

## The Halo Effect Fallacy

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### **Abstract**

The halo effect fallacy is the fallacy of concluding from a perceived single positive trait of a person to the conclusion of a generally positive assessment of that person. The halo effect fallacy is based on the "halo effect," a psychological tendency many people have in judging others based on one trait that they approve of and concluding that the person must have other attractive traits. This one trait leads to the formation of an overall positive opinion of the person on the basis of that one perceived positive trait. For example, people judged to be "attractive" are often assumed to have other qualities such as intelligence or moral virtue to a greater degree than people judged to be of "average" appearance. Another common example is that people who are skilled in public speaking are assumed to have other desirable traits, e.g. "He's such a wonderful speaker, I bet he'd make a great CEO." These judgments are instances of the halo effect fallacy.

Fallacies or errors in reasoning can be either formal or informal. Formal fallacies are analyzed within various formal logical systems and informal fallacies are fallacies which are expressed in ordinary language and are common in everyday affairs. An informal fallacy is a common error in reasoning that is psychologically persuasive but logically flawed. There seems to be no definitive list of fallacies or their categorization; Aristotle had a list of thirteen and others have more than a hundred.<sup>1</sup> None of these lists contain what I call the "halo effect fallacy."

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Informal fallacies have been categorized in various ways. Aristotle categorized fallacies into two groups, those based on language and those not based on language. For example, the fallacy of ambiguity of terms is based on language whereas the ad hominem is a nonlinguistic fallacy. Some divide informal fallacies into three areas, fallacies of ambiguity, fallacies of relevance (irrelevant premises) such as the ad hominem and fallacies of presumption which deal

with arguments that overlook facts, distort facts or simply do not provide sufficient evidence for the conclusion. Some add a fourth category of psychological fallacies where human psychology plays a major role such as the ethnocentric fallacy, assuming one's group is superior to all other groups in every way. Some add a fifth category of pragmatic fallacies, fallacies which are usually committed in a debate format for example, the fallacy of obfuscation, being unnecessarily obscure. There is even a sixth category of media fallacies.<sup>2</sup> However, all these categories are imprecise with substantial overlap among them.

The halo effect fallacy would fall most naturally in the category of fallacy of relevance or psychological fallacy. It could be considered in the category of relevance since having one positive trait is not necessarily relevant to having another positive trait. It may also be categorized in the psychological area since it seems to be a common psychological trait.

The research done by psychologist Solomon Asch suggests that the halo effect is related to cognitive dissonance.<sup>3</sup> Cognitive dissonance is the awareness a person has of holding or having inconsistent beliefs, emotions or behaviors. Once humans are conscious of cognitive dissonance, they seek to reduce the dissonance and achieve a generally consistent belief system. They usually do this by seeking information that will reduce the dissonance by supporting one or the other belief and by avoiding information that may increase dissonance.

The halo effect is related to cognitive dissonance in that once a person forms a positive impression of another person, he or she seeks to have that impression be consistent with other impressions. This tendency would then lead others to give an overall positive assessment of a person given a positive first impression of some trait.

This suggests how the halo effect is related to the "primacy effect." The primacy effect is

the human tendency to remember more vividly the first things we see or hear in a list of things rather than the later items in the list.<sup>4</sup> Given that one had a positive first impression, one would tend to generalize that positive impression to other later impressions.

The halo effect is supported by research done by Edward Thorndike who suggests people tend to judge others in blanket ways as either positive or negative.<sup>5</sup> In this perspective the halo effect fallacy can be considered as a special subcategory of the fallacy of hasty generalization, generalizing from insufficient evidence. Thorndike's research would also support the view that the halo effect may also be an instance of black and white thinking or bifurcation. However, it would be an instance of bifurcation, where the 'white' side is dominant. What one could call the "reverse halo effect," would be the tendency to form a general negative opinion given a negative trait which would be the 'black' side in a bifurcation. Again public speaking could be an example. Someone awkward and shy in public speaking situations may be assumed to have other negative qualities such as low intelligence and poor administrative skills yet there is no necessary connection between these qualities.

The halo effect fallacy can also be categorized as a kind of reverse ad hominem abusive. In the ad hominem abusive a person's statement is judged false or implausible simply because of the alleged immorality of the character of the speaker. The halo effect fallacy is the reverse of the ad hominem abusive in that one good quality is used as evidence for other good qualities or overall positive assessment of the person, not a negative assessment of the person and their opinion or claim as is the case in the ad hominem.

Though the halo effect fallacy has some similarities to other fallacies, it is a distinct fallacy that is also very common in human judgments of others. The articulation and explanation

of a new fallacy such as the halo effect fallacy will be helpful in identifying and avoiding this illogical human tendency.

## NOTES

1. Aristotle, *De Sophisticis Elenchis*.
2. See Douglas Walton, *Informal Logic*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989, and *Informal Fallacies*, Philadelphia: John Benjamins Publishing Co., 1987; Irving M. Copi, *Informal Logic*, New York: MacMillan, 1986.
3. Asch, Solomon, (1946) "Forming Impressions of Personality," *Journal of Abnormal and Social Psychology*, 41, 258-90.
4. See Carole Wade & Carol Tavris, *Psychology*, 6e, Upper Saddle River, NJ: Prentice Hall, 2000, p. 365.
5. Thorndike, E.L., (1920), "A Constant Error in Psychological Rating," *Journal of Applied Psychology*, vol. 4, 25-9.