considered unattractive. Their results in adults and children suggested that, in many cases, the disadvantage associated with being seen as unattractive could play an important role.

Therefore, we should not reduce all this research to the statement "being attractive makes

everyone see you more positively.” How the bias operates may depend on the comparison, the context, and the characteristics being evaluated.

4. How Does the Halo Effect Work in Our Minds?

The halo effect does not require someone to consciously decide to fool themselves. It can arise during the everyday process of forming impressions.

To understand it, imagine a sequence.

First: we notice a striking characteristic.

It may be someone’s appearance, confidence when speaking, prestige, friendliness, academic credentials, or anything else that stands out.

Second: we form an overall impression.

That characteristic contributes to whether the person seems favorable or unfavorable to us.

Third: we extend that impression to other dimensions.

We begin to think that the person is probably also intelligent, responsible, honest, disciplined, or capable, even though we have not gathered enough information about those qualities.

Fourth: we interpret later information through the initial impression.

Something especially interesting happens here. Once we have developed a favorable perception, we may interpret ambiguous behavior in a way that fits that image.

For example, if someone we consider brilliant makes a mistake, we may think it was an exception. But if someone who gave us a poor first impression makes exactly the same mistake, we may interpret it as proof of incompetence.

The behavior we observe is the same. What changes is the frame through which we interpret it.

This can be related to other social cognition processes, such as mental schemas and confirmation bias. They are not identical concepts, but they can interact.

A schema is a structure of knowledge and expectations that we use to organize information. Confirmation bias, in turn, describes our tendency to seek, interpret, or remember information in ways that align with prior beliefs.

Once we have an overall impression of someone, both processes can contribute to keeping that impression in place.

The result is that we stop observing the person independently enough and start seeing them through the image we have already formed.

5. The Halo Effect Also Has a Negative Side: The Horn Effect

If one positive characteristic can spread to our overall evaluation of someone, the opposite can happen too.

In applied psychology, people often use the term “horn effect” to describe how an unfavorable characteristic can contaminate our perception of other qualities.

Imagine that you meet someone who arrives late to a meeting.

You might conclude that they are disorganized. So far, that could be a reasonable hypothesis that needs more information.

But then you begin to think that they are also irresponsible, uncommitted, unintelligent, or even dishonest.

Do you have evidence for all of that?

Not necessarily.

They may have run into a transportation problem, an emergency, or a one-time planning failure. None of those possibilities proves by itself that they are a bad person or have every negative characteristic you began to assign to them.

The problem is the same as with the halo effect, but in an unfavorable direction: one characteristic dominates the evaluation of the others.

This phenomenon can have important consequences. A poor first impression can close off opportunities before someone has the chance to demonstrate their abilities.

6. Where Does the Halo Effect Appear in Everyday Life?

One reason it is worth understanding this bias is that it is not limited to interpersonal relationships. It can affect very different decisions.

In Personal Relationships

Someone may seem charming, funny, and very attentive during your first few meetings.

Based on that experience, we might conclude that they are also emotionally mature, trustworthy, empathetic, and able to build a stable relationship.

But those qualities require observation.

Initial kindness does not prove emotional responsibility. Chemistry does not guarantee compatibility. An extraordinary conversation does not reveal someone’s values completely.

This does not mean distrusting everyone or turning every interaction into an interrogation. It means understanding that a good impression is a starting point, not a complete evaluation.

At Work and in Hiring

Imagine two candidates with similar training and experience.

One has an impeccable presentation, speaks fluently, and answers very confidently. The other seems somewhat nervous, even though their answers contain stronger technical information.

If the evaluator lets their overall impression dominate the decision, they may favor the first candidate without properly analyzing the skills relevant to the job.

The effect can also appear after someone is hired.

An employee who made an excellent first impression may receive more favorable evaluations, even when their later performance is inconsistent. Conversely, someone who struggled at first may have to work much harder to change their supervisors’ initial opinion.

A 2026 meta-analytic review by Yang and colleagues analyzed 204 independent samples from 145 studies on first impressions in the workplace.

The authors found that initial impressions tend to combine several evaluation dimensions rather than always functioning as independent judgments. They also found that these impressions could be related to work and relationship outcomes, and that some of their influence remained even after a month.

One distinction is important: this meta-analysis examines workplace first impressions, not the halo effect exclusively. However, it helps explain why impression formation deserves attention in organizations.

In Education

A teacher may form a favorable expectation about a student because of their participation, behavior, or academic history.

That expectation can influence how the teacher interprets later assignments.

The opposite can also happen: a student labeled as difficult may receive an unfavorable evaluation even when they produce well-developed work.

The problem is not having expectations. It is allowing an expectation to replace an actual evaluation of each performance.

Research on academic writing assessment has also identified halo effects when an evaluator must score different dimensions of the same assignment, such as organization, development, and expression. In these cases, the overall impression can influence scores that should reflect separate aspects.

Online, on Social Media, and in Consumer Choices

This is one of the most interesting settings today.

Someone appears in a video with good lighting, an impeccable presentation, a convincing speech, and an image of success.

Within seconds, we may attribute knowledge, experience, credibility, and authority to them.

But the quality of a presentation does not prove the quality of the information it contains.

A profile with thousands of followers does not guarantee that its recommendations are correct. An elegant sales page does not prove the product will deliver what it promises. A confident speech does not turn an opinion into evidence.

The halo effect can influence how we perceive content creators, professionals, brands, courses, products, and even institutions.

In an environment where image carries so much weight, learning to distinguish presentation from substance is an essential skill.

7. Why Is It So Easy to Fall into This Bias?

There is no single explanation that reduces the halo effect to one simple mechanism.

Some research has linked it to our tendency to form overall impressions and to interpret different characteristics as interdependent.

Expectations, stereotypes, and the information we already have about the world also play a role.

A 2024 study by Chris Westbury and Daniel King proposed a complementary explanation: associations among the words we use to describe personal traits may influence how closely related we consider those traits to be.

For example, certain characteristics often appear together in our language and everyday associations. This may contribute to our perceiving them as related even when we do not have enough evidence to say that they really are.

This is an interesting research proposal, but it should not be treated as a definitive explanation of the entire halo effect. Its contribution is to show that more than one mechanism may be involved.

It is useful to pause here and make an important distinction.

Not every relationship between two characteristics is a bias.

A person can be organized and responsible. Someone with experience may also communicate very well. Some qualities really are related.

The error occurs when we assume that one characteristic automatically proves the existence of another without checking.

That is why the solution is not to distrust every impression. It is to learn to separate what we observe from what we infer.

8. How to Recognize the Halo Effect Before Making a Decision

We cannot completely eliminate the formation of impressions. It is not realistic to expect every interaction to start from zero, either.

But we can improve the quality of our judgments.

These strategies can help:

1. Separate Facts from Interpretations

When evaluating someone, ask yourself what you actually observed.

For example:

Fact: they explained a topic clearly.

Interpretation: they are a very intelligent person.

Fact: they completed a task.

Interpretation: they are always responsible.

Fact: they were kind during a conversation.

Interpretation: they are trustworthy.

The interpretations may be correct, but they need more information.

2. Evaluate Each Characteristic Separately

If you want to know whether someone is capable, analyze their performance.

If you want to know whether they are trustworthy, observe whether they keep their commitments.

If you want to know whether they are empathetic, pay attention to how they recognize other people's needs and emotions.

Do not use one characteristic as a substitute for all the others.

3. Look for Information in Different Contexts

Someone may behave one way in a meeting and another way when facing pressure, disagreement, or responsibility.

Stronger evaluations are built from patterns of behavior, not just isolated moments.

4. Ask What Evidence Contradicts Your Impression

If you think someone is extraordinary, try to identify situations where they have not shown the quality you attribute to them.

If you have a negative impression, look for information that could challenge it too.

This is not about forcing the opposite conclusion. It is about preventing a hypothesis from turning into certainty too soon.

5. Do Not Confuse Confidence with Knowledge

Speaking fluently, using technical terms, or showing confidence can influence how capable someone seems.

But knowledge is better evaluated through the quality of explanations, the precision of arguments, the ability to recognize limits, and the evidence supporting what is claimed.

A capable person does not need an immediate answer to everything.

6. Set Criteria Before Evaluating

At work, in education, and in other important decisions, define which characteristics matter and what evidence will allow you to evaluate them.

For example, in a job interview you can use equivalent questions for every candidate, criteria related to the position, and concrete examples of performance.

This reduces the chance that an overall impression will dominate the entire evaluation.

9. A Practical Exercise: Are You Seeing the Person, or Your Impression of Them?

Think of someone you recently met who made an especially good or bad impression on you.

Now answer these questions:

1. What characteristic first caught your attention?

Their appearance, confidence, way of speaking, friendliness, position, prestige, or something else?

2. What other qualities did you begin to assign to them?

Did you think they were intelligent, trustworthy, responsible, capable, or emotionally mature?

3. Which of those characteristics have you directly verified?

Do not include assumptions or conclusions based only on the first impression.

4. Have you observed how they behave in different situations?

For example, when they make a mistake, receive criticism, face pressure, or have to keep a commitment.

5. What information could change your opinion?

This last question is especially valuable. If you cannot imagine what evidence would change your perception, your judgment may have become too rigid.

The goal of this exercise is not to determine whether that person is good or bad. It is to identify how much of your evaluation is based on facts and how much on inferences.

10. One Last Thought: First Impressions Are Not Always the Problem; Turning Them into Truths Can Be

The halo effect shows us something fundamental about human perception: we do not always judge each characteristic independently.

Often, we build an overall image and then interpret details through that image.

This can make everyday interactions easier, but it can also lead to mistakes with real consequences: missed opportunities, unfair evaluations, poor consumer decisions, and unrealistic expectations of other people.

Understanding the halo effect does not mean we should stop trusting, admiring, or feeling attraction. It also does not mean we should obsessively analyze every behavior.

It means learning to recognize the limits of our own perception.

A person can be brilliant at work and have difficulty relating to others. They can be charming and fail to keep their commitments. They can look impeccable and offer unreliable information. They can also seem insecure in a first conversation and be extraordinarily capable.

People are much more complex than the first characteristic we notice.

The next time someone makes a strong impression on you, ask yourself a simple question: what do I really know about this person, and what am I assuming?

That small pause can make an important difference between perceiving and understanding.

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This article is psychological science communication based on published research. Here are some relevant sources for learning more:

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Editorial note: Research on first impressions, physical attractiveness, and the evaluation of personal traits covers different contexts and methods. These findings should not be interpreted as universal rules for judging every individual.