Physical Attractiveness, Adolescent Development, and High School Social Life
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Abstract:
Beauty stratifies the life course, much like race, social class, gender, and other sociodemographic sources of inequality that get more attention. This presentation argues that the peculiarities of adolescent development in the U.S. and the unique social systems organized by American high schools converge to make the middle to late teens a critical period in the stratifying role of physical attractiveness. During this period, good looks and bad looks come with both risks and resources, but the balance between these risks and resources is more advantageously weighted towards those deemed by others—especially others with power—as attractive. The cumulative nature of developmental trajectories and educational pathways then magnify these short-term advantages so that they filter out and grow across the life course. To explore this phenomenon, this presentation draws on a mixed-methods design, combining statistical analyses of a national sample of adolescents and qualitative analyses of a single high school. The results of this study speak to the ways that young people in a pressurized environment use external cues to sort, separate, assess, and evaluate themselves and others; how ideas about and the rewards of attractiveness may or may not vary across different cultures and groups; how the academic processes of secondary education are complicated by intense social dynamics of adolescence; and whether and how aspects of development and education seemingly difficult to change externally can be leveraged for policy intervention. The presentation closes with a description of a new large-scale data collection effort to examine the links among physical attractiveness, social achievement, and academic achievement from early childhood through young adulthood.

Tuesday, March 8th from 4:30pm to 6:00pm
Rosenwald 329, 1101 East 58th Street
Reception to precede the talk from 4:00-4:30