

## ORIGINAL ARTICLE

# Physical attractiveness and intergenerational social mobility

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**Abstract**

**Objective:** Physical attractiveness is often studied in relation to various life outcomes, but there is a lack of research on its links to intergenerational educational, occupational, and income mobility. Individuals may use physical attractiveness as one of the channels for experiencing upward or avoiding downward social mobility.

**Methods:** Using data about 11,583 individuals from the United States National Longitudinal Study of Adolescent Health, we contribute to the existing scholarship by investigating if physical attractiveness, assessed when individuals are around 15 years old, is an important predictor of intergenerational social mobility measured after 20 years.

**Results:** We find that physical attractiveness matters both for males' and females' intergenerational social mobility outcomes, but it is more important for males, even when childhood characteristics, such as various aspects of parental socioeconomic position, individuals' health, a proxy for IQ, neighborhood conditions, and interviewers' fixed effects, are accounted for using imputed data for observations with missing information. Across three measures of social mobility—education, occupation, and income—physically attractive males are more likely to be socially mobile than males of average attractiveness.

**Conclusion:** Physical attractiveness is an independent predictor of intergenerational social mobility outcomes regarding individuals' educational, occupational, and income attainment.

**KEYWORDS**

Physical attractiveness, Social mobility, Add Health, The United States

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Existing scholarship across social science disciplines suggests that individuals' physical attractiveness is significantly associated with numerous indicators of socioeconomic position (SEP) and other well-being outcomes (Bulczak and Gugushvili 2023; Monk, Esposito, and Lee 2021; Urbatsch 2019). The key finding from these studies is that more attractive individuals are usually better educated, have better employment opportunities, and have higher incomes (Hamermesh and Biddle 1994; Mobius and Rosenblat 2006; Stockemer and Praino 2015). Individuals' physical attractiveness is also often associated with better health (Shackelford and Larsen 1999; Weeden and Sabini 2005). Physical unattractiveness, on the other hand, is shown to be linked to various adverse outcomes, such as a greater propensity toward criminal activity and being perceived as materially deprived (Mocan and Tekin 2010; Schneickert, Steckermeier, and Brand 2020).

Despite the extensive descriptive evidence, it is not well known what the exact nature of this relationship is or if individuals employ physical attractiveness as a mechanism for intergenerational social mobility (Palmer and Peterson 2021). We know that different types of characteristics and resources that individuals possess or have access to, such as type of upbringing, cognitive and noncognitive skills, disposable income, inherited or acquired wealth, quality housing, and recreational and leisure facilities, can positively affect how physically attractive they are perceived by others (Dunn and Hill 2014; Hawley et al. 2007). Therefore, when studying the links between physical attractiveness and SEP, the former might be associated with individuals' other observed and unobserved characteristics.

If, after accounting for variables linked both to physical attractiveness and SEP, we still observe that physical attractiveness is independently associated with SEP, we can argue that individuals explicitly or implicitly use it as one of the channels for climbing the socioeconomic ladder, experiencing upward or avoiding downward social mobility (Jæger 2011; Monk, Esposito, and Lee 2021). The role of physical attractiveness might be particularly salient in contexts and cultures characterized by high levels of stratification and where particular standards of physical attractiveness are considered essential for succeeding in many areas of life (Kuipers 2015). The United States, due to its significant economic inequality, stagnant social mobility, and highly individualistic values, might be one of those contexts in which physical attractiveness is employed as a tool for intergenerational social mobility (Jæger 2011; McCall et al. 2017; Song et al. 2020).

One of the most discussed aspects of the relationship between physical attractiveness and various life outcomes is its supposedly distinct effects on men and women. This might be the case because the standards and expectations related to beauty vary between men and women. One of the main aims of our study, therefore, is to identify any gender-specific differences in the effects of physical attractiveness on intergenerational social mobility. The United States is a relevant case for exploring whether physical attractiveness interacts with not only gender but also with race/ethnicity and affects individuals' intergenerational social mobility chances. For individuals' income attainment in this country, it has been recently demonstrated that physical attractiveness might be as important as gender and race/ethnicity (Monk, Esposito, and Lee 2021).

Past research on the links between physical attractiveness and SEP does not explicitly investigate how physical attractiveness affects the chances of moving away from parental SEP, that is, intergenerational social mobility, by analyzing higher or lower educational, occupational, and earnings-related outcomes when all these channels of mobility are accounted for (Sala et al. 2013; Urbatsch 2018). In this study, we aim to explore whether physical attractiveness significantly affects individuals' social mobility experiences using a high-quality longitudinal dataset for the United States, Add Health. Our research strategy mitigates the problem of reverse causation by differentiating individuals' initial attractiveness from their later-life attractiveness, as well as accounting for various measures of individuals' social origins, cognitive and personality traits, neighborhood characteristics, and health selection effects, which are known to be linked to intergenerational social mobility across different stages of the life course.

## FRAMEWORK

### Social origins, cognitive and noncognitive characteristics, and health selection

Insights from the decades of social stratification and mobility research across different countries and contexts suggest that individuals' SEP is largely intergenerationally reproduced (Breen and Jonsson 2005; Hout and DiPrete 2006). We know that various aspects of social background significantly and independently shape life chances and determine whether individuals maintain origin SEP or experience intergenerational social mobility in the downward or upward direction (Bernardi and Ballarino 2016; Bukodi, Erikson, and Goldthorpe 2014).

Sociological research suggests that parental education and occupation-related measures, such as social status and social class, affect attained SEP. Even when individuals' educational attainment is accounted for, other aspects of social origin directly affect social class attainment (Bernardi and Ballarino 2016; Bukodi and Goldthorpe 2013). Research by economists also indicates that childhood factors, including toxic neighborhood environments, explain the variation in income mobility and more than half of the variability in lifetime earnings (Huggett, Ventura, and Yaron 2011; Manduca and Sampson 2019). In addition, the role of social origins on individuals' SEP can be mediated by specific cognitive and noncognitive characteristics, such as childhood intelligence and locus of control, which help individuals to maintain or even improve on their origin SEP (Gugushvili, Bukodi, and Goldthorpe 2017; von Stumm et al. 2009).

We also know that health selection significantly determines individuals' life outcomes. In other words, initial physical and mental health is important for individuals' ability, educational attainment, school-to-work transition, and later occupational and labor market success (Anderson 2018; Gugushvili et al. 2021; Hoffmann et al. 2018). However, even when the social origin, cognitive and noncognitive characteristics, and health selection effects are accounted for, these variables cannot explain much intergenerational social mobility variation. More research is needed to understand what other resources individuals use to move up or avoid moving down in the social hierarchy.

### Physical attractiveness as a factor in intergenerational social mobility

In this study, we investigate individuals' physical attractiveness as one of the complementary explanations for why some individuals experience intergenerational social mobility and others do not. We build on a large stream of literature which indicates that physical attractiveness is positively associated with a broad range of outcomes, such as educational attainment, the likelihood of employment, and earnings (Anýžová and Matějů 2018; Bauldry et al. 2016; Elder 1969; Fletcher 2009; Hamermesh and Parker 2005; Monk, Esposito, and Lee 2021; Udry and Eckland 1984; Wong and Penner 2016). Physical attractiveness is also linked to the likelihood of marriage (Jæger 2011), the structure of social networks (O'Connor and Gladstone 2018), the severity of prison sentences (Ahola, Christianson, and Hellström 2009), and electoral outcomes (Milazzo and Mattes 2016). In addition to observational research, a meta-analysis of experimental studies on the effects of physical attractiveness on job-related outcomes suggests that attractive individuals fare better on the job market irrespective of their gender (Hosoda, Stone-Romero, and Coats 2003).

Why physical attractiveness should matter for intergenerational social mobility is an underexplored research question. Theoretical links between the two are complex, and the possibility of reverse causation cannot be ruled out. Prosperous economic conditions likely allow individuals to improve and maintain their physical attractiveness by investing in relevant services (e.g., quality hairdresser, gym membership, and plastic surgery) and goods (e.g., fashionable clothes and effective cosmetics). For instance, a study based on football players in Germany found that individuals adjust their appearance as they achieve better career outcomes (Meier and Mutz 2020). One way to mitigate the problem of reverse causality is to utilize

individuals' attractiveness assessed before their social mobility experiences because intergenerational social mobility cannot affect early-life physical attractiveness.

Physical attractiveness at an earlier point in time is a valid predictor of later-life attractiveness (Jæger 2011; Tatarunaite et al. 2005; Zebrowitz et al. 1998); the two measures of attractiveness are related but analytically distinct variables. Adolescent attractiveness might provide early advantages and lasting benefits of self-confidence and locus of control that can facilitate upward intergenerational social mobility (Gugushvili, Bukodi, and Goldthorpe 2017; Judge, Hurst, and Simon 2009), but initially less attractive individuals who blossom into adult attractiveness could still benefit from it as intimate partners, social connections, and employers respond to present physical attractiveness rather than to what they would have seen during adolescence (Jokela 2009; Palmer and Peterson 2021; Pfeifer 2012). Extensive research accounts for physical attractiveness measured in previous waves before the outcome of interest is estimated (Benzeval, Green, and Macintyre 2013; Gordon, Crosnoe, and Wang 2013; Sala et al. 2013; Wong and Penner 2016), but none of these studies are explicitly concerned with intergenerational social mobility or analyze the role of attractiveness consecutively for educational, occupational, and income attainment by accounting each of these channels of intergenerational mobility.

There are multiple direct and indirect pathways through which physical attractiveness might affect individuals' intergenerational social mobility experiences. Among other mechanisms, differences in intelligence, self-confidence, trustfulness, perceived productivity, and discrimination from teachers and employers can be plausible channels linking the two (Arunachalam and Shah 2012; Belot, Bhaskar, and van de Ven 2012; Becker 1957; Kanazawa 2011). Physically attractive individuals might be perceived as more competent and smarter than unattractive individuals and therefore given more opportunities for career advancement (Jackson, Hunter, and Hodge 1995; Kanazawa 2011). Theoretically, this association is based on controversial assumptions: that, in meritocratic societies, more intelligent individuals are more likely to attain higher SEP; that individuals with higher SEP are more likely to mate with more attractive individuals than those with lower SEP; that intelligence is, to a large degree, heritable; and that physical characteristics that determine attractiveness are also, to a large degree, heritable. If the above holds, physically attractive individuals should be more intelligent, positively contributing to their social mobility experiences (Kanazawa 2004).

Numerous studies show that physically attractive individuals are more likely to be trusted and, therefore, gain more opportunities for career advancement (Wilson and Eckel 2006; Zhao et al. 2015). Evidence also suggests that physical attractiveness, including during adolescence, is associated with greater self-confidence and optimism, which, in turn, can facilitate the attainment of higher SEP when compared with parents (Mobius and Rosenblat 2006; Urbatsch 2018). There are numerous methodological challenges in identifying whether discrimination based on physical attractiveness takes place (Heckman 1998), but some existing research suggests that this channel may matter for attractiveness-associated differences, particularly concerning gender (Belot, Bhaskar, and van de Ven 2012; Biddle and Hamermesh 1998). One intriguing finding that has emerged in recent scholarship is that the effect of physical attractiveness on various life outcomes might not be linear. More specifically, it is important to distinguish between unattractive and very unattractive individuals as the two groups appear to differ in their life outcomes (Kanazawa and Still 2018). A possible explanation for this phenomenon is that very unattractive individuals might try to compensate with a more significant investment in education and intelligence, which is rewarded with a higher SEP in a meritocratic society.

The described research explores various separate outcomes associated with physical attractiveness. However, we are unaware of any studies explicitly accounting for the effects of physical attractiveness across different life course stages. It is conceivable, however, that physical attractiveness has varying effects on success in educational institutions, attaining a more advantageous position in the occupational hierarchy and receiving higher earnings from employment (Baert and Decuyper 2014; Krawczyk 2018). In educational institutions, success, to some extent, depends on instructors' subjective assessments of students, so the mechanisms described above might have different manifestations in comparison to occupational and earnings-related outcomes, for which employers' decisions should theoretically rely only on productivity and profit maximization concerns rather than individuals' physical attractiveness. This is why, in our

analyses, we first assess the effect of physical attractiveness on educational attainment and consequently examine how much of this effect translates into occupational and earnings-related outcomes.

## Physical attractiveness and gender

Physical attractiveness has varying manifestations among males and females, which can be reflected in the role of physical attractiveness in intergenerational social mobility experiences. Males, as a rule, are judged most positively by their masculine characteristics (i.e., agentic traits), while females are judged most positively on feminine characteristics (i.e., communal traits) (Hill and Lando 1976; Kiang and Takeuchi 2009). On the one hand, it is argued that physical attractiveness plays a more important role for females because they invest more time and resources in improving their looks and have greater opportunities to exploit this in various aspects of life (Hakim 2010; Kowal et al. 2022). On the other hand, physical attractiveness might be detrimental for females in environments where being considered attractive violates traditional gender stereotypes. For instance, if leadership- and authority-related skills are viewed as masculine characteristics, attractive females are not expected to possess them. They, therefore, could be prevented from taking up occupational positions with a high level of authority and leadership (Frevort and Walker 2014).

Empirical evidence regarding gender differences, due to the multiplicity of study settings and outcome measures, is mixed. Some studies find significant differences (Benzeval, Green, and Macintyre 2013; Harper 2000), while others do not (Langlois et al. 2000; Wong and Penner 2016). For instance, attractive females were found to receive better essay marks, whereas for males, no such association was identified (Bull and Stevens 1979). Other findings indicate that the benefits of physical attractiveness may be more significant for men (Pfeifer 2012), mainly when grooming is accounted for (Wong and Penner 2016). Further evidence comes from studies of the effects of anthropometric measures closely related to physical attractiveness on labor market outcomes. A positive impact of height on wage premium is identified in the case of males (Persico, Postlewaite, and Silverman 2004), while obesity is linked with negative consequences on employment irrespective of gender (Morris 2007). However, others find that only females are penalized for being overweight (Cawley 2004; Rooth 2009). Laboratory experiments also suggest that male physical attractiveness is associated with higher chances of a favorable recruitment decision (Baert and Decuyper 2014). A recent study from Czechia, however, finds a higher income premium for attractive females (Anýžová and Matějů 2018).

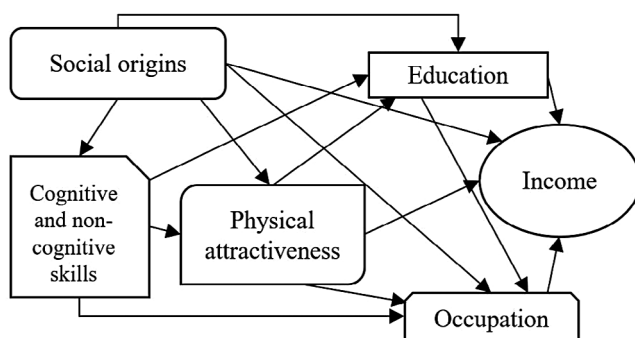
Whether gender differences arise because of various research designs, study settings, operationalizing physical attractiveness, or selecting specific outcome measures remains an open question. Our study aims to address this issue by consecutively analyzing if there are varying gender effects of physical attractiveness on outcomes related to education, occupation, and income.

## Physical attractiveness and race/ethnicity

Individuals' race/ethnicity may also play an essential role in the relationship between physical attractiveness and intergenerational social mobility. Past research finds that unattractive Black students in the United States may receive less favorable teacher evaluations (Parks and Kennedy 2007). Most previous studies examine the outcomes linked to individuals' earnings. Hamermesh (2011) suggests that physical attractiveness in the United States may be less critical for Blacks than Whites. However, more recent research indicates that the opposite is more likely. Monk, Esposito, and Lee (2021) show that because perceived physical attractiveness is unequally distributed among racial/ethnic groups, it matters more for minorities. The latter is in line with other studies that identify a link between skin tone, an often considered proxy of attractiveness, and wages of Black individuals in the United States (Bond and Cash 1992; Goldsmith, Hamilton, and Darity 2007).

**FIGURE 1** Theoretical model

Source: authors' interpretation.



However, scholarship focusing on labor market outcomes finds no significant interactions between physical attractiveness and race/ethnicity (Marshall, Stamps, and Moore 1998). Similarly, a study using the Add Health data reports no evidence of race/ethnicity and attractiveness interactions for individuals' academic achievements and SEP attainment (Gordon, Crosnoe, and Wang 2013). Others also show that stereotypes associated with physical attractiveness, such as being intelligent or friendly, matter more for peer preferences than race/ethnicity (Langlois and Stephan 1977). Given the inconclusive evidence on the role of race/ethnicity in the effects of physical attractiveness, it is of particular interest to examine this complex interaction in terms of intergenerational educational, occupational, and income mobility outcomes. The latter approach might shed new light on our understanding of how physical attractiveness may mitigate or intensify racial/ethnic stratification over individuals' life course.

## Theoretical model and expectations

Figure 1 presents a theoretical model that aims to illustrate some of the complexities associated with examining the effects of physical attractiveness on intergenerational educational, occupational, and income mobility. It shows possible relationships between physical attractiveness, social origins, cognitive and noncognitive traits, and SEP outcomes, which we study in the empirical section.

The presented model implies that parental socioeconomic characteristics may affect individuals' physical attractiveness through various channels, such as cultivating manners, grooming, providing resources for fashionable and more expensive clothes, and other items and services contributing to changes in physical attractiveness. Social origin also affects cognitive and noncognitive characteristics, which, in turn, may influence how attractive others perceive individuals. Regarding intergenerational social mobility measures, we first look at the effect of physical attractiveness on educational attainment. In consecutive models, we aim to test if physical attractiveness affects individuals' mobility after accounting for additional controls, including personality, health, and neighborhood characteristics. Similarly, the presented approach is used to assess if any relationship between physical attractiveness and occupational and income mobility exists. In other words, our method allows a comparison of the effect of physical attractiveness across three measures of intergenerational social mobility—educational, occupational, and income attainment.

Based on the insights from previous studies and potential associations in the described theoretical model, in this study, we consecutively examine whether physical attractiveness affects educational, occupational, and income mobility using longitudinal panel data from the United States. Our three major expectations based on theoretical review and previous scholarship are as follows: (1) physical attractiveness matters for intergenerational social mobility for all considered measures of SEP, (2) the effect of physical attractiveness on intergenerational social mobility depends on individuals' gender, and (3) physical attractiveness has varying effects on individuals from different racial/ethnic groups.

## RESEARCH DESIGN

### Data

In this study, we use data from Waves I, IV, and V of the National Longitudinal Study of Adolescent Health (Add Health), a representative longitudinal study of 20,745 adolescents in the United States. Wave I, completed in 1994–1995, provides information about respondents aged 12–19 and their parents. Wave V, completed in 2016–2018, is the latest wave available when conducting the present study. The number of interviewed participants in Wave V declined to 15,701 (76% of the original sample). The attrition rate in Add Health is primarily explained by individuals' gender, race, and parental education (Brownstein et al. 2011). To preserve the sample size, instead of list-wise deletion of individuals with missing information, mainly Wave V occupation and income variables (~9 percent of the sample), we relied on a multiple imputation procedure, Multiple Imputation by Chained Equations (Rubin 1987). All the analyses reported in the main text are based on the imputed data. Our study did not require ethical approval as it uses secondary survey data.

### Three measures of intergenerational social mobility

We constructed intergenerational social mobility variables by comparing three parental attainment measures at Wave I—education, occupation, and income—with individuals' attainment at Wave V. Add Health provides information about 13 educational attainment categories for individuals, while Wave I questionnaires included fewer postgraduate options for educational attainment; for this reason, we can only consider 10 categories for parents. We use the so-called dominance approach and construct parental education from the highest level mothers or fathers achieve (Erikson 1984). We collapse parental and individuals' educational attainment into five categories: (1) some high school and lower, (2) completed high school, (3) some college, (4) completed college 4-year degree, and (5) completed some postgraduate qualifications.

We create occupational attainment variables for parents and respondents to measure intergenerational occupational mobility based on previous research using Add Health data (Bulczak, Gugushvili, and Zelinska 2022; Dennison 2018; Ueno, Peña-Talamantes, and Roach 2013). Parental data contain 10 occupational groups. Similarly, as in the case of education, we took the highest level of occupation obtained by mothers or fathers to construct five occupational categories. These categories were created by taking the average Nam–Power–Boyd scale score (Nam and Boyd 2004) for each of the 10 occupational groups, which are collapsed into five categories ranging from “none” and “other occupation,” equaling 1 to Nam–Power–Boyd scale score from 70 to 100 equaling 5 (highly qualified professionals). The data on individuals' occupational attainment are more detailed than for parents. We exclude individuals for whom occupational information is unavailable and convert the Standard Occupational Classification codes into status scores based on the Nam–Power–Boyd scale. As the final step, we create quintiles from the converted scores (lowest status jobs = 1, highest status jobs = 5).

Finally, we consider income in parental households as an origin measure of income attainment for intergenerational income mobility. For parents and individuals, we create quintiles based on the reported income in Waves I and V (1 = lowest household income, 5 = highest household income). Using adulthood household income is less straightforward than for educational and occupational attainment. In Wave V, 7 percent of respondents still lived with their parents. Comparing individuals who live in the same household could be challenging as numerous factors associated with attractiveness come into play, including partners' selection and motivation to work/generate income. We address this issue in the Supporting Information by limiting the sample to only those individuals who no longer live in the same households as their parents.

To derive an actual measure of intergenerational social mobility, we subtract parental attainment at Wave I (when the average age of respondents was 16) from individuals' attainment at Wave V (when the average age of respondents was 37). This produces three variables we use as outcome measures of intergenerational social mobility. These variables range from –4 to 4, with values above 0 indicating upward mobility, below

0 indicating downward mobility, and a value of 0 indicating immobility. In the Supporting Information, to separately estimate the effects of attractiveness on upward and downward intergenerational mobility, we transform the mobility variables into binary indicators equaling 1 for upward or downward mobility. It should be noted that in Wave V, the respondents were not in the final stage of their lifetime income and occupational attainment. This may be observed by a higher occurrence of downward mobility for these mobility indicators. However, in the case of education, we can safely assume that in most cases, individuals' attainment at Wave V was complete (Bernardi and Ballarino 2016).

## Physical attractiveness

We study the effect of individuals' attractiveness on intergenerational social mobility by using Add Health's interviewer-rated physical attractiveness. Information about physical attractiveness was collected during Wave I of the survey when all interviewers were asked to assess the physical attractiveness of respondents with answer options of (1) very unattractive, (2) unattractive, (3) about average, (4) attractive, and (5) very attractive. Previous studies, some also using Add Health, show that this method of rating individuals is a reliable measure of physical attractiveness (Gordon, Crosnoe, and Wang 2013; Kanazawa 2011; Bulczak and Gugushvili 2023). To account for the interviewers' idiosyncratic characteristics, potentially biasing their assessment of respondents' physical attractiveness, we include interviewers' fixed effects in all models. Interviewers for the later Add Health waves were also asked to assess respondents' physical attractiveness. However, at these waves, many respondents have already experienced intergenerational social mobility (particularly regarding educational attainment), making the problem of reverse causality more likely.

## Other predictors of intergenerational social mobility and health selection effects

In all of the estimates, we account for age, gender (when the pooled sample of males and females is analyzed), respondents' race/ethnicity categories—White (non-Hispanic), Hispanic, Black (non-Hispanic), Asian, and Other (non-Hispanic)—and the corresponding parental SEP. For instance, when the outcome measure is educational mobility (i.e., the difference between own and parental education), models include the variable for parental education. In the final set of models, all social origin SEP indicators are simultaneously accounted for because parental education, occupation, and income are known to have a net effect on individuals' likelihood of experiencing intergenerational social mobility (Gugushvili, Bukodi, and Goldthorpe 2017).

In addition to social origin SEP measures, we also account for an extensive set of covariates that predict later-life SEP outcomes. More specifically, given the evidence from previous studies linking intelligence and attractiveness (Kanazawa 2011) and its likely effect on intergenerational social mobility, we also include a proxy variable for IQ—the standardized Peabody picture and vocabulary test. Personality is another possible confounder that can potentially affect the key variables of interest to us (Tews, Stafford, and Zhu 2009). We account for the Big Five personality characteristics, largely fixed over an individual's life course, measured at Wave IV: agreeableness, conscientiousness, extraversion, openness, and neuroticism. We also control for respondents' numbers of siblings, marital status (equal to 1 if married, Wave V), and several contextual characteristics of neighborhoods where individuals lived at Wave I—neighborhoods' modal race, poverty, and unemployment.

Childhood health is of particular importance, as it may affect both later-life perceived physical attractiveness (Brierley et al. 2016; Shackelford and Larsen 1999; Weeden and Sabini 2005) and social mobility chances (Anderson 2018; Gugushvili et al. 2023; Power et al. 2002). We construct an initial health indicator that equals 1 if respondents' childhood health was self-rated below excellent and very good (31 percent) and 0 otherwise. We also include the body mass index (BMI) score and a dummy variable equal to 1 if chronic health problems were present at Wave I (Bulczak and Gugushvili 2022). The latter variable is based on the answers to the following questions: “Do you have difficulty using your hands, arms, legs, or



feet because of a permanent physical condition?"; "Do you have a permanent physical condition involving a heart problem?"; "Do you have a permanent physical condition involving asthma?"; and "Do you have a permanent physical condition involving other breathing difficulties?" Summary statistics for dependent and independent variables are presented in Table S1.

## Statistical analysis

In the main analyses, we estimate separate linear models for three social mobility indicators, with individuals' physical attractiveness at Wave I being the key explanatory variable of interest. Individuals of average physical attractiveness (43 percent of respondents) are used as a reference point for other categories—very unattractive, unattractive, attractive, and very attractive. The main aim is to derive point estimates for the physical attractiveness variable for the three social mobility outcomes. Our approach limits the possibility of reverse causality so that social mobility does not change individuals' physical attractiveness (Meier and Mutz 2020). By using Wave I physical attractiveness and later-life social mobility (based on the difference in attainment between Waves I and V), we can ensure that if any relationship is identified, it is not in the opposite direction.

We start with a simple model in which only age, gender, and relevant parental SEP are accounted for. By introducing more controls, we test how robust the relationship between physical attractiveness and intergenerational social mobility is. In each case, we estimate two additional sets of educational, occupational, and income mobility models, including all parental SEP measures and the full range of controls. We also estimate separate models by gender and race/ethnicity, as we expect to identify noticeable differences due to these demographic characteristics. Another issue that can be raised about the employed statistical approach is that our primary outcome variable is partially determined by origin position (since it is the difference between parental and offspring's attainment), which can affect the reliability of our estimates. To check the robustness of our findings, in the Supporting Information, we focus on more conventional measures of attainment instead of relying on intergenerational social mobility. The estimated effects are in line, in terms of the size and significance of the coefficients, with results reported in the main analyses.

## RESULTS

### Main findings

Table S2 shows mean attractiveness by intergenerational social mobility and parental and individuals' SEP. It can be observed that higher attractiveness scores are associated with social mobility and higher SEP. We now examine if similar patterns appear after a wide array of controls are accounted for. Table 1 depicts the points estimates from the linear regression models, showing the associations between individuals' physical attractiveness and the three measures of intergenerational social mobility under consideration (full results with all coefficients are reported in Table S3). Our reference category is average attractiveness. Models 1, 4, and 7 show that being attractive and very attractive is positively associated, while being unattractive is negatively associated with educational, occupational, and income mobility.

The estimated effect sizes across social mobility measures are not trivial and are largely comparable to each other. For example, for educational mobility, being rated as attractive, compared to having average attractiveness, is associated with a higher mobility score of 0.23 ( $p < 0.001$ ). The size of this effect is even greater for very attractive individuals. As for other variables included in Models 1, 4, and 7, we see that males are less likely to experience upward education mobility but are more likely to experience upward income mobility. Age is associated with higher income mobility. Compared to Whites, Blacks are less likely to experience upward income mobility, while Asians perform much better than non-Hispanic Whites in all measures of intergenerational social mobility. Married individuals have better occupational and income mobility outcomes than non-married individuals.

TABLE 1 Physical attractiveness and social mobility across three mobility measures.

	Educational mobility			Occupational mobility			Income mobility		
	Model 1	Model 2	Model 3	Model 4	Model 5	Model 6	Model 7	Model 8	Model 9
Physical attractiveness									
Very unattractive (ref. = average)	0.18* (2.24)	0.15 (1.85)	0.13 (1.53)	0.07 (0.42)	0.05 (0.29)	0.04 (0.23)	-0.04 (-0.28)	-0.03 (-0.20)	-0.05 (-0.33)
Unattractive	-0.17* (-2.56)	-0.14* (-2.13)	-0.07 (-1.15)	-0.27* (-2.52)	-0.22* (-2.16)	-0.15 (-1.59)	-0.22* (-2.53)	-0.22* (-2.49)	-0.15 (-1.67)
Attractive	0.23*** (7.97)	0.21*** (7.51)	0.16*** (5.86)	0.21*** (4.42)	0.18*** (3.89)	0.12** (2.72)	0.23*** (5.93)	0.24*** (6.24)	0.18*** (4.70)
Very attractive	0.30*** (7.78)	0.27*** (7.04)	0.20*** (5.32)	0.34*** (4.93)	0.27*** (3.93)	0.20** (2.94)	0.30*** (5.32)	0.30*** (5.43)	0.22*** (3.97)
Age	0.01 (1.36)	0.01 (1.01)	0.01 (1.36)	0.00 (0.15)	0.01 (0.88)	0.01 (1.32)	0.03*** (3.43)	0.03*** (3.65)	0.04*** (3.97)
Male	-0.23*** (-7.50)	-0.24*** (-8.00)	-0.28*** (-8.55)	-0.03 (-0.61)	-0.06 (-1.16)	-0.09 (-1.64)	0.50*** (12.61)	0.52*** (12.97)	0.49*** (11.17)
Race/ethnicity									
Hispanic (ref. = non-Hispanic White)	-0.07 (-1.39)	-0.01 (-0.12)	0.09 (1.86)	-0.05 (-0.67)	0.12 (1.54)	0.21** (2.84)	0.21** (2.84)	0.19* (2.49)	0.24** (3.10)
Black non-Hispanic	-0.06 (-1.24)	0.02 (0.43)	0.17*** (3.69)	-0.26*** (-3.43)	-0.13 (-1.85)	0.02 (0.22)	-0.20*** (-3.27)	-0.29*** (-4.68)	-0.17* (-2.27)
Asians non-Hispanic	0.31*** (3.95)	0.36*** (4.53)	0.43*** (5.62)	0.47*** (3.60)	0.44*** (3.45)	0.52*** (4.22)	0.37** (3.33)	0.30*** (2.73)	0.37** (3.41)
Others non-Hispanic	0.19 (1.31)	0.27 (1.92)	0.32* (2.23)	0.08 (0.40)	0.11 (0.59)	0.16 (0.87)	0.07 (0.34)	0.02 (0.12)	0.04 (0.19)

(Continues)

TABLE 1 (Continued)

	Educational mobility			Occupational mobility			Income mobility		
	Model 1	Model 2	Model 3	Model 4	Model 5	Model 6	Model 7	Model 8	Model 9
Married	-0.02 (-0.70)	-0.02 (-0.75)	-0.02 (-0.83)	0.15** (3.19)	0.15** (3.37)	0.16*** (3.58)	0.15** (3.37)	0.14** (3.22)	0.14** (3.30)
Pbody test (IQ)	-	-	0.25*** (15.29)	-	-	0.24*** (9.50)	-	-	0.17*** (6.81)
Number of siblings	-	-	0.01 (1.09)	-	-	-0.01 (-0.39)	-	-	0.01 (0.55)
Big Five									
Agreeableness	-	-	0.04*** (6.64)	-	-	0.03** (3.08)	-	-	-0.00 (-0.19)
Conscientiousness	-	-	0.02** (3.16)	-	-	0.02* (2.06)	-	-	0.03*** (3.79)
Extraversion	-	-	-0.01* (-2.52)	-	-	0.00 (0.01)	-	-	0.03*** (4.01)
Openness	-	-	0.02*** (3.81)	-	-	0.01 (1.56)	-	-	-0.01 (-1.41)
Neuroticism	-	-	-0.03*** (-5.66)	-	-	-0.03*** (-4.75)	-	-	-0.03*** (-4.50)
Poor health (W1)	-	-	-0.15*** (-6.29)	-	-	-0.14** (-3.52)	-	-	-0.13** (-3.18)
Chronic health problem (W1)	-	-	-0.04 (-0.62)	-	-	-0.18 (-1.41)	-	-	-0.15 (-1.41)
BMI (W1)	-	-	0.00 (0.14)	-	-	-0.00 (-0.58)	-	-	-0.01 (-1.55)

(Continues)

TABLE 1 (Continued)

	Educational mobility			Occupational mobility			Income mobility		
	Model 1	Model 2	Model 3	Model 4	Model 5	Model 6	Model 7	Model 8	Model 9
Parental education	Yes	Yes	Yes	–	Yes	Yes	–	Yes	Yes
Parental occupation	–	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	–	Yes	Yes
Parental income	–	Yes	Yes	–	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Neighborhood characteristics	–	–	Yes	–	–	–	–	–	Yes
Intercept	1.83*** (14.25)	1.90* (2.07)	1.12 (1.27)	–1.77 (–1.64)	1.90* (2.07)	–3.18 (–1.86)	0.13 (0.78)	1.90* (2.07)	0.75 (0.63)
Adjusted R <sup>2</sup>	0.48	0.49	0.54	0.44	0.46	0.49	0.48	0.49	0.51
Observations	11,583	11,583	11,583	11,583	11,583	11,583	11,583	11,583	11,583

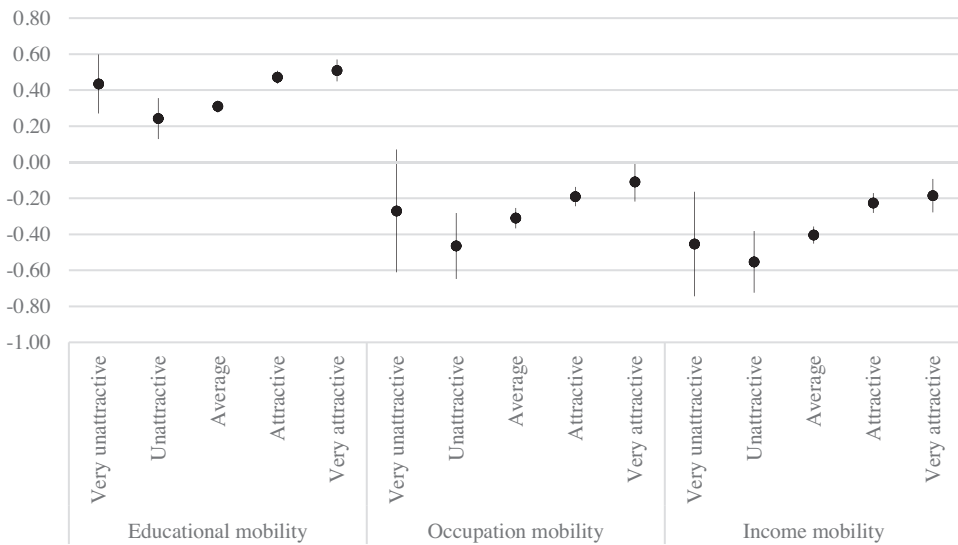
*Notes:* *t*-Statistics are in parentheses. All models account for interviewers' fixed effects and survey weights. Multiple imputation is used to bring back missing data.

Abbreviation: BMI, body mass index.

\**p* < 0.05;

\*\**p* < 0.01;

\*\*\**p* < 0.001.



**FIGURE 2** Predictive margins of attractiveness for three social mobility outcomes

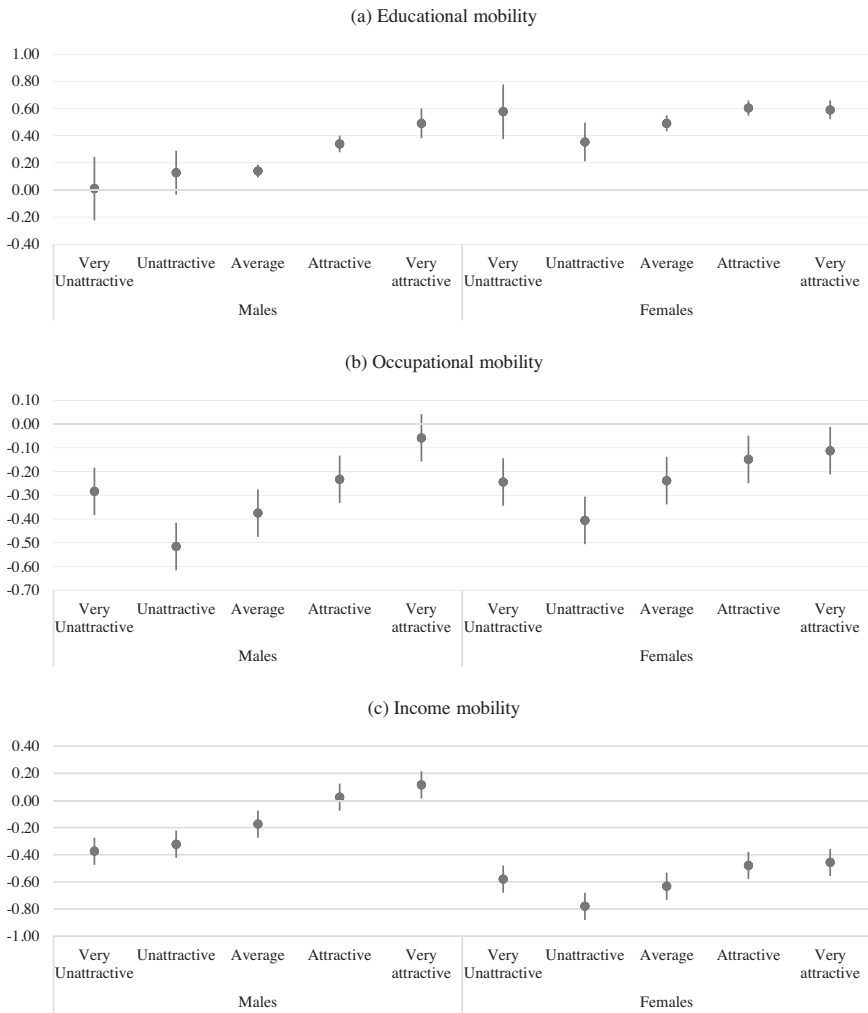
*Note.* Estimated from Models 3, 6, and 9 in Table 1 with corresponding model specifications. Bars represent 95 percent confidence intervals.

Models 2, 5, and 8 include additional parental SEP attainment measures. This inclusion does not affect our estimates noticeably. Models 3, 6, and 9 include more covariates of intergenerational social mobility and account for health selection effects. These variables play an important role in predicting social mobility and can also be related to physical attractiveness. For all three social mobility measures, being perceived as unattractive is no longer associated with a lower likelihood of social mobility than individuals of average attractiveness. The effect size of being assessed as attractive or very attractive is also reduced, yet its substantive significance remains unaffected. We observe that the Peabody test is a strong independent predictor of all three types of social mobility. We also identify a health selection effect, as initial poor health is negatively related to intergenerational social mobility. Personality characteristics matter as individuals' agreeableness and conscientiousness are positively, while neuroticism is negatively related to intergenerational social mobility.

Next, we use the final models for the respective mobility outcomes from Table 1 to calculate the effect of physical attractiveness in absolute rather than relative terms. Figure 2 presents predictive margins for the three mobility outcomes, depicting visible patterns across the three outcomes. The most significant social mobility advantage is observed among attractive and very attractive individuals. Considering the confidence intervals of our estimates, we also see that very unattractive and attractive individuals achieve comparable educational mobility outcomes. Similar associations can be identified between very unattractive individuals and individuals with average attractiveness for intergenerational occupational and income mobility.

## Gender, attractiveness, and mobility

In this section, we explore gender differences in the role of physical attractiveness across the three social mobility measures. A graphical illustration of the results, based on the final models in Table 1, is presented in Figure 3. Predictive margins indicate that physical attractiveness matters for females' and males' educational mobility. The first plot shows broadly comparable patterns, with females achieving higher educational mobility than males, while males' attractiveness gradient is steeper. Only a slightly different pattern is observed for intergenerational occupational mobility. The middle plot shows no major differ-



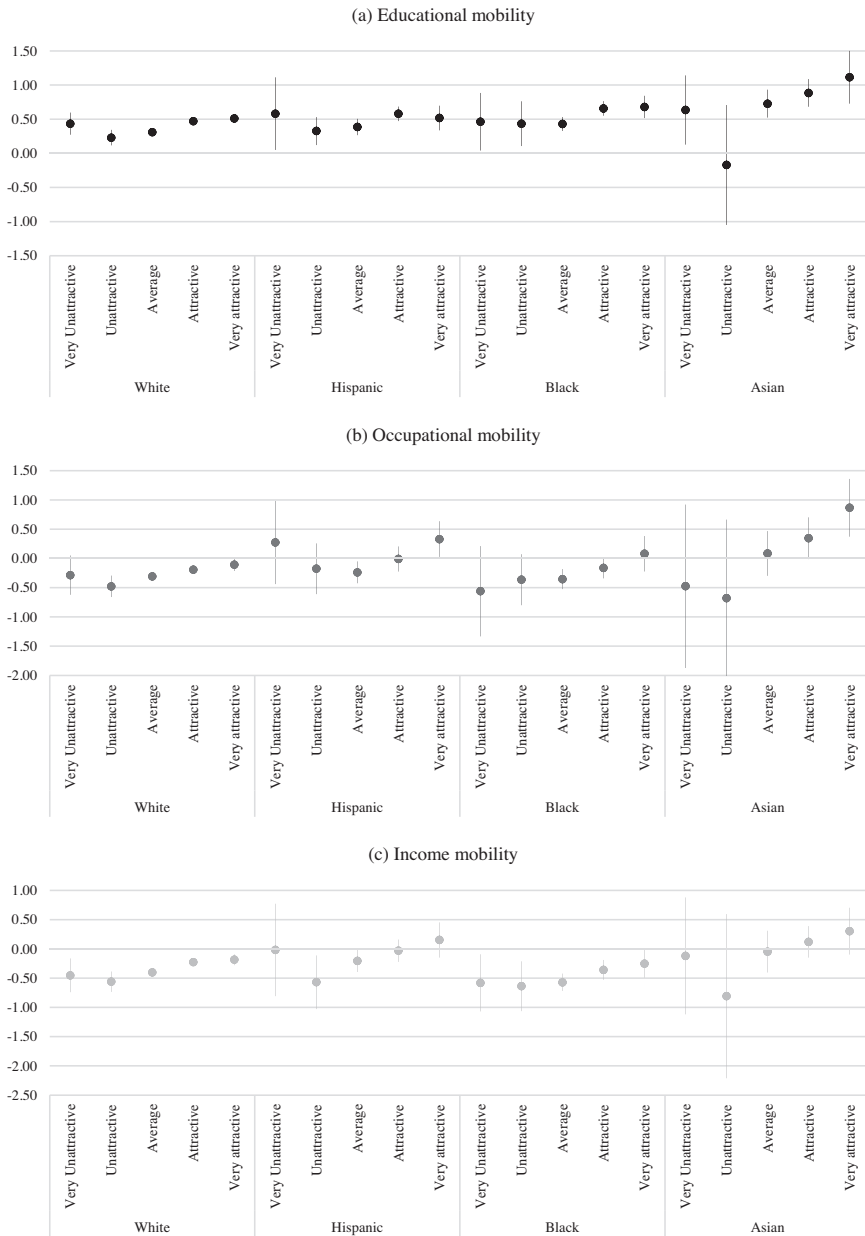
**FIGURE 3** Predictive margins of attractiveness for three mobility outcomes by gender

*Note:* Estimated from Models 3, 6, and 9 in Table 1 with corresponding model specifications. Bars represent 95 percent confidence intervals.

ences across genders in occupational mobility. For males, the gradient is slightly steeper, leading to better occupational mobility outcomes for very attractive individuals compared to the reference category. The plot for intergenerational income mobility shows that males, compared to females, do better and that there is little variation across genders in the effect of attractiveness on mobility. It does appear, however, that gender differences increase with attractiveness. To summarize, physical attractiveness matters for males and females for the considered social mobility outcomes, yet across all measures of social mobility, being rated as very attractive instead of attractive matters more for males than females.

### Race/ethnicity, attractiveness, and mobility

Figure 4 presents predictive margins of attractiveness for different race/ethnicity groups according to the three measures of intergenerational social mobility. All racial/ethnic groups experience upward educational mobility, but point estimates for non-Hispanic Whites are lower than for other racial/ethnic groups due to



**FIGURE 4** Predictive margins of attractiveness for three mobility outcomes by race/ethnicity

*Note:* Estimated from Models 3, 6, and 9 in Table 1 with corresponding model specifications. Bars represent 95 percent confidence intervals.

their more advantageous starting position (Juhn, Kim, and Vella 2005). Overall, the physical attractiveness gradient in mobility for educational attainment is similar across the considered racial/ethnic groups, yet we can also highlight some important differences. The largest gaps in the points estimates are observed for Asians assessed as unattractive and very attractive. Being very attractive and Asian is linked with a more than one-point higher level of mobility in terms of our educational outcome measure. We can also observe the racial/ethnic social mobility gradient for attractive and average-looking individuals. Whites demonstrate the lowest educational mobility, while Asians exhibit the highest.

For occupational mobility, we observe a similar social mobility gradient of attractiveness across racial/ethnic groups. However, being rated as very attractive instead of average results in better occupational outcomes for Hispanics. This is also confirmed by interaction terms reported in Table S4. Very attractive Hispanics and Asians have noticeably better mobility than Whites of the same attractiveness. For individuals of average physical attractiveness and those described as unattractive or very unattractive, virtually no differences can be observed between non-Hispanic Whites and Blacks.

The last plot shows income mobility for different attractiveness categories by individuals' race/ethnicity. Blacks have the lowest likelihood of experiencing income mobility among those who are not described as unattractive. Attractive Asians again demonstrate the highest likelihood of intergenerational mobility. Confidence intervals for individuals described as unattractive are too wide to identify significant differences between racial/ethnic groups. In Figure S1, we also differentiate racial/ethnic gradient by individuals' gender. For educational mobility, we observe similar gender differences across the four race/ethnicity categories. It appears that gender plays a role in the occupational mobility of Blacks. However, for income mobility, this seems to be the case only for very attractive Blacks.

## Robustness checks

We check the robustness of our estimates by accounting for other attractiveness measures also assessed during Wave I interviews. These measures include attractiveness in terms of personality and grooming. Results reported in Table S5 indicate that grooming and personality are significantly associated with mobility outcomes. Yet, despite strong correlations between the different types of attractiveness measures (0.4–0.6), physical attractiveness maintains its independent and largely unaffected association with intergenerational educational and income mobility. Furthermore, in Wave IV, respondents were asked to assess their attractiveness on a 1–4 scale. We use this information to test if self-rated physical attractiveness is important in determining mobility outcomes and if introducing this additional control impacts the coefficients of primary interest. Results reported in Table S6 show that adding self-rated attractiveness did not affect the interviewer-rated physical attractiveness coefficients noticeably.

In Tables S7 and S8, we present results split by gender and gender interactions. The findings indicate that physical attractiveness matters more for males' educational mobility and, to a lesser extent, occupational mobility. Unattractive females, on the other hand, do worse regarding educational mobility. In the case of income mobility, we again find slightly larger physical attractiveness effects for males. To address the possibility that the interviewer's race (i.e., they are predominantly White) affected attractiveness judgments and our overall results (Nedelec and Beaver 2011), we limited the sample to White respondents and interviewers and reran the main models. The results reported in Table S9 remain robust for the White-only group, with the coefficients of interest remaining stable and significant.

We also consider related, alternative outcome measures to test the robustness of our findings. To do this, we move from continuous to binary mobility and attractiveness measures. We separately estimate the effects of attractiveness on upward and downward intergenerational mobility by transforming the original variables into two binary indicators equaling 1 for upward or downward mobility. Results reported in Table S10 indicate strong links between physical attractiveness and mobility. Similarly, in Table S11, the results remain consistent when a binary attractiveness indicator is used (equal to 1 if an individual is rated as attractive or very attractive, 0 = otherwise) instead of the five-category measure used in the main analysis.

Additionally, instead of intergenerational social mobility, we use three corresponding Wave V attainment measures: education, occupational attainment, and household income. Results reported in Table S12 are consistent with previous estimates. Across the three outcomes, similar patterns can be observed, reconfirming that physical attractiveness matters for the SEP attainment measures. Additionally, in Table S13, we also limit the sample by excluding individuals living in the same household as their parents during Wave V (7 percent) and rerun the income mobility models. No significant changes are observed.

Next, as stated in the Data section, because a group of parents fell into the ambiguous “none” and “other occupation” categories (~15 percent) in Table S14, we rerun the analysis by excluding parents with



these occupational categories. Similarly, we aim to address a concern that individuals with parents in the lowest and highest positions could not move down and up, respectively, on the social mobility ladder. Therefore, in Table S15, we split the sample by excluding parental SEP that equals 1 and 5. Using these approaches, the estimates remain consistent with our main results.

Further, we included marital status at Wave V in all estimated models. However, as some studies suggest (Jokela 2009; Meltzer et al. 2014), this variable can be a possible channel linking physical attractiveness and social, particularly occupational and income, mobility. In Table S16, we remove marital status from the models, but the main estimates remain unaffected. It also is acknowledged that physical attractiveness's effect on intergenerational social mobility may differ whether or not individuals are born in the United States. To test this assumption, we included an additional dummy variable equaling 1 for those born in the United States. The association between physical attractiveness and social mobility did not change, with those born outside the United States being less likely to go up on the educational and occupational hierarchy. In Table S17, we also checked for possible interaction effects between the migration variable and physical attractiveness, but none were statistically significant.

Finally, we moved away from interviewer-assessed physical attractiveness to gender-specific indicators of physical attractiveness (Shepperd and Strathman 1989; Weeden and Sabini 2005). For males, we examined the role of height, and for females, the role of BMI. Results reported in Table S18, in line with past research, show that height matters for males and BMI for females, income-related outcomes (Cawley 2004; Persico, Postlewaite, and Silverman 2004; Rooth 2009).

## DISCUSSION

The role of physical attractiveness in determining intergenerational social mobility has remained underexplored in the relevant literature. The majority of past studies in the field of social mobility and stratification have ignored the importance of physical attractiveness in determining individuals' mobility outcomes (Anderson 2018; Deary et al. 2005; Nettle 2003; von Stumm et al. 2009), while research which has examined the role of physical attractiveness in SEP attainment has not explicitly considered social mobility outcomes (Hakim 2010; Hamermesh and Biddle 1994; Hosoda, Stone-Romero, and Coats 2003; Kanazawa and Still 2018; Mobius and Rosenblat 2006). We contribute to the existing scholarship by examining whether physical attractiveness in the age range 12–19, as assessed by survey interviewers, explains individuals' likelihood of moving up or down from their origin SEP, as measured by parental educational, occupational, and income attainment. In addition to social origin effects, our models account for various variables associated with social mobility, such as cognitive and noncognitive traits, neighborhood characteristics, and health selection effects. We were particularly interested in heterogeneous gender and race/ethnicity effects, as physical attractiveness has different manifestations across these groups.

In line with theoretical expectations, with our empirical results, we provide consistent and systematic evidence that physical attractiveness is a significant predictor of individuals' intergenerational social mobility by all considered measures. This suggests that the benefits of physical attractiveness remain across different life course stages. For occupational and income mobility, the effect size, for instance, of being very attractive versus having average attractiveness, is comparable to the effect size of the standardized Peabody picture and vocabulary test (IQ proxy). Our results indicate that physical attractiveness may be more important for males than females. The latter aligns with selected past findings (Persico, Postlewaite, and Silverman 2004; Pfeifer 2012; Wong and Penner 2016), suggesting that physical attractiveness benefits males more and specifically in relation to their educational attainment. Our results contradict a study from Scotland in which females' physical attractiveness, assessed during adolescence, was identified as more important in determining educational outcomes (Benzeval et al. 2013). It seems plausible that distinct approaches to measuring educational attainment may explain some of these differences.

By examining three different intergenerational social mobility measures by gender of individuals, we demonstrate that physical attractiveness may have a different impact depending on the investigated outcome. For males, we observe a social mobility gradient of physical attractiveness for all three mobility

measures; that is, those assessed as attractive have higher mobility chances than those assessed as average. Among females, the gradient is weaker regarding intergenerational educational and income mobility, and there are no significant differences in physical attractiveness categories regarding occupational mobility. These findings suggest that choosing outcome measures is crucial when examining gender differences and social mobility and explain why past research in this field has produced mixed results (Harper 2000; Langlois et al. 2000). One of the explanations for why physical attractiveness matters less for occupational outcomes could be that in the United States, occupational attainment is primarily affected by individuals' educational credentials, while, in the realm of educational and earnings attainment, educators and employers are more likely to reward individuals based on their subjective judgments affected by individuals' physical attractiveness.

As for individuals' race/ethnicity, we find that across all three measures of intergenerational social mobility, Asians have a much higher likelihood of experiencing upward social mobility than other racial/ethnic groups. Compared to Whites, Blacks, and Hispanics, due to their initial disadvantages, also have a higher likelihood of social mobility in terms of educational and income attainment. When looking at intergenerational social mobility chances across racial/ethnic groups based on individuals' attractiveness, we do not find evidence of major differences across race-ethnicity groups. An attractiveness-mobility gradient is observed for all mobility outcomes among Whites, only for educational mobility among Blacks and Asians, and for occupational mobility among Hispanics. One of the reasons why we do not observe a more pronounced attractiveness-mobility gradient among minorities could be their relatively small share in the analyzed sample.

We also provide evidence that accounting for various aspects of social origin variables does not strongly affect the key estimates of our interest. It appears, however, that neighborhood characteristics, individuals' personality, IQ, and initial health should be accounted for in this research, as models without these key characteristics might produce noticeably higher point estimates for the effect of physical attractiveness on intergenerational social mobility. Further, we find some evidence that mobility outcomes differ between the very unattractive and unattractive categories, suggesting that the relationship between physical attractiveness and mobility is nonmonotonic and that these two attractiveness categories should not be merged in future research on the links between physical attractiveness and social mobility.

Our analytical approach has some limitations; in particular, the Wave I attractiveness variable allows us to address the possibility of reverse causality, but this might also be an imperfect indicator of later-life physical attractiveness. Our approach relies on the assumption that the interviewers reliably assessed the physical attractiveness of a cohort of relatively young age, as most of the respondents during Wave I were still in high school. It is also assumed that to a large extent, physical attractiveness does not change over time, yet the same factors that affect Wave I attractiveness might also have shaped later-life physical attractiveness. Furthermore, past research has shown that interviewers' characteristics, in particular their gender, may, in some settings, affect the assessment of attractiveness (Nedelec and Beaver 2011). However, we could account for interviewers' fixed effects, which did not affect the coefficients of primary interest (Robins, Homer, and French 2011).

## CONCLUSION

This study, by using rich longitudinal data and appropriate research design, shows that physical attractiveness is an independent predictor of intergenerational social mobility outcomes regarding individuals' educational, occupational, and income attainment. These findings fit well with past research examining the role of physical attractiveness in determining different SEP outcomes. Our research provides evidence that the association between physical attractiveness and intergenerational mobility differs concerning gender. The results show that there may be more to gain from attractiveness for males than for females and that, with each step on the attractiveness ladder, males increase their advantage in income mobility.

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## CONFLICT OF INTEREST STATEMENT

The authors declare no conflicts of interest.

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## SUPPORTING INFORMATION

Additional supporting information can be found online in the Supporting Information section at the end of this article.

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