

As students hurried around MIT one cold weekday, I asked some of them whether they would allow me to take their pictures for a study. In some cases, I got disapproving looks. A few students walked away. But most of them were happy to participate, and before long, the card in my digital camera was filled with images of smiling students. I returned to my office and printed 60 of them—30 of women and 30 of men.

The following week I made an unusual request of 25 of my undergraduates. I asked them to pair the 30 photographs of men and the 30 of women by physical attractiveness (matching the men with other men, and the women with other women). That is, I had them pair the Brad Pitts and the George Clooneys of MIT, as well as the Woody Allens and the Danny DeVitos (sorry, Woody and Danny). Out of these 30 pairs, I selected the six pairs—three female pairs and three male pairs—that my students seemed to agree were most alike.

Now, like Dr. Frankenstein himself, I set about giving these faces my special treatment. Using Photoshop, I mutated the pictures just a bit, creating a slightly but noticeably less attractive version of each of them. I found that just the slightest movement of the nose threw off the symmetry. Using another tool, I enlarged one eye, eliminated some of the hair, and added traces of acne.

No flashes of lightning illuminated my laboratory; nor was there a baying of the hounds on the moor. But this was still a good day for science. By the time I was through, I had the MIT equivalent of George Clooney in his prime (A) and the MIT equivalent of Brad Pitt in his prime (B), and also a George Clooney with a slightly drooping eye and thicker nose (–A, the decoy) and a less symmetrical version of Brad Pitt (–B, another decoy). I followed the same procedure for the less attractive pairs. I had the MIT equivalent of Woody