

The Impact of the Coronavirus (COVID-19) on the Black Lives Matter Movement

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I pledge that I have neither received nor given unauthorized assistance during the completion of this work. Anna Marston, Eileen Scheir, Shawna Pilout

Abstract

When people have more free time, activism and engagement in social justice activities often increase. We studied whether this political theory is true in the midst of the #BlackLivesMatter Movement, while many Americans have increased levels of free time during the coronavirus (COVID-19) pandemic. We surveyed 203 participants between the ages of 18 and 71 to analyze the extent to which free time impacted engagement in the contemporary Black Lives Matter movement for racial justice. In this survey, we controlled for the variables of self-efficacy and personal impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic by including measures for these constructs to the participants. Results showed that investment into Black Lives Matter was in fact marginally significantly impacted by prior knowledge on racial justice issues ($p < 0.001$). Furthermore, our results revealed that the amount of free time people had, in hours over a given month, impacted the number of hours people invested into Black Lives Matter ($p = 0.050$). Self-efficacy and personal impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic did not have mediation effects in this study as we had hypothesized. We further continue to discuss the practical implications of these findings and the role that limitations played in the production of this study and its results.

Keywords: coronavirus (COVID-19), racial justice, social isolation, Black Lives Matter, racism, quarantine, social justice

The Impact of the Coronavirus (COVID-19) on the Black Lives Matter Movement

The United States is battling two converging pandemics—coronavirus (COVID-19) and systemic racism. The coronavirus has undoubtedly taken emotional, physical, and financial tolls on the world population; in the United States, as of December 9th, the death toll is quickly approaching 300,000 (CDC, 2020). Research has subsequently shown that the coronavirus has disproportionately impacted Black, Brown, and Indigenous communities in the United States. Black and Indigenous Americans are facing the highest death toll to COVID-19 in the United States at a rate of 1 in 1,000 people (APM Research Lab Staff, 2020). Black, Indigenous, and Latinx communities face a death rate at three times the rate of white Americans (APM Research Lab Staff, 2020). Reasons for this public health phenomenon are in no way biological, as there is no evidence that COVID-19 discriminates according to racial or ethnic background. However, these populations are more likely to have underlying health conditions, work and live in environments more subject to viral exposure, and have limited access to healthcare (Marshall III, 2020). Evidence suggests that racial minorities' experiences of racism and discrimination can take a toll on their physical health over time (Marshall III, 2020). It is not new information that public health crises continue to devastate communities of color, but COVID-19 is yet another reminder that health disparities are pervasive in the United States. One historical example of this disparaging phenomenon includes Hurricane Katrina in 2005 in New Orleans, Louisiana, where people of color were killed, injured, and displaced at alarmingly high rates (Rivlin, 2016). In addition to the pandemic of the coronavirus disproportionately infecting and killing marginalized groups, the converging issue of systemic racism harms people of color at an alarmingly high rate. Specifically, at the forefront of discussions on racism right now are the high amounts of violence and murder occurring at the hands of law enforcement in the United States.

Black Americans are 3.5 times more likely to be killed by police than their white counterparts (Gilbert & Ray, 2015). Violence against people of color by law enforcement is known as “police brutality” and it has a long history in the United States since the institution of slavery was in place. Despite public health and education efforts, Black and Brown people continue to face victimization by law enforcement officers and in the criminal justice system. There are several reasons for this disproportionate violence and victimization against people of color—such as the pervasive implicit biases held by police officers as well as the institutionalized racism in law enforcement in this country. Regardless of the reasoning behind police brutality, what we do know is that Black Americans are facing racism that is usually excused as “unintentional.” According to the Mapping Police Violence project (Sinyangwe et al., 2020), 98.3% of police killings have not resulted in charging the responsible officer with a crime between 2013 and 2020. In 2013, the #BlackLivesMatter Movement was formed by three Black women—Alicia Garza, Patrisse Cullors, and Opal Tomet—in response to the rising crisis of police brutality when 17-year-old Trayvon Martin was shot by officer George Zimmerman (Capatosto, 2018). Zimmerman was acquitted for the crime, despite Martin being completely innocent and not posing an an imminent threat; it was clearly a case of racial profiling, yet police brutality continues.

Since 2013 and throughout 2020 in the era of coronavirus, police brutality against Black and Brown Americans has remained pervasive. In 2020 alone, the police have killed 1,1016 people, with 28% of that number being Black people, despite accounting for only 13% of the population (Sinyangwe et al., 2020). The combination of coronavirus and systemic racism are devastating communities of color in the United States. Despite these devastating pandemics, we have seen a rise in racial activism across the country and a resurgence of the #BlackLivesMatter

Movement. In response to the murders of Ahmaud Arbery on February 23rd in South Georgia, Breonna Taylor in Louisville on March 13th, and of George Floyd in Minneapolis on May 25th, #BlackLivesMatter awareness has erupted (Blue, 2020; Fausset, 2020; Oppel et al, 2020;). This long-awaited activism and push for justice is finally here after the brutal murders of these innocent civilians. Throughout the month of June, the United States saw mass protests and riots in pursuit of justice and awareness of this cause that were comparable to the civil rights movement in the 1960s. What remains largely unexplored is the reason why it took so long—over hundreds of years—for white allies to mobilize against police violence and oppression. At this point, psychological explanations for this upsurge in political activism remains unknown and in its early stages of research. Perhaps the vast exposure of inequality resulting from the COVID-19 pandemic enlightened people to become aware of systemic racism and its pervasive effects (Newburn, 2020). Furthermore, it is possible that COVID-19 quarantines and shutdowns have given people more time to focus their energy on social justice issues like #BlackLivesMatter (Nakhaie & Nakhaie, 2020). Research shows that when people have more free time, people are more likely to engage in social justice movements and activities in pursuit of change (Opp, 2009). Many people have more time on their hands to participate in protests as a result of unemployment, social distancing, and lockdowns; as a result, it is possible that this could have a positive impact on Black Lives Matter.

Purpose of the Present Study

In the present study we examined the extent to which levels of “free time” impacted people’s levels of involvement and engagement in Black Lives Matter and antiracism education. We posed two main questions: First, did higher levels of free time predict the extent to which people engaged with Black Lives Matter in the summer of 2020? Second, did mediating factors

such as prior engagement in antiracism education or disruption due to COVID-19 impact involvement in Black Lives Matter? Earlier research on this topic is limited, as this is the first time that most people alive today have seen a pandemic overturn life as we know it. Like many research studies on COVID-19 that are in the process of data collection now, we wanted to study folks who have been actively affected by COVID-19 and Black Lives Matter. We gathered data from a sample of participants ($N = 203$) between the ages of 18 and 71 who were recruited to and consented to participate in a survey. Our study hypothesized that the more free time people had, the more active they would be in this racial justice activism, while controlling for self-efficacy, effects of COVID-19, and other demographic information.

Materials and Methods

Sample

The participants were recruited by advertising the study in the University of Richmond's SpiderBytes, a daily email listing various institutional announcements, through social media postings, and through word-of-mouth. There were 203 participants aged 18-71 ($M = 26.65$, $SD = 12.94$). They were mostly white (81.77%) and female (77.83%; see Table 1). All participants had at least a high school education, despite this not being a requirement (see Table 1). They also leaned more towards the liberal side on social and economic issues (see Table 2) and also affiliated more with the democratic party (see Table 3).

Instruments

The survey instrument was a set of 15 questions developed by us. 3 questions were in regards to racism and activism, 2 about COVID-19 and its personal impact, 1 about self-efficacy, and the remaining were demographic questions. These measures were created to supplement our independent variables, dependent variables, and mediating variables. The independent variables

were the level of extra free-time since the onset of COVID-19 and prior knowledge/involvement in Black Lives Matter (BLM) or racial justice. For the level of extra free-time, participants typed in the average amount of hours of free time they have in a given month. For prior knowledge/involvement in BLM, participants indicated their familiarity with 15 topics related to racial justice on a scale from 0 to 7; 0 being zero knowledge at all, 7 being an expert in the field. A couple examples of these topics include police brutality and racial disparities in healthcare.

The dependent variables were the number of antiracism action items taken in a given month and time invested into antiracism in a given month. For the number of antiracism action items taken in a given month, participants listed a number next to 13 action items representing how many times they completed that specific task. A few of these items include signing a petition, attending a protest/march, and reading a book or article about race or racial injustice. For the time invested into antiracism in a given month, participants typed in the average amount of hours of time they have invested into antiracism in a given month. The mediating variables were the impact of COVID-19 on the person, and self-efficacy. To measure the impact of COVID-19 on a person, participants indicated the severity to which COVID-19 has disrupted their normal life proceedings, including unemployment, financial struggles, mental health struggle, family/friend losses due to the virus, or anything else that has impacted them negatively. This was on a scale from 0 to 7; 0 being not at all changed or disrupted, and 7 being completely disrupted. To measure self-efficacy, we adopted the New General Self-Efficacy Scale (Chen et al., 2001), in which participants indicate how much they agree with the statement on a scale from 1 to 4 (1 = strongly disagree, 2 = disagree, 3 = neither agree nor disagree, 4 = agree, 5 = strongly agree). A couple examples of these statements are “I will be able to achieve most of the goals that I set for myself” and “I will be able to successfully overcome many challenges.

Design

This study was developed using a Qualtrics survey that was distributed through friends and family of the researchers, as well as word of mouth, spider bites, social media, and other ways to get it out to the public. This study is entirely based on current events so we took advantage of the social climate to find how people were personally affected by these uprootings of normal times as well as how the events of COVID-19 and BLM impacted each other. We used a 2 x 2 factorial design in which the independent variables were the level of extra free-time since the onset of COVID-19 and prior knowledge/involvement in Black Lives Matter (BLM) or racial justice, and the dependent variables were the number of antiracism action items taken in a given month and time invested into antiracism in a given month. The data analysis consisted of 2 ANOVAs which display more detail in the results section of this report.

Results

Analyses focus on the extent to which our independent variables—level of free time and prior education on antiracism—had a bearing on the dependent variable of involvement in Black Lives Matter. For the sake of designing a 2 x 2 factorial design, we divided our dependent variable into two constructs—number of antiracism actions taken in a given month and time invested into antiracism in a given month. Respondents' answers were coded for analysis purposes into the SPSS 5 statistics program to test for significant effects between the variables. For the independent variables—level of free time and prior education on antiracism—respondent data was coded into two groups to represent the higher half and lower half of the data pools. For example, for the number of antiracism actions taken, data was coded into groups “1” and “2” to divide the groups into the high and low ends of the data, for the sake of statistical analysis. Results were analyzed through two different processes of an Univariate Analysis of Variance

(ANOVAs) to examine the main effects of free time and education level on involvement in the Black Lives Matter movement. The first ANOVA for education level revealed a significant main effect of the level of prior education on the number of action items taken in a given month ($F(3, 198) = 6.996, p < 0.001$). There were no other significant main effects in the ANOVA testing for main effects of antiracism education on Black Lives Matter involvement. The second ANOVA, testing for levels of free time, revealed a marginally significant effect of free time on the number of hours spent on antiracism in a given month, ($F(3, 179) = 2.660, p = 0.050$).

It is critical that the ANOVA tests revealed main effects of antiracism education and of free time on the dependent variables. Thus, the level of prior antiracism education impacted the amount of action items people took in pursuit of the Black Lives Matter movement in a given month. The results described above showed that there was also a significant influence of free time on the time in a given month invested into racial activism. In this study, we utilized the disruption due to COVID-19 and a measure of self-efficacy as our mediating variables. There was no significant effect of either mediating variable on either of the dependent variables, showing us that the level of disruption people faced from the pandemic and self-efficacy are not indicators of how much time people invested into Black Lives Matter.

Thus, these results provide evidence in favor of our hypothesis that increased levels of free time would increase the level of involvement in the contemporary social justice movement. Our results also show that the independent variable of prior knowledge on antiracism work had a significant effect on the extent to which one made tangible action steps to engage in the Black Lives Matter movement (see Figure 1). The statistical analysis in the second ANOVA also shows that free time impacted the number of hours people spent in a given month on Black Lives Matter involvement (see Figure 2). Furthermore, there was no significant mediation effect of

COVID-19 impacts or self-efficacy for either of the dependent variables of hours spent or action items taken for antiracism work in a given month.

Discussion

Our results suggest the importance of antiracism education in the fight against racism and racial discrimination. Those with more antiracism knowledge had taken more “action items” towards racial equality. As shown by the results, education is an important first step if we want to live in an equitable society for all. We cannot change the past, but we can change the future. This change starts by recognizing our errors and how to prevent them. Education also brings more awareness to the many ways racism appears in our world, from the more obvious ones (e.g., police brutality) to the more subtle ones (e.g., hair discrimination). While education is not the solution to fighting racism, it’s a great, and effective, place to start. This education, especially in institutional settings like schools, needs to be more than just policies. For example, schools in the UK had citizenship education that was supposed to promote social cohesion and racial equality (Gillborn, 2006). The idea was great in theory, but in the end, only disadvantaged Black students through avenues such as testing. This reinforces the notion that even well-intended policy changes do not have the desired outcome and need to be addressed to lead to positive change.

This study also shows the positive impacts the COVID-19 pandemic has had on the BLM Movement. Despite the disruptions COVID-19 has had on many of our lives, those who had more free time spent more time on antiracism education and activism. Even as our lives return to normal once the COVID-19 pandemic ends and our free time levels change, this study shows the many ways we can spend our free time in the fight against racism. While some action items take more time (e.g., protesting) take more time than others (e.g., signing a petition), they all have a

valuable role in the BLM Movement and fight for racial justice and equality. Van Dyke (1998) studied why student activism occurred on some college campuses, but not others in the 1960s. These differences were partially explained by higher levels of free time, more economic resources, and higher self-efficacy at more elite or wealthier schools. Even though this was based on 1960 data, this falls mostly in line with our findings of more free time leading to more activism. Our demographic was largely students, faculty, and staff from the University of Richmond, a more elite, wealthier school (estimated endowment of \$2.4 billion; *The Endowment*, 2020). Those with more free time spent more time educating themselves. However, our findings did not find a significant effect of self-efficacy, but this could potentially be due to our participant sample.

Limitations

One limitation of our study is the way we measured the average number of antiracism action items taken each month. Some items, such as signing a petition, are much easier to accomplish and take much less time to do than other items, such as attending a protest. This can lead to misleading results. For example, one person signing 20 petitions a month (20 action items) may look like more action items taken compared to someone else only attending a protest and reading a book (2 action items), even though the second person more than likely spent more time completing their tasks. Future research can better weigh the differences between these action items to get a better representation of how participants are participating in the Black Lives Matter movement.

Another limitation to this study is the lack of clarity participants gave to the questions where they had to type out an answer (or the lack of a response in general). Some participants gave a range or simply said “don’t know.” This lack of clarity (or response) from participants led

to some participants' responses having to be taken out of the data set or averaged (e.g., a range of 60-80 being averaged to 70) when analyzing that variable. Future research can make the way participants respond be more straightforward. For example, where they had to fill in the average number of free time in a given month, researchers could provide something like a sliding scale for participants instead.

There was also a lack of diversity among the participants. They were a majority white (81.77%) and female (77.83%; see Table 1). There were also no participants who had less than a high school education (see Table 1). 55.66% of the participants indicated that they were either a moderate or strong democrat while only 4.44% indicated that they were either a moderate or strong republican when asked about their political affiliation (see Table 3). Our participants, while varying greatly in age (18-71), were also considerably young on average ($M = 26.65$). This lack likely stems from the survey being advertised at a predominantly white institution (University of Richmond), where many of the respondents were college-aged students. This lack of diversity leads to more difficulty when generalizing the results of this study, especially when discussing a political issue like the Black Lives Matter movement and other racial discriminations.

Implications for Future Research

This study and its results can bring awareness to how free time might impact activism. In this case, unfortunately, the free time resulted from a negative situation, but hopefully this encourages people to use their other free time as a time to be an activist, like over summer vacation for students or on holiday for adults. Additionally, the way that action items were operationalized in the survey may show people how small an action item can be. For example, signing a petition likely takes less than a minute to do. Hopefully, this will encourage people to

take action items and fit them into their busy schedules because they will realize it really does not take that much time at all. Furthermore, results showed that when participants had more prior knowledge on subject matters related to racial injustice, they completed more action items on average than those who had less prior knowledge on subject matters related to racial injustice. The first step is always education. The more you know, the more you want to take action and help.

Another implication for future research is how the Black Lives Matter movement is an evolving movement, and there is currently a lack of psychological research about it. Future research just needs to include the BLM movement and what is affecting it and how it is affecting other things. Showing how BLM and COVID-19 are impacting each other is just the start of the research about these topics. This study can be used as a basis for further research to use the measures, understand the relationship, and even just generate new ideas, theories, and hypotheses. Along these lines, future studies could focus on operationalizing our variables in a more efficient manner to confirm that our results were accurate, and if some results that did not appear significant to us are able to appear significant in other means.

Conclusion

Results showed that the more prior knowledge participants had on racial injustice, specifically topics such as voter suppression, microaggressions, and intersectionality, the more they supported the Black Lives Matter movement. Moreover, the more free time people had due to COVID-19, in hours over a given month, the more hours they invested in completing action items to combat racism. Self-efficacy and personal impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic did not have mediation effects in this study as we had hypothesized. This may be due to the limitations

of this study outlined above. Overall, it seems the more time and education people have, the more they are willing to combat worldwide issues such as this one regarding social injustice.

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*Table 1**Participant Demographics*

		<u>Participants</u>	
Measure		Number	Percent
Race/Ethnicity	White/Caucasian	166	81.77
	Black/African American	12	5.91
	Native American or Eskimo	1	0.49
	Aleut	0	0.00
	Asian or Pacific Islander	4	1.97
	Hispanic/Latinx	4	1.97
	Biracial/Multiracial	11	5.42
	Other	1	0.49
	Missing	4	1.97
Gender	Male	39	19.21
	Female	158	77.83
	Nonbinary/Other	2	0.99
	Missing	4	1.97
Education	Less Than High School	0	0.00
	High School	111	54.68

College Graduation	45	22.17
Postgraduate Degree	43	21.18
Missing	4	1.97

Note. Missing refers to participants who failed to provide a response to that question.

Table 2

Participant Political Issue Identities

Measure		<u>Participants</u>	
		Number	Percent
Social Issue Political Identity	Strongly Liberal	101	49.75
	Moderately Liberal	61	30.05
	Slightly Liberal	15	7.39
	In the Middle	13	6.40
	Slightly Conservative	5	2.46
	Moderately Conservative	3	1.48
	Strongly Conservative	2	0.99
	Missing	3	1.48
Economic Issue Political Identity	Strongly Liberal	50	24.63
	Moderately Liberal	62	30.54
	Slightly Liberal	30	14.78
	In the Middle	24	11.82
	Slightly Conservative	15	7.39
	Moderately Conservative	14	6.90
	Strongly Conservative	5	2.46

Missing	3	1.48
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Note. Missing refers to participants who failed to provide a response to that question.

*Table 3**Participant Political Party Affiliation*

	<u>Participants</u>	
	Number	Percent
Strong Democrat	63	31.03
Moderate Democrat	50	24.63
Leaning Democrat	29	14.29
Independent	32	15.76
Leaning Republican	13	6.40
Moderate Republican	6	2.96
Strong Republican	3	1.48
Missing	7	3.45

Note. Missing refers to participants who failed to provide a response to that question.

Mean Action Items Taken by Antiracism Education Level

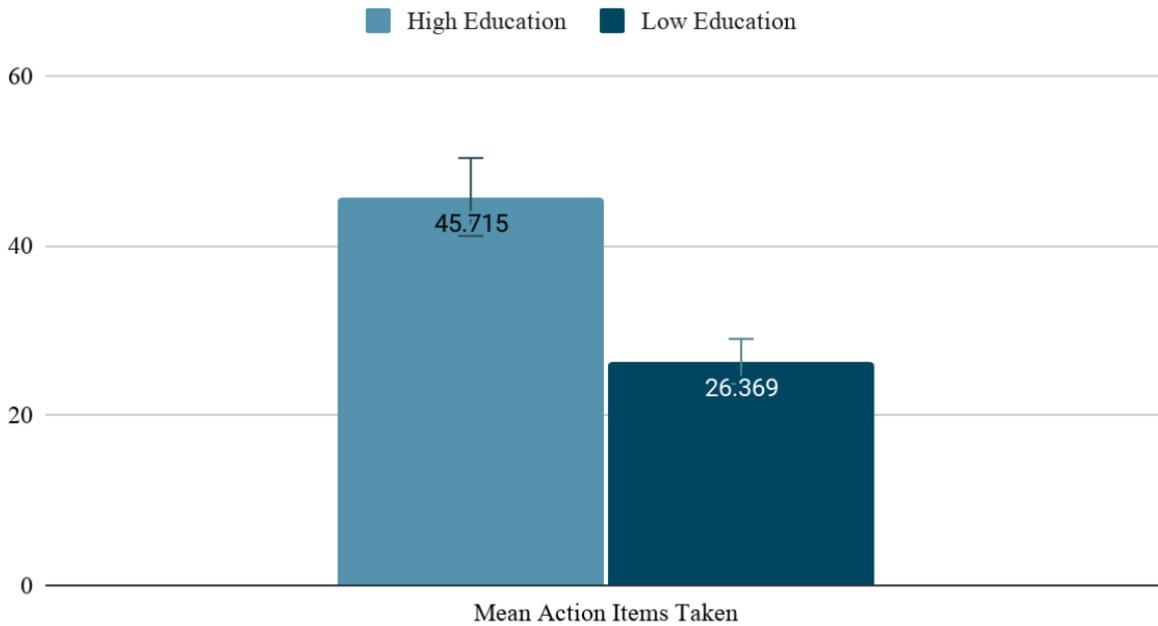


Figure 1. Mean values representing the number of action items taken in a given month for each educational category, “high” or “low”. A significant difference ($F(3, 198) = 6.996, p < 0.001$) was observed between the two groups according to their level of education on antiracism and Black Lives Matter. Standard errors are represented in the figure by the error bars attached to each column.

Mean Hours Spent on Antiracism Work by Level of Free Time

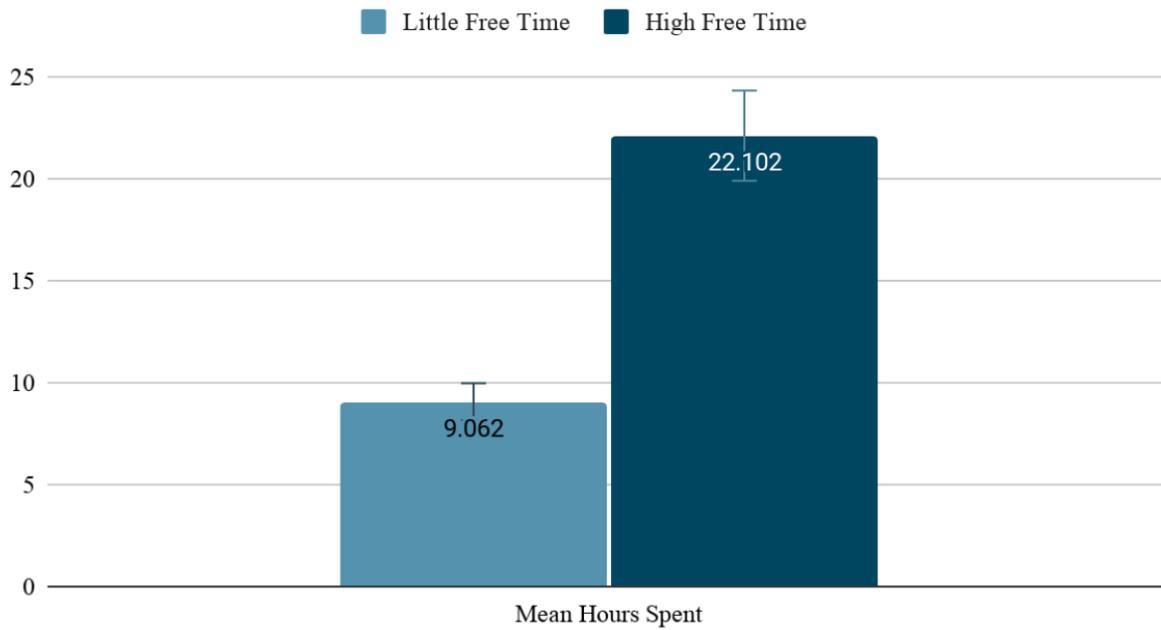


Figure 2. Mean values representing the number of hours spent on antiracism education and activism in a given month for each category of free time, “high” or “low” in hours. A marginal significant difference ($F(3, 179) = 2.660, p = 0.050$) was observed between the two groups according to their level of free time. Standard errors are represented in the figure by the error bars attached to each column.