



A CONVERSATION WITH MARIA AGTHE

"BEAUTY IS NOT ALWAYS AN ADVANTAGE."

The job goes to the best candidate? Undoubtedly, qualifications should determine the choice. Should. Often, however, irrelevant criteria also play a role, according to social psychologist Maria Agthe. And sometimes in quite unexpected ways.

insightLMU: Ms. Agthe, you've said that good looks aren't always an advantage in applying for a job. Why is that?

Maria Agthe: Generally, physical attractiveness does indeed enhance a candidate's chances. However, it can also lead to envy and thus turn into a disadvantage. We found that this happens if applicants and decision-makers are of the same gender. Particularly when personnel managers have to struggle through hundreds of application portfolios, such candidates may end up being rejected on the basis of their CV photos in the very first round.

insightLMU: Why do personnel officers react with such obvious antipathy to attractive candidates of their own gender?

Agthe: We were able to show that social comparison appears to play a role, which can lead to perceptions of threat—in this case, on the part of decision-makers—without necessarily any awareness of it. They may perceive attractive same-sex persons as a threat to their self-worth and possibly to their relationships, may feel inferior or inadequate, and therefore attempt to steer clear of the supposed competition.

insightLMU: So the decision-maker's self-esteem is key?

Agthe: By all means it plays a role. Besides, evolutionary psychology would argue that same-sex individuals are viewed as potential rivals, whereas for the opposite sex, attracting a potential partner is what matters.

insightLMU: Are unconscious phenomena really so biologically determined?

Agthe: At any rate, several studies support such a correlation. In children, for example, the effects of this type of bias are not yet apparent, but emerge from adolescence onwards.

insightLMU: And even experienced personnel managers can be misled?

Agthe: At least, even experienced personnel managers can be influenced by good looks. We still need to investigate whether experience and a clear age difference to the candidate offset the disadvantage in same-gender constellations. In any case, during the course of a job interview, other important factors such as rapport or perceived similarities come into play as well. We're also investigating whether a decision is less biased and thus more professional when personnel managers are required to substantiate their decisions precisely. In addition, we're looking forward to the findings of the Federal Anti-Discrimination Agency, which is currently studying the effect of abandoning CV photos. In the United States and many other countries, photos in CVs have already been prohibited for a long time, but in Germany most employers still expect them. If it's possible to apply for a job either with or without a photo, those candidates who provide one might have an advantage, at least according to our own preliminary research findings. From a photo, a personnel manager evidently gets the subliminal impression that he or she already knows the candidate to some extent.

insightLMU: To interpose a small question: What does attractive actually mean?

Agthe: Naturally, we can take the view that attractiveness lies in the eye of the beholder. Nevertheless, there are undoubtedly some biological criteria which make a face seem attractive: symmetry, for example, or regular features—that is, features which are close to average proportions. Youthfulness and in women something of a childlike face, as well as highly developed secondary sexual characteristics—e.g., a broad chin in men or high cheekbones in women—also play a role. It's interesting to note that rating facial appeal has proved largely consistent across cultures, in contrast to rating body measurements.

insightLMU: There's also the preconception that you can't expect much from someone who is exceptionally beautiful.

Agthe: Yes, this view is fairly widespread. Superficiality, indifference, and self-centeredness are associated especially with women who are too attractive; in short, a minus in competence.

insightLMU: Is this in effect a feeble attempt to rationalize one's own prejudice, to compensate for it?

Agthe: Yes, as if to prove to yourself that you're not going to be influenced by physical attractiveness. This is particularly the case in opposite-gender constellations.

insightLMU: Have you had any personal experience of such bias? Do you often encounter such stereotypes yourself?

Agthe: It's striking that even in academic circles women are scrutinized more closely than men with regard to their attractiveness.

insightLMU: The principles of job selection you've now studied also apply to the advertising industry. In which way?

Agthe: For example, studies show that women dislike being served by saleswomen who are too attractive. Otherwise, good looks in those who are advertising a product are mostly an advantage. We ourselves have found, however, that with regard to so-called lay testimonials, i.e. endorsements by those who are meant to represent the typical user, attractiveness isn't pivotal. In such cases, a purchase decision is particularly based on whether the potential buyer can identify with the testimonial.

Translation: Linda L. Löwe

Dr Maria Agthe is currently the awardee of a LMU Munich postdoctoral grant and is completing her *Habilitation* in the field of social psychology. In summer semester 2011, she was Junior Researcher in Residence at the Center for Advanced Studies at LMU Munich.



Source: LMU Munich