A Helping Hand: Does Volunteerism Decrease Stress and Negative Affect?

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Abstract

The current study examined the effect that volunteerism has on perceived stress and anxiety in college students. Fifty-eight undergraduates participated in an activity and completed the Perceived Stress Scale (Cohen, 1988) and the State-Trait Anxiety Inventory (Spielberger, Gorsuch, Lushene, Vagg, & Jacobs, 1983) both before and after the activity. An experimental group was told the task was service-oriented, while a control group was told it was a sorting activity. Results showed a marginally significant decrease in stress and anxiety between time points, but this could not be attributed to the experimental condition. It may be important to consider social interaction as an important factor for decreasing stress and anxiety.

Introduction

The current study examined volunteerism as a mechanism to decrease stress and anxiety levels. Volunteerism, defined as an action that manifests as one's willingness to benefit another person without the exchange of compensation (UNDP, 2018), has been linked with mental health in young adulthood such as increases in self-esteem and self-efficacy, and decreased feelings of isolation (Musick, Herzog, & House, 1999; Wilson & Musick, 1999).

Considering that volunteering does have some effect on mental health, the literature lacks a clear link between volunteering, stress and anxiety. Previous data explored the negative-state relief model, citing that those who experience a negative mood might seek to elevate this by participating in positive activities (Carlson & Miller, 1987). Similarly, literature has found that those who experience stress are less likely to participate in altruistic activities, or activities that benefit others without the expectation of personal gain (Brittain et al., 2013). The literature is still unclear, however, as to how someone who is stressed might benefit from volunteering.

Hypotheses

It was predicted that the experimental group would experience a decrease in perceived stress and state anxiety after participating in a service task. In contrast, it was predicted that the control group would not experience a decrease in stress and state anxiety after participating in a sorting task.

Participants

Fifty-eight undergraduate students were randomly separated into an experimental or control group. Of the sample, 53.4% identified as female, and 77.6% identified as white. Additionally, 55.1% of participants' mothers and 58.6% of participants' fathers received a Bachelor's degree or higher. Of the sample, 20.7% reported that they participate in a service organization.

Method

Perceived Stress Scale (Cohen, 1988)
A 10-item, 5-point Likert scale assessing participants' perception of stressful life situations that both groups completed before and after the sorting activity. Sample items included: "I feel confident in my ability to handle my personal problems" and "I feel that I cannot cope with all the things I have to do." The measure showed fair internal reliability (Cronbach's α = .75)

State-Trait Anxiety Inventory (Spielberger et al., 1983)
Participants competed the state anxiety subscale, a 20-item, 4-point Likert scale assessing current feelings associated with anxiety, both before and after the sorting activity. Sample items included: "I feel upset" and "I feel self-confident." The subscale showed high internal reliability (Cronbach's α = .93).

Sorting Activity
Both groups completed a sorting activity in which the researcher lined up boxes of individually wrapped food on a table in the front of the room, and asked participants to place one of every food item into two bags that were distributed to them. The experimental group was told that this was a volunteer task that benefitted children at a local elementary school, and the control group was told it was a simple organizational sorting activity.

Participants completed the Perceived Stress Scale (Cohen, 1988) and State-Trait Anxiety Inventory (Spielberger et al., 1983) both before and after the sorting activity.
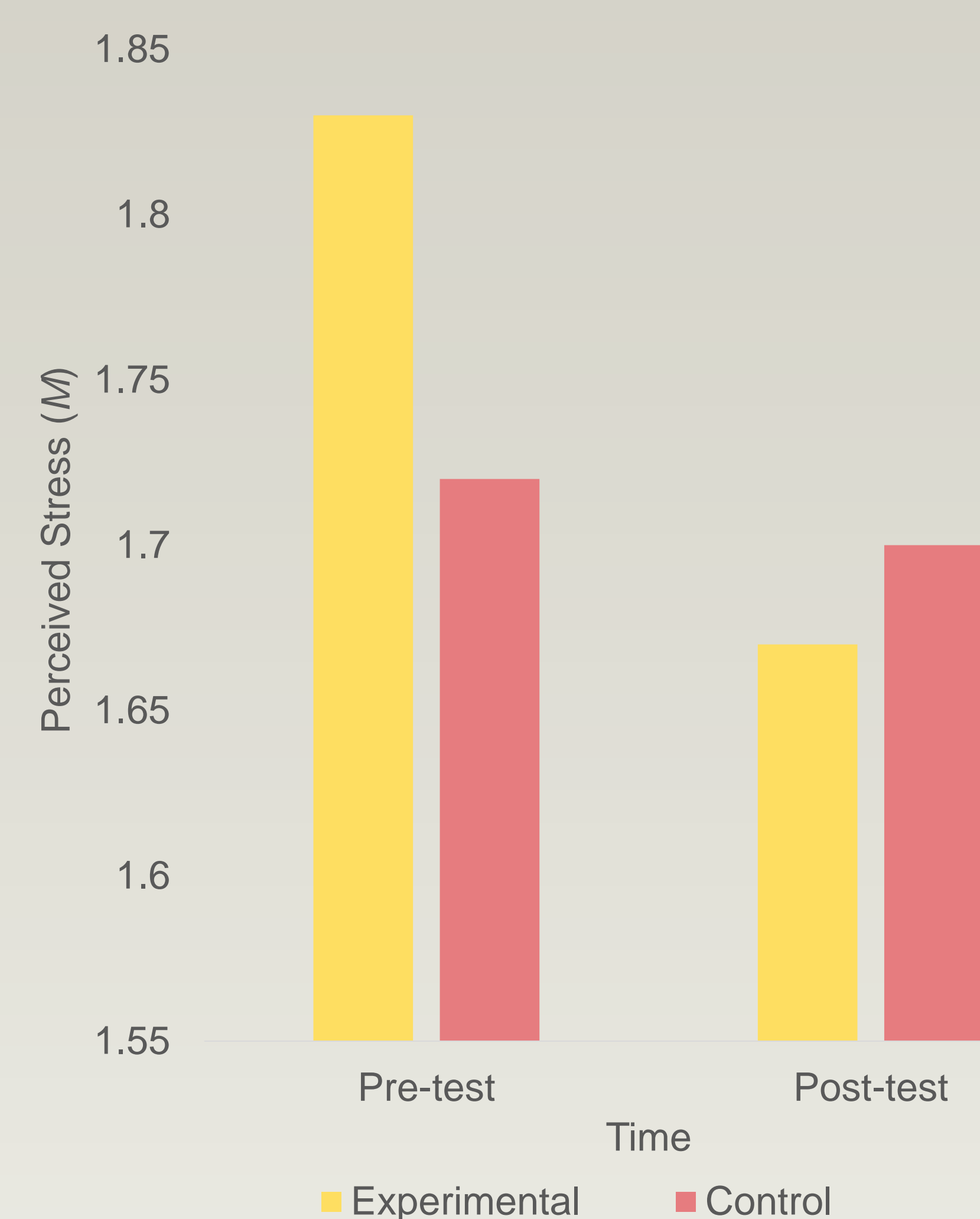
Results

Figure 1. Difference in perceived stress between time points for both experimental and control groups.
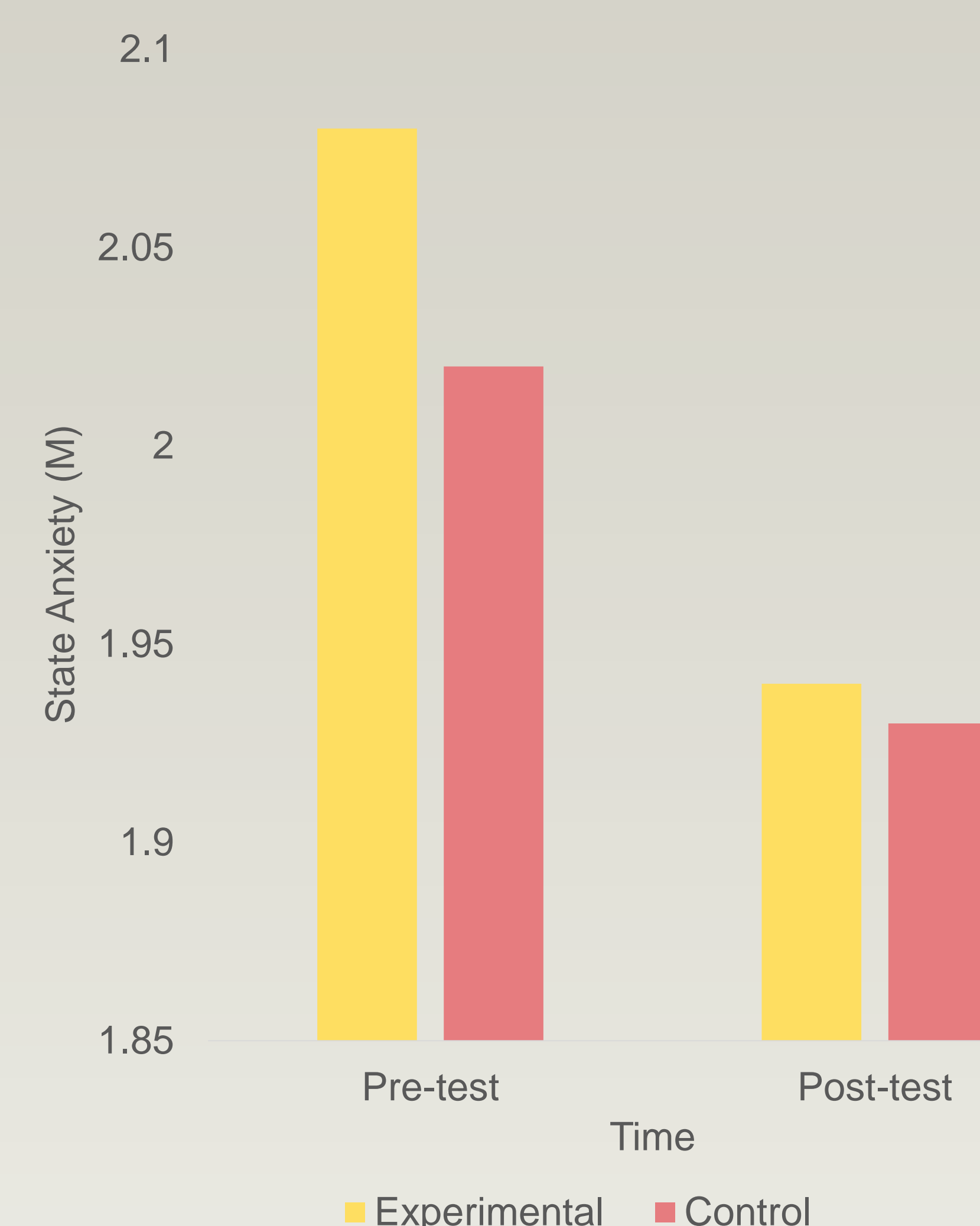
Figure 2. Difference in state anxiety between time points for both experimental and control groups.

Results (cont.)

Repeated measures ANOVAs were conducted to examine differences in perceived stress and state anxiety before and after the activity with the participants' condition (experimental or control) as the between subjects variable.

There were marginally significant decreases in both perceived stress and state anxiety for the full sample ($F(1, 54) = 3.37$, $p = .072$; $F(1, 48) = 2.70$, $p = .095$); however the interactions were not significant, showing that the decreases could not be attributed to the experimental condition ($F(1, 54) = .11$, $p = .74$; $F(1, 48) = 2.06$, $p = .619$). Additionally, there was no significant difference in overall perceived stress and state anxiety levels between groups ($F(1, 54) = 1.81$, $p = .18$; $F(1, 48) = 2.06$, $p = .095$).

	Perceived Stress Pre-test M(SD)	Perceived Stress Post-test M(SD)	State Anxiety Pre-test M(SD)	State Anxiety Post-test M(SD)
Experimental Group	1.83 (.53)	1.67 (.58)	2.09 (.65)	1.94 (.61)
Control Group	1.72 (.45)	1.70 (.67)	1.95 (.51)	1.93 (.49)
Total	1.78 (.49)	1.69 (.62)	2.02 (.59)	1.94 (.55)

Discussion

While both groups experienced a marginally significant decrease in both perceived stress and state anxiety between time points, the decrease did not differ by experimental condition, indicating that this could not be attributed to the experimental condition. Thus, the original hypothesis was not supported.

It is possible that the social interaction experienced during the activity contributed to these results. Social interaction has been shown to have an effect on many mental health outcomes. Brailovskaia et al. (2018) found that social support was negatively related to anxiety symptoms, such that those who experience more social support can better handle anxiety-inducing situations.

Future research should examine the effects that more prolonged volunteerism has on psychological states. Additionally, it may be useful to incorporate physiological biomarkers of stress, such as cortisol and amylase, into future research designs.