

The Relationship Between Occupation, Employment Status, and Happiness among Older Adults in America



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Introduction

- As the population of adults over 60 years of age rapidly increases worldwide, it is crucial for all people to better understand how to age happily and healthily. Employment and retirement influence much of how older adults experience aging in America.
- Over the past 30 years, the average age of retirement for Americans has increased from 60 to 63, and individuals now receive full social security retirement benefits at age 66 or 67 depending on one's birth year (CRR 2021, SSA 2023). Financial benefits and social norms make retiring in one's mid-sixties nearly compulsory, yet studies show that staying employed past the average age of retirement is associated with greater overall happiness (Baker et al., 2005; Schwingel et al., 2009).
- While the relationship between employment status and well-being has been well-established in older literature, more recent studies have produced uncertain results (Di Gessa et al., 2017; Anxo et al., 2019; Chia, Hartanto, 2021) and little is known about the impact occupation category might have on the potential association.

Methods

Sample

- Older adults (age 60+) drawn from the 2018 General Social Survey (GSS)
- The GSS represents the civilian, non-institutionalized adult population of the United States and includes only persons living in households
- 2,348 adults participated in the 2018 GSS, 718 of which are 60 and older.

Measures

- This study recoded work status responses dichotomously so 0 = unemployed, retired, or in school and 1 = employed.
- Mental health and quality of life were rated from 1 (excellent) to 5 (poor). The present study measures overall happiness based on the sum of these two variables flipped so higher scores indicate greater happiness (1-9).
- Occupation was recorded in the GSS according to the 2010 census occupation codes. This study groups occupation responses based on their broader categories in the 2010 census and numbers them 1-6 (1 = management, professional, and related activities, 2 = service occupations, 3 = sales and office occupations, 4 = natural resources, construction, and maintenance occupations, 5 = production, transportation, and material moving occupations, 6 = military specific occupations).

Research Questions

- Is there a relationship between overall happiness and employment status among Americans aged 60 and above?
- Does this relationship differ between occupation categories?

Results

Univariate

- 30.43% of adults aged 60 and over were employed in 2018
- General happiness is centered around 7 and skewed left
- 40.88% of adults aged 60 and over were currently employed or formerly employed in management, professional, and related occupations.

Bivariate

- An Analysis of Variance (ANOVA) revealed that **the average overall happiness of older adults is significantly higher for those who are employed** (mean: 6.72, s.d. \pm 1.54) than for those who are not employed (Mean=6.33, s.d. \pm 1.65), $F = 8.47$, $p = 0.0037$.
- Those with **management, professional, and related occupations** have the **greatest average happiness score** among each category of occupation.

Multivariate

- After controlling for the occupation category, Work Status is still significantly and positively associated with the general happiness score (Beta=0.387 CI 0.073-0.133, $p=0.0037$). On average, someone aged 60 and older who is employed is expected to have a happiness score that is 0.387 points more than someone who is unemployed (Figure 1).
- The occupation category was found to be independently associated with overall happiness.

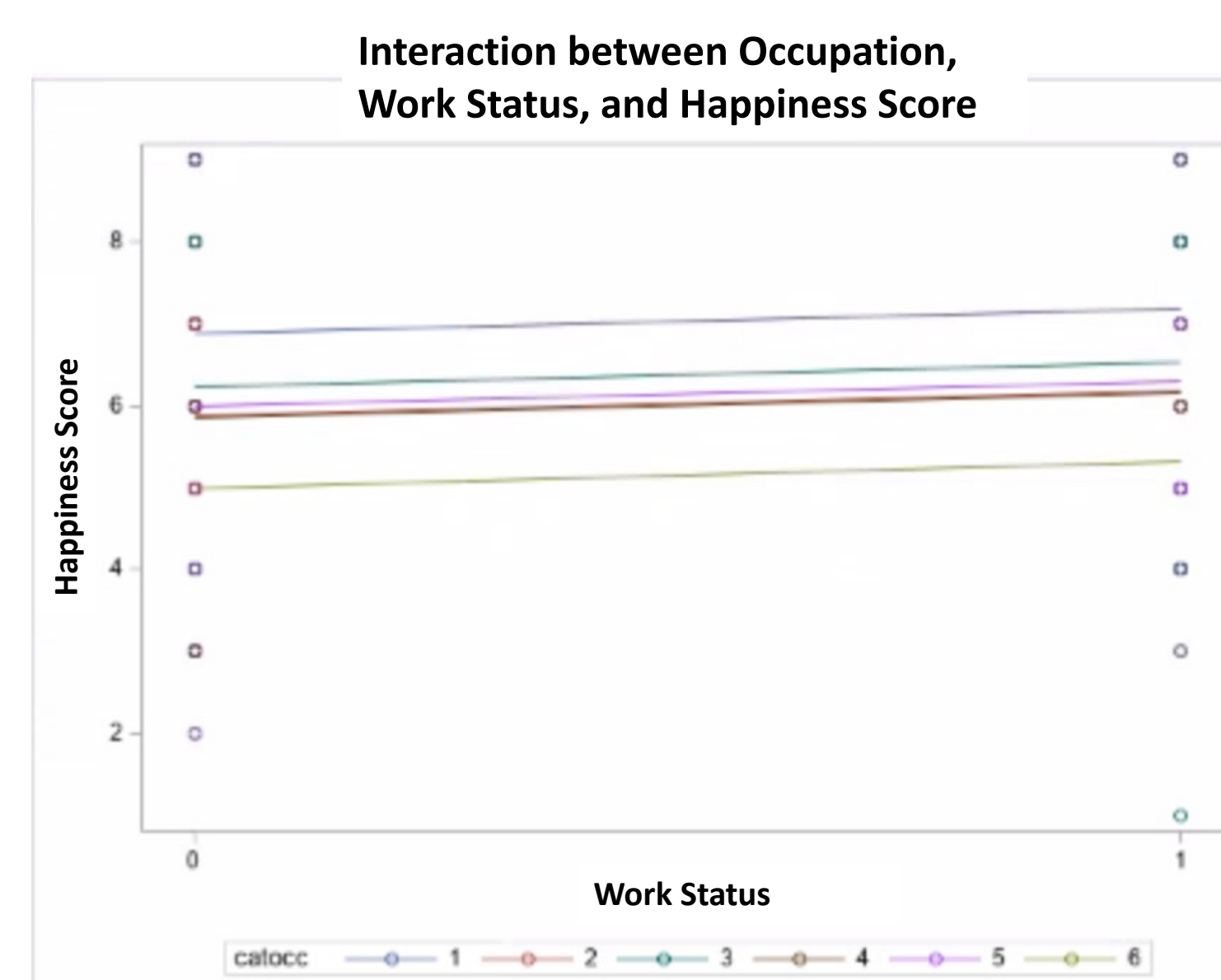


Figure 1: The relationship between work status and general happiness with occupation category as an interacting variable

Multivariate (cont.)

- The mean happiness score for people aged 60 and above in occupation category 1 (management, professional, and related occupations) is significantly higher than the happiness score for all other categories. The mean happiness score does not differ significantly between the other occupation categories (Figure 2).

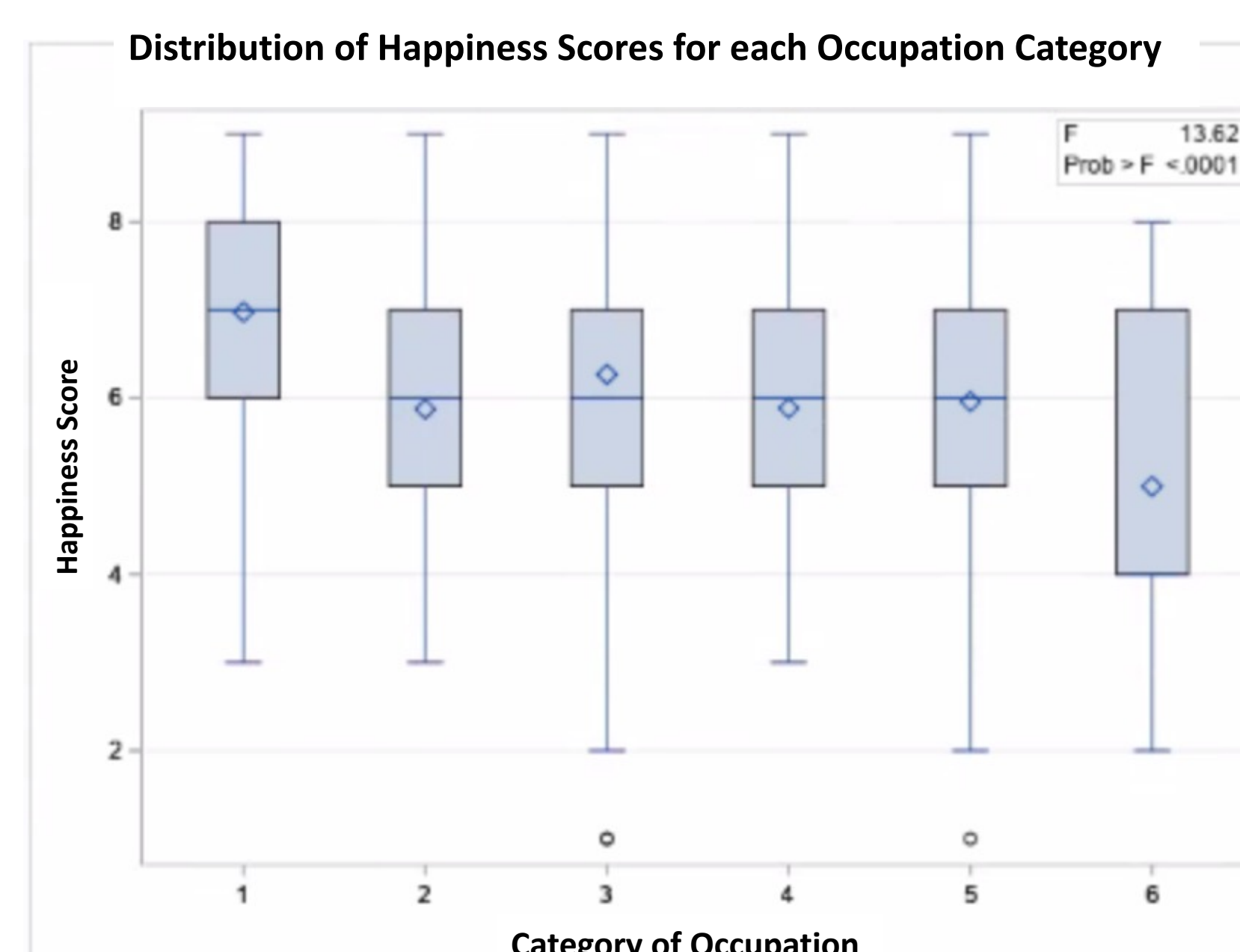


Figure 2: General happiness comparisons between occupation categories for adults aged 60 and over

Discussion

- Regardless of occupation, older adults who stay employed as they age might be happier on average than those who retire.
- Individuals 60+ who have retired from or continue to work in management, professional, and related occupations might be happier on average than individuals in any other occupation categories regardless of work status.
- Notably, the present findings contradict the widely held belief that retirement is synonymous with the “golden age” of a person's life
- Further research is needed to determine whether retirement is significantly associated with lower overall happiness.
- Research on barriers to employment for older adults must also be done in order to further understand how ageism impacts social involvement and happiness among the aging U.S. population.

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