

Does Knowing One Trait Make You Assume Ten Others?

We often size someone up from almost nothing. If a friend tells you a blind date is “honest,” you might immediately picture someone who is also kind, reliable, and easy to trust — even though you were only told about honesty. Psychologists call this pattern a halo effect: learning one trait about a person colors your guesses about many other, unrelated traits.

Why does this happen? One idea is that the words we use to describe people’s personalities are not stored in memory as an unconnected list. Instead, they form something like a network, where each trait word is a “node” and words that tend to go together in meaning or experience are linked to one another. Some words in this network are learned very early in life — young children already use words like “nice” or “mean” — while other words are learned much later, sometimes not until the teenage years (for example, “condescending” or “sanctimonious”). Because early-learned words have had many more years to pick up connections to other words as people build their vocabulary, they tend to sit at more central, well-connected positions in this network — similar to how the very first members of a social network end up with far more connections than someone who joins years later. Later-learned words, by contrast, tend to sit closer to the edges of the network, with fewer connections.

If impressions spread through this kind of network the way a signal spreads through connected wires, then hearing a well-connected (early-learned) trait word should activate many other trait words at once, leading you to assume the person has lots of other traits too. Hearing a more peripheral (later-learned) trait word should activate only a few nearby traits, leading to a narrower, more targeted impression.

This research matters because these kinds of automatic, single-word impressions happen constantly in real life — in job interviews, first dates, courtrooms, and classrooms — often before anyone has enough evidence to justify the broader judgment. Understanding which traits trigger the widest “halo” of assumptions, and why, can help explain where snap judgments of other people come from and, potentially, how people might catch themselves over-generalizing from very little information.

If you have any questions about this study, please contact Wenyue Yang (wy2493@columbia.edu) or the principal investigator, Dr. Chujun Lin (cl4767@columbia.edu), Department of Psychology, Columbia University.

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