

The Dramaturgical Perspective in Relation to Self and Culture

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Social scientists have studied human behavior from the *dramaturgical perspective* (DP), through which society is viewed as an elaborate play or game in which individuals enact different roles. The DP is more than a theoretical construct; members of individualist, secular societies occasionally adopt the DP with relation to their own lives. The current research examined the consequences of adopting the DP for evaluations of the self and conceptions of reality at large. Study 1 examined the attitudinal correlates of DP endorsement to test our claim that the DP is situated in an ideological context of individualism and secular modernism. Supporting our claim that the DP invalidates external information about the self's value, in Studies 2A and 2B individuals endorsed the DP to a greater extent after a self-esteem threat, and Studies 2C and 3 showed that exposure to the DP (but not a direct system threat) buffered self-esteem threats. Examining moderators of the DP's influence on self-esteem, Study 4 showed that taking the DP with regard to the ultimate value (vs. concrete experience) of a social role decreased self-esteem and investment in that role. Studies 5A and 5B examined the DP's consequences for perceived moral objectivism. Adopting the DP decreased moral objectivism and moralization of various behaviors but not when the intrinsic self was dispositionally or situationally salient. The latter finding suggests that although contemporary individuals can and occasionally do adopt a reflective stance toward their place within social reality, they nevertheless continue to believe in a true, core self that transcends that precarious drama.

Keywords: dramaturgical perspective, self-esteem, moral objectivism, culture, system threat

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Under some circumstances in everyday life the actor becomes, is, or is made *aware* of an actual or potential discrepancy between his "real" and his "projected" selves, between his "self" and his "character." He may greet this sensed discrepancy with joy or anxiety; presumably he usually finds himself somewhere between these affective poles. (Messinger, Sampson, & Towne, 1962, p. 99)

Since the 1950s, many scholars have analyzed social interaction from a theoretical perspective that compares social reality to a stage play being performed by actors. This framework is most commonly associated with the work of Erving Goffman (1959), and it is often called the *dramaturgical perspective* (DP; Sandstrom, Martin, & Fine, 2009). Many of the theoretical assumptions of the DP are shared by mainstream social psychology, albeit couched in the terms of an extended theatrical analogy. For example, people are actors who adopt shifting roles when sharing different stages with rotating sets of other characters (i.e., people have contextualized self-concepts); people enact these performances in the hope of gaining approval and applause (i.e., people seek to maintain face and self-esteem); there is sometimes a mismatch between the performance a person puts on "frontstage" and the actor who emerges from costume "backstage" (i.e., people can deceive others and even themselves due to defensive or strategic motives, and there are differences between the extrinsic self presented to others and the intrinsic self who a person "really is"); and so on. Recognizing these parallels, social psychologists have used the DP as a framework for empirically studying self-presentation

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(Schlenker, 2012). They have demonstrated that people engage in various strategies to maintain their public identities in everyday interactions and that people vary in the extent to which they tactically control their self-presentations (Jones & Pittman, 1982; Snyder & Gangestad, 1986).

It is important to note that prior theory and research use the DP to describe the routine functioning of actors inhabiting roles but do not address whether the actors themselves have psychological access to the DP. Yet analyses of contemporary culture (e.g., Cohen & Taylor, 1978; Giddens, 1991; Harvey, 1990; Miller, 2003; Trilling, 1972) stress that sociocultural variables including individualism, secularism, and materialism have increased the extent to which people adopt a DP on their lives. To our knowledge, prior research has not examined the causes and consequences of adopting a global, role-general DP on the self's relationship with the social world. The current research aims to fill this gap.

Beyond examining the validity and attitudinal correlates of the DP as a worldview to which contemporary individuals have access, we sought to determine the situations in which people may be motivated to (at least temporarily) embrace this worldview. This question is interesting because, as the epigraph suggests, individuals may experience a sense of either liberation or unease when viewing reality in this way. Under normal circumstances, it would seem that the DP would not be a particularly appealing or sustainable approach to social life. Because it is a somewhat abstract worldview with undertones of relativism and deception, individuals may normally prefer to go about their lives assuming that the social world and the roles they enact in it correspond with objective reality and are not mere playacting (adopting an attitude of naive realism; Ross & Ward, 1996).

However, we propose that when information from the social world reflects negatively on the individual—that is, when she (or he) feels that she is somehow failing in her performance—taking the DP may be desirable because it allows the individual to discount the threatening information as nonobjective. The current studies investigate this novel possibility as well as other consequences and moderators of the DP.

The DP: A Reflective Worldview in Cultural Modernity

As mentioned above, theorists initially developed the DP as a conceptual tool for understanding how individuals go about their daily social routines. Studies drawing on this perspective were carried out under the assumption that, at least for most people in most situations, the DP was not the way in which actors understood or experienced their daily lives (Messinger et al., 1962).

Yet in recent years scholars have claimed that, as a result of modernizing processes of secularization and individualization, people in contemporary societies are increasingly more likely to adopt the DP themselves as a temporary mode of understanding social reality and their place within it. Although the exact content of the DP differs in various cultural instantiations, the premise is always roughly the same: that reality is not what we believe it to be but rather an elaborate farce maintained through a common suspension of disbelief. Kövecses (2005) proposed

that the metaphor *life is a show* is perhaps the dominant metaphor of contemporary U.S. culture, as instantiated in the recent phenomenon of reality television. Many recent popular films including *The Matrix* (Silver, Wachowski, & Wachowski, 1999) and *The Truman Show* (Feldman, Rudin, Niccol, Schroeder, & Weir, 2003) have questioned the genuineness of reality and compared it to a simulation or performance. Even the term *meta* has begun to be used by today's generation to describe a common experience of self-conscious, ironic detachment from reality (Raz, 2012).

Scholars (Berger, 1963) have connected the rise of the DP in everyday life to the historical transition to cultural modernity. Cultural modernity involves increased individualism and secularism, as well as decreased psychological investment in the social system, resulting largely from the spread of globalized capitalism (Giddens, 1991; Harvey, 1990). Contemporary social psychological research sheds light on why these sociocultural factors would coevolve with the DP. Individualism emphasizes forming a unique perspective on reality, engaging in Socratic questioning of social norms, and developing a multifaceted self-concept by shifting between multiple geographic settings ("stages") and associational networks ("casts"; Adams & Plaut, 2003; Oishi & Kissing, 2009; Tweed & Lehman, 2002). Similarly, modern secularism promotes the DP by reducing conviction that the social world and moral beliefs are objectively grounded in a divine realm (Graham & Haidt, 2010; Hogg, Adelman, & Blagg, 2010), opening the door for relativistic perspectives on what social reality is and could be.

The idea that self-concepts are complex in cultural modernity is not a new one for social psychology. Indeed, there are some well-established research traditions demonstrating that contemporary individuals often view themselves as possessing many "roles" that they inhabit and switch between in different situations. For example, Linville's (1985) self-complexity theory holds that there are many benefits to having a multifaceted self-concept, investing in distinct self-aspects suited to shifting social contexts, and maintaining some psychological separation between these aspects. Drawing in part on the dramaturgical tradition, Snyder's (1974) construct of self-monitoring describes the tendency for some individuals to strategically monitor their behavior in different situations in order to self-present in desirable ways. Like the DP, self-complexity and self-monitoring have been associated with cultural modernity (McAdams, 1996).

Although the DP has similarities to these constructs, it is not only or even primarily a trait or self-concept. Whether one has a complex self-concept or is high in the trait of self-monitoring does not by necessity connote anything about one's understanding of the fundamental nature of social reality. By contrast, the DP is a worldview—a culturally mediated understanding of the nature of the social and objective world—that affords a particular *self model* (Cross & Gore, 2003) or a *selfway* (Markus, Mullally, & Kitayama, 1997), just as an individualistic worldview promotes an independent self-construal.

In particular, the DP may be characterized as a *reflective worldview*. In anthropological (Turner & Bruner, 1986) and sociological (Giddens, 1991) analyses, *reflectivity* refers to the capacity for individuals to adopt critical, self-aware, or "meta" stances toward

their cultural context and socially derived beliefs.¹ In theory, because of the unique attributes of human consciousness, people can adopt a reflective attitude toward their beliefs and ideas at any time: They can recognize these constructs as objects and reflect on their origins in social construction (Donald, 2012). However, in practice, cultures vary widely in the extent to which their institutions, media, and ideologies endorse greater or less reflectivity.

Cultural modernity encourages reflective worldviews encompassing views of social reality that critically question the validity and mutability of socially derived beliefs and practices. Examples of reflective worldviews include cultural relativism, many social scientific perspectives, and the DP (Habermas, 1984; cf. Koltko-Rivera, 2004).

Like other aspects of modernity (such as capitalism and globalization), reflective worldviews afford both psychologically attractive and unattractive possibilities for the individual. For example, the DP provides two potential self models; either the self is nothing but a loose amalgam of empty social roles, or there is an authentic, “core” self resembling the actor who willingly adopts these roles in different situations. Which self model is currently salient may moderate the effect of the DP, as we discuss below.

Adopting the DP in Everyday Life

The theories reviewed in the preceding section suggest that reflective worldviews such as the DP are increasingly prominent in individualist, secular societies. But is there evidence that individuals actually adopt the DP in their daily lives, and, if so, how does it manifest psychologically? The current set of studies was undertaken partly because research on this topic in psychology is surprisingly scarce. However, there are several lines of evidence from the sociological literature suggesting that individuals spontaneously adopt either the DP or closely related perspectives.

First, there is the aforementioned evidence that ideas related to the DP are common in modern media (such as popular films and television). For example, a content analysis (Paolucci & Richardson, 2006) revealed that many episodes of *Seinfeld* (arguably the most popular sitcom of the modern United States) centered around DP-related themes, such as people’s strategic attempts to manipulate others, manage impressions, and perform arbitrary or inauthentic roles in different social settings. If people are continually exposed to the DP in popular media, a social learning perspective (e.g., Bandura, 1977) suggests that they will likely apply it to their own lives on occasion.

Second, a major research tradition inspired by the DP has built on Goffman’s (1961) concept of *role distance* to demonstrate that people sometimes maintain distance between their core self-concept and their enactment of a social role, especially if they feel that the role is demeaning or too demanding (Levitin, 1964). Research in this area (for a review, see Fleming & Spicer, 2003) suggests that people may strategically use variations of the DP to avoid overidentification with roles or situations that might otherwise be threatening to their sense of positive identity. Studies demonstrate that service workers in jobs that demand “emotional labor”—such as waitresses or receptionists who must enact polite scripts and emote warmth to please customers—are especially likely to report a sense that they put on a mask or enter a role when they report to work (Abiala, 1999).

Third, and closely related to the work on role distance, is a growing literature investigating people’s use of cynical or ironic rhetoric to preserve a sense of identity in the face of normative social demands. For instance, qualitative research (Korobov, 2009) shows that many contemporary men circumvent a possible failure to meet traditional standards for masculine behavior by conceiving of masculinity as an inauthentic role that is socially manufactured. In this research, men distanced themselves from the masculine role exactly by seeing it as a role. In a related study (Tracy, Myers, & Scott, 2006), members of highly demanding human service professions (such as correctional officers) evinced a tendency to use humor to downplay the gravity of their roles and distance themselves from identity-threatening role aspects.

Fourth, there are recent studies suggesting that many people embrace a kind of folk moral relativism (Sarkissian, Park, Tien, Wright, & Knobe, 2014). Data from these experiments show that people are spontaneously inclined to believe that individuals from different cultural backgrounds will have conflicting views about the nature of morality. Although moral relativism is not the same as the DP (because an individual can subscribe to moral relativism without viewing society through a theatrical metaphor), both are reflective worldviews that entail an understanding of the socially constructed nature of reality.

Although these lines of inquiry suggest growing familiarity with the DP in individualist, secular culture, none of them is definitive, because most focus on people’s tendency to see only one particular role (typically, a role occupied by the research participant) in cynical, reflective terms or focus on a reflective worldview (e.g., moral relativism) that is not identical to the DP. Do people sometimes adopt the DP in the more global sense of a worldview, seeing all social roles and activities as theatrical constructions? A recent study from our lab provides initial evidence for this possibility. We asked a sample of college students to respond to the prompt “Discuss how everything we do in society—from participating in experiments to being a family member or the citizen of a country—is like being in a ‘play,’ ‘game,’ or ‘matrix’ which is only real because everyone agrees to participate in it.” An inspection of the resulting essays revealed that all participants were satisfactorily capable of understanding the prompt and presenting their own interpretation of the DP. Typical responses included statements like “[A social situation] is like a game because it is never truly consistent and the roles we play can be deceiving; they make us ask ourselves, ‘Who am I really?’” and “How people participate in society is like a play. Everyone has their certain roles to move the show along or make the play come to life” (for full details of this study, see the online supplemental materials). These findings show

¹ Technically, most theories in anthropology and sociology use the term *reflexivity* to refer to the human capacity to reflect in a critical and self-aware manner on their beliefs and social roles. However, the terms *reflexive* and *reflective* can have quite complex, sometimes synonymous and sometimes antonymous meanings in the social sciences (Sandywell, 1996). In social psychology, the term *reflexive* is often used in dual-process models to denote a less cognitively mediated, more automatic process (e.g., Lengfelder & Gollwitzer, 2001; Van Bavel, Xiao, & Cunningham, 2012). This meaning is nearly the opposite of the meaning of the term given in other social scientific analyses. To avoid confusion, we therefore use the terms *reflectivity* and *reflective* in place of *reflexivity* and *reflexive*, although we imply the connotations of the latter as they are employed in anthropological and sociological (rather than social psychological) perspectives.

that college students in contemporary society are familiar with the DP and able to expand on this worldview independently when asked.

In sum, different research programs strongly indicate that people sometimes adopt the DP in their daily lives. However, there are some important caveats to this conclusion. First, it is by no means the case that the DP is the only (or most common) form of reflective stance adopted by contemporary individuals. Rather than interpreting the social world through a theatrical metaphor, individuals will sometimes use humor, cynicism, or relativistic perspectives to reflect on the socially constructed nature of reality. We chose to focus on the DP because it is a particularly representative example of a reflective worldview. Second, individuals often adopt the DP in circumscribed terms, with respect to a particular social role rather than social reality in toto. We consider this point in the current studies but also assert that the ability to conceive of a particular social role in theatrical terms implies the ability to conceive of society more globally in these terms. Finally, the relevant literature suggests that people often embrace versions of the DP in response to information or situations that threaten to undermine their positive self-views. We now consider this last point in detail.

The DP and Self-Enhancement

Expanding the notion of role distance, [Cohen and Taylor \(1978\)](#) proposed that people may experience feelings of inadequacy in a variety of different life areas: in the workplace, in their knowledge of art and culture, in their fashion sense and physical appearance, and so on. To defend their sense of comparative personal adequacy in any one of these domains, they may adopt the DP in a global, role-general manner, reassuring themselves that society is just one big theatrical production and one's performance in a given role does not indicate the ultimate value of the self.

This potential use of the DP as a buffer against self-esteem threats is superficially similar to other tactics that have been researched in social psychology. For example, [Ditto and Lopez \(1992\)](#) provided evidence that one component of the commonly observed self-serving bias is the use of stricter decision criteria to evaluate undesirable conclusions; the DP might represent a version of such "motivated skepticism." Other research shows that when people sense their performance is threatened on a given dimension, they may reduce the importance of that dimension either to their self-concept ([Tesser & Paulhus, 1983](#)) or more globally ([Landau, Greenberg, & Sullivan, 2009](#)). Similarly, people will trivialize behaviors or issues in order to reduce cognitive dissonance ([Simon, Greenberg, & Brehm, 1995](#)). All of these tactics can also be related to self-affirmation theory ([Sherman & Cohen, 2006](#)), which suggests that when people feel their esteem threatened in a particular domain they may defensively downplay the importance of that domain while simultaneously affirming themselves on another dimension. In a similar vein, self-complexity theory ([Linville, 1985](#)) holds that individuals who possess many distinct self-aspects can psychologically buffer threats that arise in one domain and temporarily shift attention to other self-aspects.

Despite the surface similarity between the hypothesized use of the DP as a defense mechanism and these alternate tactics, we believe that the former tactic has broader psychological implications that are not addressed in these other perspectives and is

therefore interesting in its own right. For instance, responding to a bad evaluation at work by trivializing one's workplace or employer is a direct strategy that most likely does not influence one's global attitudes or goal pursuit. But taking refuge in the idea that all social roles are dramatic performances and thus ultimately unimportant may have broader consequences, some of which may be less beneficial for the self.

Additional Consequences of the DP as a Reflective Worldview

Although we propose that individuals may be motivated to adopt the DP when they are experiencing a self-esteem threat, it does not follow that contemplation of the DP will always be psychologically attractive. Indeed, in situations where the self is not receiving information that it is underperforming or inadequate, the DP might be seen as threatening in its own right. After all, the DP can highlight the arbitrariness and contingency of one's life and beliefs, portray the self as a pastiche of isolated performances, and undermine faith in the objective value of one's life pursuits ([Carter, 1994](#); [Gergen, 2000](#); [Lerner, 1996](#); [Purdy, 1999](#)).

What characteristics of the DP allow it to alternately function as either a threat or a buffer for the self? We propose that the specific nature of reflective worldviews is critical. Especially for individuals embedded in conditions of cultural modernity (e.g., most middle- or upper-class U.S. citizens), entertaining a reflective worldview such as the DP need not be a threatening experience. Although reflective worldviews challenge individuals to question the origins and ultimate validity of their own (or any) worldview, they differ from direct system threats: overt challenges to the legitimacy and functioning of a particular worldview ([Jost & Hunyady, 2005](#)). Whereas system threats imply a comparative context (your worldview is flawed compared to other, better worldviews), reflective worldviews like the DP connote relativism and do not denigrate any one worldview in particular (all worldviews are equally arbitrary). There is an important difference, for example, between telling a U.S. citizen American values are wrong versus American values are arbitrary.

Therefore, although prior research suggests that people respond to direct system threats with defensive bolstering of their social system ([Lau, Kay, & Spencer, 2008](#)), we propose that the DP is less likely to elicit defensiveness. This is because, as a reflective worldview, the DP induces an act of metacognition or meta-consciousness—thinking about one's beliefs and perception of reality ([Grant, 2001](#); [Schooler, 2002](#))—and therefore orients individuals toward a more rational, rather than experiential, mode of thought ([Epstein, 1994](#)). Prior research suggests that individuals are less likely to respond in a hostile, defensive manner to worldview threats when they are thinking rationally ([Simon et al., 1997](#)). Thus, we expect that, instead of challenging the DP, individuals will temporarily assimilate it. This assimilation will have different consequences depending on various factors.

In addition to the presence of self-esteem threat, another factor proposed to moderate the consequences of DP assimilation is whether the object of the DP is construed at a concrete versus abstract level ([Lieberman, Sagristano, & Trope, 2002](#)). If one adopts the DP in relation to concrete failures experienced during one's daily routine—for example, reassuring oneself after an embarrassing remark at the workplace by recognizing sociality as

mere pretense—this could be an effective means of self-esteem maintenance. However, if one thinks about the ultimate abstract value of one's career or imagines great future achievements in one's field, and adopts the DP in this situation, a stifling of motivation might result (Nietzsche, 1887/1964).

The consequences of assimilating the DP should also be moderated by the type of self model that is currently active. One can endorse the DP but simultaneously assume the existence of a core, stable self, analogous to the "actor" adopting various social masks in life. This model of the intrinsic or authentic self is, like the DP, quite common in cultural modernity (Wood, Linley, Maltby, Baliouis, & Joseph, 2008). If one is exposed to the DP without the corresponding notion of an intrinsic self beneath the shifting social roles, the DP is likely to diminish the perceived objectivity of one's beliefs and values. Alternatively, if a core self is preserved beyond the variegated performances, one may remain convinced of the reality of one's beliefs, despite the transient or fabricated nature of social conventions.

The Present Research

Our analysis yields several testable hypotheses concerning the attitudinal correlates, antecedents, consequences, and moderators of adopting the DP. We list these hypotheses below, in roughly the order that they were presented in our conceptual introduction and will be tested in the current research.

Hypothesis 1: Dispositional endorsement of the DP will be positively associated with attitudes and beliefs representative of modernism (e.g., secular and individualist tendencies) and will be negatively associated with attitudes and beliefs representative of traditionalism (e.g., fundamentalist religiosity and commitment to the social system).

Hypothesis 2: Individuals will be more likely to personally endorse the DP or perceive the DP as widely endorsed when their self-esteem is threatened.

Hypothesis 3: Exposure to the DP after a self-esteem threat will diminish or even reverse the impact of the threat on one's self-esteem. This self-esteem-buffering effect will be specific to the DP (a reflective worldview) and will not be observed for direct worldview threats such as a system threat.

Hypothesis 4: Exposure to the DP will diminish investment in and certitude regarding worldview-specified roles, standards for personal success, and beliefs such as the objective nature of values. This effect will occur particularly if self-esteem has been threatened.

Hypothesis 5: Building on Hypothesis 4, adopting the DP with respect to the abstract, long-term value (vs. concrete daily experience) of a role will decrease self-esteem and investment in that role.

Hypothesis 6: People high in trait intrinsic (low in trait extrinsic) self-esteem, or for whom intrinsic self-worth is situationally salient, will show diminished effects of exposure to the DP.

Study 1 employed a correlational approach in an initial investigation of the DP as a construct and of our cultural-historical

account of its origins. We devised original items to capture people's level of DP endorsement and measured several individual difference variables to test Hypothesis 1. In addition, we obtained evidence for the discriminant validity of DP endorsement by comparing it to other self-relevant constructs (self-monitoring and self-complexity). Studies 2A–2C and 3 sought to obtain converging evidence for our claim that the DP might act as a buffer against a self-esteem threat (Hypotheses 2 and 3). Study 3 tested an important corollary of Hypothesis 3 by comparing the buffering effect of the DP to that of a direct system threat. Studies 4 and 5A–5B shifted to an examination of moderating factors influencing the strength of effects of DP exposure. Study 4 tested Hypothesis 5 by manipulating the construal level of the target role. In Studies 5A–5B we primed the DP and measured moralization and moral objectivism to test Hypothesis 4; we also included a trait measure of extrinsic self-esteem (5A) and an intrinsic self-affirmation manipulation (5B) to test Hypothesis 6.

Relationships Between the DP and Other Attitudes, Beliefs, and Self-Relevant Constructs

Study 1

As discussed above, many scholars have proposed that because of the DP's implications of skepticism and relativism, the rise of this perspective on reality probably occurred as result of increases in individualistic and secular tendencies in modern society. Accordingly, we predicted that DP endorsement would be positively associated with tendencies toward individualism and a more secular or open-minded worldview characteristic of modernism. By contrast, we expected that DP endorsement would be negatively associated with more conservative or traditionalist forms of religious belief, attitudes, and political thinking.

In a preliminary correlational study with a modest sample size ($N = 57$), we examined the association between a novel three-item measure of DP endorsement and measures of political orientation and religiosity. The DP items were "I often feel as if society is one big play that everyone is performing in," "I often feel as if society is one big game that everyone is playing," and "I believe that the 'real me' is like an actor who plays different roles in different situations." These items were internally reliable ($\alpha = .80$). Furthermore, as expected, they positively correlated with a two-item measure of political orientation, for which higher scores indicated greater liberalism ($r = .31, p = .02$). This is not surprising, because the DP implies a skeptical attitude toward social reality, and political liberals tend to have greater needs for cognition, tolerance for ambiguity, and levels of skepticism (Eidelman, Crandall, Goodman, & Blanchar, 2012; Jost, Glaser, Kruglanski, & Sulloway, 2003). Also supporting our analysis, DP endorsement was negatively associated with the belief in a controlling God ($r = -.29, p = .03$) but not with a single-item measure of the general importance of religiosity (for full details, see the online supplemental materials).

These initial findings are consistent with our predictions regarding the DP's associations with modernist and traditionalist ideologies. However, we were interested in measuring these variables in more precise ways and more fully testing our account of the cultural factors that co-occur with the DP. Accordingly, we con-

ducted a large-scale correlational study with a sample of U.S. Internet users. We added items to our DP scale and included more nuanced measures of religiosity, including a fundamentalism scale and a secularism scale. Additionally, we expanded on our measure of liberal versus conservative attitudes by assessing beliefs that are typically associated with a conservative worldview: moral objectivism and system justification (Matthews, Levin, & Sidanius, 2009). Because our analysis suggests that the DP might additionally be related to materialist and individualist tendencies encouraged by contemporary capitalism, we included measures of these constructs to assess this possibility.

Finally, given the points of overlap between the DP, self-monitoring, and self-complexity, we sought to establish the convergent and discriminant validity of the DP. Although we would expect the DP to be positively associated with these other self-relevant constructs, we believe that the DP has many unique features that distinguish it as a construct.

Method. Participants were 175 Amazon Mechanical Turk users who completed an online survey in exchange for \$2.00. They answered demographics questions before completing the measures described below. For information concerning the descriptive statistics and internal-consistency reliabilities for all measures, see Table 1. Unless otherwise indicated, participants responded to all items on a scale of 1 (*strongly disagree*) to (7 = *strongly agree*).

DP endorsement. Participants responded to five items: “I often feel as if I’m simply putting on a performance in my day-to-day life,” “I often feel as if society is one big play that everyone is performing in,” “I often feel as if society is one big game that everyone is playing,” “I believe that the ‘real me’ is like an actor who plays different roles in different situations,” and “At work or in certain social situations, I sometimes feel like an impostor.”

Self-monitoring. We assessed self-monitoring with the Self-Monitoring Scale—Revised (Snyder & Gangestad, 1986). Four items were removed from the scale due to an a priori decision and preliminary analysis.² This left a total of 14 items, many of which would seem to overlap conceptually with the self model provided by the DP, such as “I would probably make a good actor.”

Self-complexity. On the basis of Linville’s (1985) self-complexity theory, we constructed a brief measure assessing the extent to which participants believe their self consists of many distinct aspects or roles. Initial instructions read as follows:

Throughout this questionnaire, think about the word “aspects” very broadly to mean *any* and *all* of the following: Roles you have at work, with family and friends, and in your community; activities such as hobbies, fitness activities, and interests; relationships you have with different people; aspects of who you are, such as your creativity, your sense of humor, your religious beliefs, and your career goals.

Participants then responded to four items: “I like to keep my aspects separate from each other,” “When I switch from one aspect to another, it’s like I become a different person,” “I’m basically the same person across all my aspects” (reverse-scored), and “Each of my aspects puts me in a different state of mind.”

Competitive individualism. We assessed individualism with a scale that specifically highlights the competitive individualism characteristic of capitalist modernity (Singelis, Triandis, Bhawuk, & Gelfand, 1995). Participants responded to the following items: “Competition is the law of nature,” “I enjoy working in situations

involving competition with others,” and “When another person does better than I do, I get tense and aroused.”

Existential quest. To assess secularism, we administered the Existential Quest Scale (Van Pachterbeke, Keller, & Saroglou, 2012). The scale assesses need for cognition, more secular or exploratory views on religious issues, and a tendency to search for a sense of meaning in life. Sample items include “Being able to doubt about one’s convictions and to reappraise them is a good quality” and “My attitude toward religion and faith is likely to change according to my life experiences.” The scale is intended to be a measure of the “quest” orientation toward life (Batson, Schoenrade, & Ventis, 1993) that can be completed by religious or nonreligious individuals.

Materialism. We assessed materialism with modified versions of the centrality and happiness subscales of the Consumer Values Orientation Scale (Richins & Dawson, 1992). Participants responded to six items, such as “The things I own say a lot about who I am” and “My life would be better if I owned certain things I don’t have.”

Religious fundamentalism. A seven-item scale adapted from Hoge (1972) assessed religious convictions and the perception that those convictions guide one’s daily behavior and attitudes. Sample items include “I try hard to carry my religion over into all my other dealings in life” and “Nothing is as important to me as serving God as best I know how.”

Moral objectivism. We constructed a seven-item measure of moral objectivism, or the tendency to believe that one’s attitudes about morality are matters of fact rather than subjective or culturally determined constructions, based partly on Goodwin and Darley’s (2008) analysis. Sample items include “I believe right and wrong are a part of human nature” and “Moral codes are invented by people” (reverse-scored).

System justification. We included a three-item measure of system justification based on items used for a similar purpose in the General Social Survey. Participants rated their level of confidence in the following institutions: “Businesses,” “U.S. Congress,” and “Organized Religion” (1 = *No confidence* to 7 = *A great deal of confidence*).

Results. The correlations between all measured variables are presented in Table 1. As expected, the DP was positively correlated with our three measures of assimilation to modern, more secularized culture: competitive individualism, existential quest, and materialism. Also as expected, the DP was negatively correlated with our three measures representing a more conservative or

² Prior to data collection, we modified the scale by removing two items that did not have high conceptual overlap with the DP and contained strange or outdated wording: “I have considered being an entertainer” and “I feel a bit awkward in public and do not show up quite as well as I should.” After data collection, a confirmatory factor analysis (see Study 1 Results section) suggested that two items—“In different situations and with different people, I often act like very different persons” and “I’m not always the person I appear to be”—loaded poorly on the self-monitoring scale (at .31 each). Of all the items on the scale, these items correlated most strongly with the DP scale ($r = .50$ and $r = .60$, respectively) and with self-complexity ($r = .55$ and $r = .43$). The correlation between self-monitoring and the DP with these items included is $r = .40$; without them, the correlation is reduced to .29. This suggests that most of the overlap between these two constructs may result from only a few items on the self-monitoring scale. Due to the poor model fit that resulted from including these items in the self-monitoring scale, we conducted all analyses with these two items omitted.

Table 1
Correlations, Reliabilities (Cronbach's Alpha), Means, and Standard Deviations for All Variables (Study 1)

Variable	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9
1. DP endorsement	—								
2. Self-monitoring	.29**	—							
3. Self-complexity	.64**	.17**	—						
4. Competitive individualism	.26**	.32**	.16*	—					
5. Existential quest	.40**	.20*	.36**	.10	—				
6. Materialism	.32**	.12	.30**	.35**	.21**	—			
7. Religious fundamentalism	-.17*	-.22**	-.07	-.02	-.26**	-.03	—		
8. Moral objectivism	-.19*	-.28**	-.08	-.05	-.35**	.01	.65**	—	
9. System justification	-.25**	-.18*	-.19*	.04	-.34**	-.03	.48**	.40**	—
Scale α	.91	.85	.81	.83	.79	.79	.97	.74	.65
Variable mean	3.23	3.81	3.39	4.27	4.41	3.99	3.05	4.04	3.15
Standard deviation	1.53	1.02	1.22	1.44	1.04	1.16	2.04	1.13	1.27

Note. $N = 175$. DP = dramaturgical perspective.
* $p < .05$. ** $p < .01$.

traditionalist worldview: religious fundamentalism, moral objectivism, and system justification.

In order to test the discriminant validity of the DP in comparison to the other self-relevant constructs of self-monitoring and self-complexity, we followed the recommendations of John and Benet-Martinez (2000) and performed a confirmatory factor analysis on these three variables using maximum likelihood estimation in AMOS software. Although initial fit to the data for the hypothesized three-factor model was poor, modification indices suggested that the error terms between two DP items and between three pairs of self-monitoring items should be allowed to covary. We therefore estimated these covariances in all models. This resulted in acceptable fit of the hypothesized model to the data, $\chi^2(223, N = 175) = 485.54$, comparative fit index = .87, root-mean-square error of approximation = .08. All five items from our DP scale loaded at .70 or higher on the construct.

Parameter estimates in the structural equation model suggested that the DP was significantly associated with the two other self-relevant constructs of self-monitoring ($r = .31$) and self-complexity ($r = .73$). Although these are substantial associations, they are not so large as to suggest that the DP can be reduced to either of these other constructs. To test the discriminant validity of the DP, we compared the hypothesized three-factor model to three other models: (a) a one-factor model that did not distinguish between any of the constructs; (b) a two-factor model in which the DP and self-complexity items were combined into a single construct; and (c) a two-factor model in which the DP and self-monitoring items were combined into a single construct. Fit statistics and model comparison information for all four models are provided in Table 2. The hypoth-

esized three-factor model fit the data significantly better than any of the alternate models, supporting the discriminant validity of the DP as a construct.

It is instructive to compare the patterns of association with the other, worldview-related variables observed for the three self-relevant constructs. The DP was correlated with every other variable in the data set, testifying to its explanatory power. Self-monitoring was correlated with nearly every other variable (it was not correlated with materialism), in a similar fashion to the DP. Yet, it is interesting to note that the DP was less strongly associated with self-monitoring than with self-complexity, because self-complexity does not share the same overall pattern of association (it was not negatively correlated with religious fundamentalism or moral objectivism). This study provides preliminary evidence, then, that the self model provided by the DP bears considerable similarity to self-complexity (although the two constructs do not completely overlap); however, when considered as a worldview, the DP is linked more strongly to tendencies that do not necessarily follow from high self-complexity.

Study 1 established the basic validity of the DP as a construct and provided preliminary evidence for our cultural-historical account of the DP by showing that endorsement of this construct was positively associated with modernist tendencies and negatively associated with traditionalist tendencies. These results suggest the relevance of the DP to a variety of domains, including the self-concept, religious beliefs, individualism-collectivism, and system justification. Out of this range of possibilities, we focused in the next set of studies on the DP's consequences for self-esteem.

Table 2
Comparative Fit Indices for the Hypothesized Three-Factor Model and Alternative Models (Study 1)

Model	χ^2	df	χ^2 difference	CFI	RMSEA
Hypothesized (three-factor model)	485.54	223		.87	.08
Model A (single-factor model)	1,020.57	226	535.03*	.61	.14
Model B (DP and self-complexity combined into one factor)	613.15	225	127.61*	.81	.10
Model C (DP and self-monitoring combined into one factor)	840.74	225	355.20*	.70	.13

Note. df = degrees of freedom; CFI = comparative fit index; RMSEA = root-mean-square error of approximation; DP = dramaturgical perspective.
* Significant at $p < .001$.

Evidence for the DP's Role in Self-Esteem Maintenance

Our guiding analysis suggests that the DP might sometimes function as a buffer against self-esteem threats. Because the DP calls into question the validity of socially derived information, beliefs, and values, it is plausible that when individuals feel condemned by information transmitted from the social environment (e.g., when one fails an important exam), they may use the DP to their advantage, undermining the validity of the negative information and thereby preserving their self's value. If this is true, participants should be more likely to endorse the DP after a self-esteem threat (Hypothesis 2), and the effect of such a threat should be eliminated by contemplation of the DP (Hypothesis 3).

Studies 2A and 2B test Hypothesis 2, and Studies 2C and 3 test Hypothesis 3 (see Table 3 for an overview of the design and results for Studies 2A–2C). Studies 2A–2C provided sufficient information about the size of the effect of the DP on self-esteem-related outcomes that we were able to subsequently conduct a more thorough, highly powered investigation (Study 3). Study 3 also tested a corollary of Hypothesis 3: The DP, as a reflective worldview, will buffer self-esteem threats, whereas a direct worldview threat will not.

Study 2A

In an initial investigation of the DP's self-esteem-buffering potential, we asked participants to read a DP-themed essay versus other essays as a between-subjects variable and gave them an opportunity to endorse the essay that they read. Self-esteem threat was manipulated orthogonally. We predicted that participants whose self-esteem had been threatened would be more likely to endorse a DP essay than would participants whose self-esteem had not been threatened.

As mentioned in the introduction, it is possible that the DP might appeal to people after a self-esteem threat simply because it trivializes the particular social role in which they have underperformed. If this is the case, the DP is not necessarily a common, culturally derived mechanism for buffering the self; rather, it is only a novel means of reducing the perceived importance of a social role for the self (a defense mechanism that has been documented in the literature). To rule out this possibility, we threatened (or affirmed) participants in the context of a particular social role they perform (that of college student) and compared the DP essay to an essay trivializing that particular role. If DP endorsement after threat merely reflects reducing the importance of the role in which one has been threatened, we would expect parallel effects of self-esteem threat on DP and trivialization essay endorsement.

Method. Participants were undergraduates who completed a laboratory experiment in exchange for course credit. Data were collected from 84 participants and removed from 11 participants either because of technical problems (e.g., computer failure; $n = 5$) or because of suspicions expressed about the true nature of the study ($n = 6$). This left a final total of 73 (44 female) participants in a 3 (DP manipulation: DP vs. trivialization vs. control essay) \times 2 (self-esteem: threat vs. affirmation) between-subjects design. The outcome of interest was participants' personal endorsement of the essay they read as part of the DP manipulation.

DP manipulation. Participants read essays ostensibly taken from a major online magazine. In the DP condition, the essay was entitled "Your Whole Life Is a Lie: How Our Social World Is One Big Performance." It described social life from the vantage point of the DP, as in the following passage:

We've all experienced social situations where it feels like everyone's just pretending that they actually want to be there, where everyone's going through the motions . . . You know that your heart isn't in it; you're putting on a show because that's what's expected of you . . . I feel like there's always more to myself than these different roles that I play—who I am in my career, who I am with my friends, who I am at parties when I'm meeting strangers. But who am I, *really*? Am I really nothing underneath all these different roles? Am I just the sum total of all these artificial "parts" that I've learned to perform?

In the *trivialization* condition, the essay—entitled "Students, You Should Get on With Your Lives: How Being a University Student Is One Big Joke"—directly attacked the value of the student role, as in this passage:

I know this is going to be a controversial statement for a lot of people, but I truly believe that being a university student is one of the most useless things you can do . . . You're there because you're supposed to be there, and you're doing things that you've done hundreds of times before, going through all the motions. But the truth is, you're only there because you know it's expected of you . . . Is this what the taxpayers' money is going toward? And is this really going to help you play an important part in society?

In the *control* condition, the essay—entitled "You Are Part of the System: How Our Social World Is One Big Structure"—adopted a noncontroversial attitude of naive realism toward society, as in this passage:

The process of becoming an adult is largely the process of learning how society works, and how to behave in different social settings . . . We learn what society expects of us, and how to control our behavior and interact with others in such contexts . . . Society functions because each person finds their own position within the complex economic and social system . . . Each of the people you meet also has their own

Table 3
Overview of Design and Results for Studies 2A–2C

Study	Self-esteem threat comparison condition(s)	Dramaturgical perspective comparison condition(s)	Outcomes	Omnibus interaction effect
Study 2A ($N = 73$)	Self-affirmation	Trivialization/control	Personal essay endorsement	$F = 3.13/p = .05/\eta^2 = .07$
Study 2B ($N = 93$)	Self-affirmation/control	Trivialization (within-subjects)	Collective essay endorsement	$F = 3.81/p = .03/\eta^2 = .08$
Study 2C ($N = 53$)	Self-affirmation	Control	Role-contingent self-esteem Extrinsic contingency focus	$F = 5.33/p = .03/\eta^2 = .09$ $F = 4.60/p = .04/\eta^2 = .08$

specialized place in society, which is the logical endpoint of all their different life experiences, educational background, and personality.

Self-esteem manipulation. Self-esteem was threatened in connection with the particular social role of university student (also the role criticized in the trivialization condition). Participants wrote brief responses to prompts. In the *self-esteem threat* condition, participants responded to “Please briefly describe a recent time when you failed to be a good college student” and “Describe what happened to you emotionally when you experienced this personal failure.” In the *self-esteem affirmation* condition, participants responded to “Please briefly describe a recent time when you succeeded at being a good college student” and “Describe what happened to you emotionally when you experienced this personal success.”

Essay endorsement. Participants responded to six items concerning the content and author of the essay they read as part of the DP manipulation: “This description of reality fits my own way of thinking about everyday life”; “I could see myself being friends with the author of this essay”; “I like the personality of the author of this essay”; “The author of this essay seems intelligent”; “This essay described reality in a way that I’m used to thinking about”; and “The author of this essay seems to understand how the world works quite well” (1 = *strongly disagree*, 7 = *strongly agree*). We combined responses to form a composite ($\alpha = .92$), with higher scores indicating greater endorsement of the opinions expressed in the particular essay read.

Results. We submitted essay endorsement scores to a 3 (DP manipulation: DP vs. trivialization vs. control essay) \times 2 (self-esteem: threat vs. affirmation) analysis of variance (ANOVA) and obtained a main effect for DP, $F(2, 61) = 7.10, p < .01$, qualified by the predicted interaction, $F(2, 61) = 3.13, p = .05, \eta^2 = .07$. Estimated marginal means are presented in Figure 1. Pairwise comparisons using Fisher’s least significant difference revealed that, as expected, participants who read the DP essay endorsed it more after receiving a self-esteem threat ($M = 4.73, SD = 1.33$)

than after receiving a self-esteem affirmation ($M = 4.08, SD = 0.75$), $F(2, 61) = 4.72, p = .03, d = .60$. However, there was no effect of the self-esteem manipulation among participants who read the trivialization or control essays ($ps > .17$). Also supporting predictions, among participants whose self-esteem was threatened, those who read the DP essay endorsed it significantly more than those who read the trivialization essay ($M = 2.58, SD = 1.43$), $F(2, 61) = 17.33, p < .001, d = 1.56$, and marginally more than those who read the control essay ($M = 4.24, SD = 0.62$), $F(2, 61) = 3.17, p = .08, d = .47$. Additionally, among self-esteem-threatened participants, the control essay was endorsed significantly more than the trivialization essay, $F(2, 61) = 7.28, p < .01, d = 1.51$, suggesting that trivialization of the role in the context of which they had been threatened was not an attractive strategy for participants. There were no significant differences in essay endorsement among participants whose self-esteem had been affirmed (control: $M = 4.23, SD = 0.55$; trivialization: $M = 3.32, SD = 1.81$; $ps > .19$).

Study 2A supported Hypothesis 2: Participants were more likely to endorse a DP-themed essay after their self-esteem had been threatened. By contrast, self-esteem threat did not affect endorsement of a role-trivializing essay, supporting our claim that DP endorsement does not represent mere trivialization of the threatened role or domain. Study 2B sought to replicate this effect but with a few modifications. We treated essay type as a within-subjects variable to provide a more direct test of participants’ preference for the DP. We also compared self-esteem threat to both an affirmation and a neutral control condition. Finally, we measured endorsement of the DP by asking participants if they believed other people would endorse this perspective. On the basis of our analysis, we expected that self-esteem-threatened participants would be more motivated to assert that the DP is a widely held perspective on reality and therefore more legitimate. Accordingly, we assessed whether students might defend their own self-esteem by exaggerating the extent to which there is a collective consensus about the validity of the DP.

Study 2B

Method. Participants were undergraduates who completed a laboratory experiment for course credit. Data were collected from 93 (54 female) participants in a 3 (self-esteem: threat vs. affirmation vs. control) \times 2 (DP vs. trivialization essay; within) mixed-model design. The outcome of interest was perceived collective endorsement of the DP essay.

Self-esteem manipulation. Participants took a computer exam purported to measure their current and predict their future academic performance. In reality, the exam was fabricated and contained a set of stock questions about factual knowledge and past academic performance, designed to seem fairly challenging. In the *self-esteem threat* condition, participants received randomly determined feedback indicating that they were performing below average as a college student. In the *self-esteem affirmation* condition, participants received feedback telling them they were performing above average as a student. Finally, participants in the *control* condition received no feedback regarding their performance. Participants in the threat and affirmation conditions responded to the item “According to the feedback you received from the test, how likely are you to succeed as a student?” (1 = *highly unlikely*, 7 =

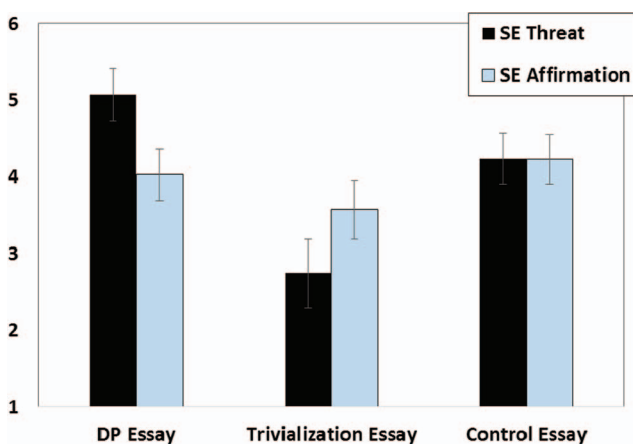


Figure 1. Essay endorsement as a function of DP manipulation (essay type) and self-esteem (SE) manipulation (Study 2A). Higher scores indicate greater endorsement of the particular essay participants read. Scale ranged from 1 to 7. Y-axis values indicate estimated marginal means; bars indicate standard errors. DP = dramaturgical perspective. See the online article for the color version of this figure.

highly likely). As expected, threatened participants indicated they were less likely to succeed ($M = 2.57$, $SD = 1.54$) than were affirmed participants ($M = 6.39$, $SD = 0.76$), $t(59) = 12.45$, $p < .001$.

Essay condition (within-subjects). All participants read the same DP and trivialization essays used in Study 2A.

Essay endorsement. After reading each essay, participants responded to eight items reflecting perceived collective endorsement of that essay: "Other students would agree with this description of reality," "This description of reality fits how other students think about everyday life," "Other students have thought about reality the way it was described in this essay," "Other students would think that the author of this essay is intelligent," "Other students would like this description of reality," "Other students would like the author's personality," "Other students would think that the author of this essay understands how the world works," and "This essay described reality in a way that other students are used to thinking about" (1 = *strongly disagree* to 7 = *strongly agree*). Responses were averaged to form two sets of composite essay endorsement scores (DP: $\alpha = .85$; trivialization: $\alpha = .92$).

Results. Scores for the collective essay endorsement measures were submitted to a 3 (self-esteem threat vs. affirmation vs. control) \times 2 (DP vs. trivialization) mixed-model ANOVA, with the second factor serving as a within-subjects variable. This analysis returned a significant main effect for essay type, $F(1, 90) = 68.06$, $p < .001$, which was qualified by the predicted two-way interaction, $F(2, 90) = 3.81$, $p = .03$, $\eta^2 = .08$. See Figure 2 for estimated marginal means. Pairwise comparisons showed that self-esteem-threatened participants evaluated the DP as more widely endorsed ($M = 4.35$, $SD = 0.94$) than did self-esteem-affirmed participants ($M = 3.84$, $SD = 0.99$) and control participants ($M = 3.87$, $SD = 0.67$; $ps = .03$, $ds = .55$). However, participant ratings of endorsement of the trivialization perspective did not vary as a function of the self-esteem manipulation (threatened: $M = 2.56$,

$SD = 1.03$; affirmed: $M = 3.03$, $SD = 1.40$; control: $M = 2.79$, $SD = 1.00$; $ps > .12$).

Taken together, Studies 2A–2B provide converging evidence that people endorse the DP to a greater extent when their self-esteem has been threatened (Hypothesis 2). These findings support our theoretical claim that people endorse the DP in part to protect their self-esteem against threats. To more directly assess this possibility, Study 2C tested Hypothesis 3: that participants' self-esteem would not be diminished by a threat after exposure to the DP.

Study 2C

In Study 2C we threatened or affirmed participants' self-esteem in the college student role, exposed them to the DP or an alternate description of social reality, and measured their role-contingent self-esteem. We predicted that participants not presented with the DP would suffer a blow to their role-contingent self-esteem but that those exposed to the DP would not evince this effect.

In addition to testing whether the DP buffers self-esteem threats, Study 2C examines another potential consequence of the DP. If our analysis is correct, the DP protects self-esteem by undermining the validity and perceived relevance of externally derived information about the self's performance. In short, if reality is an arbitrary set of constructed performances, then information about one's ability to perform a particular role is not essential to one's self-concept. At the same time, this also implies that adopting the DP should reduce one's interest in performing or living up to socially constructed roles (Hypothesis 4). In other words, insofar as the DP deflates the significance of all extrinsically conditioned roles, then not only will one's self-evaluation be buffeted from failure at such roles, it will also not increase on the basis of success in those roles. One prediction that follows from this is that, after being primed with the DP, not only will self-esteem-threatened participants fail to show a deficit in self-esteem, but self-esteem-affirmed participants will fail to show more interest in living up to the standards of external roles. We measured investment in extrinsic contingencies of self-esteem to test this prediction.

Method. Participants were undergraduates who completed a laboratory experiment in exchange for course credit. Data were collected from 53 (30 female) participants in a 2 (self-esteem: threat vs. affirmation) \times 2 (DP manipulation: DP vs. control) between-subjects design.³ The outcomes of interest were role-contingent self-esteem and extrinsic contingency focus.

Self-esteem manipulation. We used the same procedure and materials as in Study 2A to threaten or affirm participants' self-esteem.

DP manipulation. Participants read either the same DP or control essay used in Study 2A.

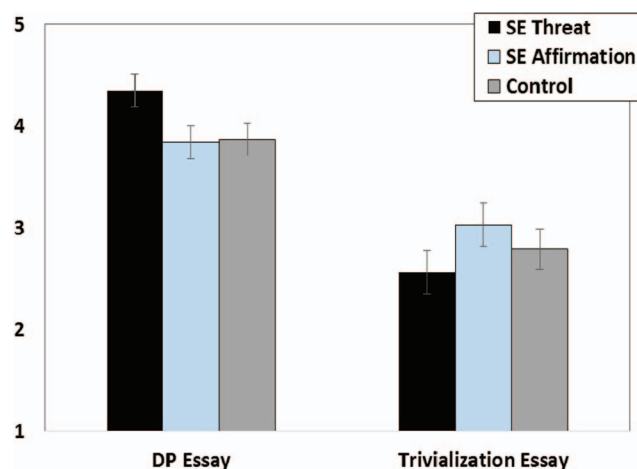


Figure 2. Essay endorsement (within-subjects) as a function of DP manipulation (essay type) and self-esteem (SE) manipulation (Study 2B). Higher scores indicate greater perceived collective endorsement of the essay. Scale ranged from 1 to 7. Y-axis values indicate estimated marginal means; bars indicate standard errors. DP = dramaturgical perspective. See the online article for the color version of this figure.

³ In Study 2A, we manipulated DP exposure prior to the self-esteem manipulation, whereas in Study 2C that order was reversed. The outcome measures were different for each study (2A: essay endorsement; 2C: role-contingent self-esteem and extrinsic contingency focus). However, Study 3 also assessed role-contingent self-esteem (as in Study 2C) with the DP manipulation preceding the self-esteem manipulation. Given that expected effects were obtained for all three studies, we have no reason to conclude that the presentation order of these variables affected the relevant outcomes.

Outcomes. We measured *role-contingent self-esteem* with reference to the college student role using a single, face-valid item: “On the whole, I am satisfied with my performance as a student at KU” (1 = *strongly disagree* to 7 = *strongly agree*; “KU” referred to the University of Kansas, at which data were collected).

Participants also completed the Extrinsic Contingency Focus (ECF) scale (Williams, Schimel, Hayes, & Martens, 2010), which assesses concern with meeting extrinsically derived standards for self-esteem. Participants responded to 20 statements such as “I often get concerned with how others are evaluating me” and “I work hard at things because of the social approval it provides” (1 = *strongly disagree* to 5 = *strongly agree*). Responses were averaged to form a composite ($\alpha = .84$).

Results

Role-contingent self-esteem. Scores were submitted to a 2 (self-esteem threat vs. affirmation) \times 2 (DP vs. control) ANOVA, yielding a main effect for self-esteem, $F(1, 49) = 5.25, p = .03$, and the predicted interaction, $F(1, 49) = 5.33, p = .03, \eta^2 = .09$. See Figure 3 for estimated marginal means. Supporting predictions, pairwise comparisons revealed that, among participants who read the control essay, a self-esteem threat lowered role-contingent self-esteem ($M = 3.93, SD = 1.27$) more than did a self-esteem affirmation ($M = 5.42, SD = 1.24$), $F(1, 49) = 10.37, p < .01, d = 1.19$. In contrast, among participants who had read an essay describing the DP, the self-esteem manipulation had no effect ($F < .001, p = .99$). Also supporting predictions, among participants whose self-esteem was threatened, those who had read the DP essay reported higher self-esteem ($M = 5.08, SD = 1.38$) than did those who read the control essay, $F(1, 49) = 6.43, p = .01, d = 0.87$. DP did not influence self-esteem in the self-affirmation condition (DP/affirmation: $M = 5.07, SD = 0.73; p > .45$).

Extrinsic contingency focus. Scores were submitted to the same analysis, yielding only the expected interaction, $F(1, 49) = 4.60, p = .04, \eta^2 = .08$. See Figure 4 for estimated marginal means. As expected, pairwise comparisons revealed that, in the control essay condition, participants who received a self-

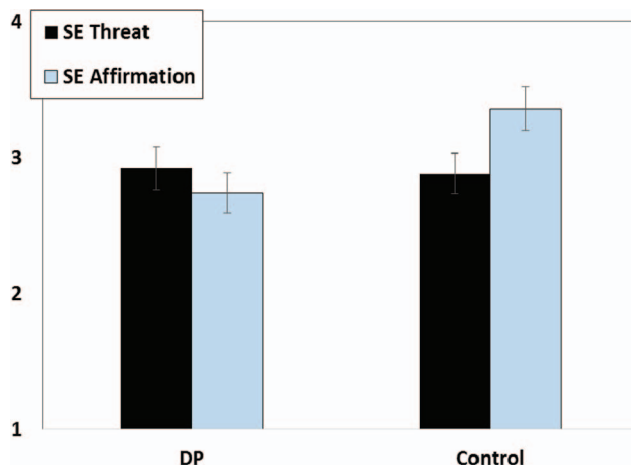


Figure 4. Extrinsic contingency focus as a function of self-esteem (SE) manipulation and DP manipulation (Study 2C). Higher scores indicate greater extrinsic contingency focus. Scale ranged from 1 to 5. Y-axis values indicate estimated marginal means; bars indicate standard errors. DP = dramaturgical perspective. See the online article for the color version of this figure.

affirmation were more focused on extrinsic contingencies ($M = 3.36, SD = 0.49$) than were those who received a threat ($M = 2.88, SD = 0.73$), $F(1, 49) = 4.92, p = .03, d = .77$. In contrast, among participants who read the DP essay, there was no effect of self-esteem condition on extrinsic contingency focus (DP/threat: $M = 2.92, SD = 0.43; F < .65, p = .43$). Also as expected, among participants whose self-esteem was affirmed, those primed with the DP showed less extrinsic contingency focus ($M = 2.74, SD = 0.53$) than did those who received the control induction, $F(1, 49) = 7.95, p < .01, d = 1.21$.

Discussion. Considered collectively, Studies 2A–2C provide strong initial support for the idea that the DP buffers self-esteem threats. In Study 2A, participants primed with failure in the student role were more likely to endorse the DP than were those primed with success (but were not more likely to endorse a trivialization of the student role). Study 2B conceptually replicated this effect: Participants whose self-esteem in the student role was threatened were more likely to claim the DP is widely endorsed but were not more likely to perceive wide endorsement of a trivializing perspective on the student role. Because essay type was a within-subjects variable in Study 2B, these findings strongly imply that endorsement of the DP after a self-esteem threat does not simply represent trivialization of the relevant social role. Furthermore, the inclusion of a control condition (which did not differ from a self-esteem affirmation condition) suggests that the results of Study 2A and 2B are due to increased DP endorsement after threat rather than to decreased DP endorsement when self-esteem is affirmed.

In a more direct demonstration of the self-esteem-maintenance function of the DP, Study 2C showed that under control conditions a self-esteem threat in a given social role decreases one’s sense of positive performance, but this effect does not occur when one has contemplated the DP. Additionally, the DP prevented participants from becoming more focused on extrinsic contingencies of personal value after receiving a self-esteem affirmation.

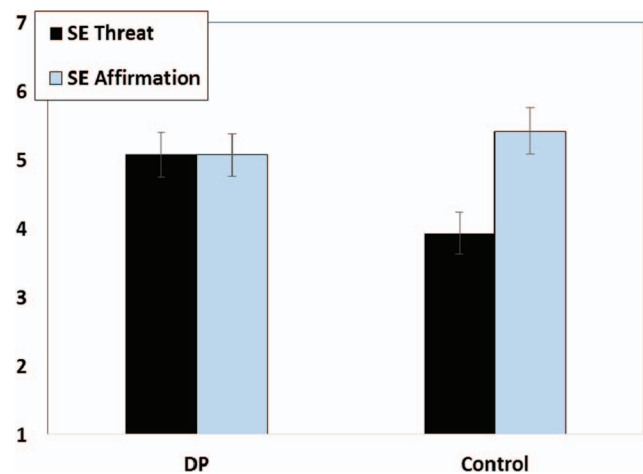


Figure 3. Role-contingent self-esteem as a function of self-esteem (SE) manipulation and DP manipulation (Study 2C). Higher scores indicate greater self-esteem. Scale ranged from 1 to 7. Y-axis values indicate estimated marginal means; bars indicate standard errors. DP = dramaturgical perspective. See the online article for the color version of this figure.

Although Studies 2A–2C provide considerable converging evidence that the DP buffers self-esteem against threat, these were preliminary studies carried out without a clear data collection plan, because we did not have prior knowledge concerning the effect size of a DP induction. To account for the possibility of Type I errors, we conducted a further investigation of the self-esteem-buffering qualities of the DP in a sample large enough to yield acceptable power. In addition, we expanded our investigation of this process by examining both role-contingent and global self-esteem, and by comparing the effect of the DP to that of a direct worldview threat.

Study 3

In Study 3 we conceptually replicated the design of Study 2C. We threatened or affirmed self-esteem and then exposed half of the participants to a DP-themed essay before measuring self-esteem. To advance beyond Studies 2A–2C and provide compelling convergent evidence, we also expanded our investigation in several ways.

First, based on Studies 2A–2C, we were able to conduct a power analysis prior to collecting data. The omnibus interaction effect sizes for these studies ranged from $\eta^2 = .07$ to $.09$, close to the standard cutoff for a medium effect size (e.g., Vacha-Haase & Thompson, 2004); similarly, the effect sizes for the relevant pairwise comparisons ranged from $d = .47$ to 1.51 , clustering around the standard range for a medium effect size (e.g., Cohen, 1992). Because we were primarily interested in obtaining the expected DP \times Self-Esteem interaction, we conducted a power analysis to determine the sample size per cell required to observe the interaction and both main effects (this was a conservative analysis, given that we did not actually predict main effects). Assuming a medium effect size, and in line with the recommendations of Cohen (1992) and Maxwell and Delaney (2004), a G*Power analysis (Faul, Erdfelder, Lang, & Buchner, 2007) determined that approximately 60 participants per condition would be required to obtain power of $.80$. Due to time constraints (imposed by the end of the academic semester of data collection), we were able to obtain approximately 50 participants per condition.

Second, in Studies 2A–2C we compared the buffering effect of the DP to either neutral control inductions or trivialization of the specific role in which participants received a self-esteem threat (or affirmation). In Study 3 we went further to contrast the DP with another, equally comprehensive view of social reality. Our guiding analysis suggests that although the DP can cause the individual to temporarily question their entire worldview, it differs from other worldview threats in that it is a reflective, rather than a direct, threat. To briefly reiterate the distinction, a direct threat challenges the comparative value and functionality of one's worldview, eliciting defensive worldview-bolstering behavior; a reflective worldview subtly questions the meaningfulness of one's own (and any other possible) worldview, inducing a temporary meta-conscious stance toward one's beliefs. Because we propose that it is questioning the meaningfulness of socially derived, self-relevant information that protects self-esteem under the DP, it follows that a direct worldview threat should not be equally successful at protecting self-esteem. To test this possibility, in Study 3 we compared the effect of the DP to that of a direct system threat (Jost & Hunyady, 2005).

Finally, in Study 2C we found evidence that the DP can buffer the effect of a specific self-esteem threat on role-contingent self-esteem. Going further, here we examined whether the DP has similar effects

on global self-esteem, irrespective of the particular role in which esteem has been threatened.⁴ Thus, to obtain a more comprehensive picture of the effects of the DP under self-esteem threat, we assessed three outcomes: investment in socially derived standards for self-worth; role-contingent self-esteem; and global self-esteem. In line with Hypothesis 3, we predicted that the DP would buffer the effect of a self-esteem threat on role-contingent self-esteem. In line with Hypothesis 4, we predicted that the DP (combined with a self-esteem threat) would decrease investment in social standards.

Method. Participants were 201 (121 female) undergraduate students at two major U.S. universities who participated in a laboratory study in exchange for course credit. They were randomly assigned to condition in a 2 (DP vs. system threat) \times 2 (self-esteem threat vs. affirmation) between-subjects design. Our outcomes of interest were investment in U.S. standards for self-worth, role-contingent self-esteem, and global self-esteem.

DP manipulation. Participants assigned to the DP condition read a fabricated online article similar to the DP essay used in Studies 2A–2C but modified to include specific reference to U.S. culture. It contained passages such as “We’re given roles to play as Americans, as family members, as workers, and we usually play them. Really, though, we’re all aware on some level that the roles we’re given are like parts in a play, and that the ‘American Dream’ is just a big game everyone is playing.” In the *system threat* condition, participants read an article that did not question the objectivity or validity of U.S. cultural standards but rather directly attacked the effectiveness of U.S. political and economic institutions. Drawing on similar inductions used in prior research (Lau et al., 2008; Sullivan, Landau, & Rothschild, 2010), we included statements such as “Where American culture used to be something that united us, it has instead become extremely polarized. A fragmented society has led to a dysfunctional political system . . . our nation’s ‘honorable’ institutions have turned out to be total junk.”⁵

⁴ We assessed global self-esteem using a trait, rather than a state self-esteem scale, because of the well-validated psychometric properties of the Rosenberg (1965) scale and because research has consistently shown that responses to such scales are in fact situationally malleable and sensitive to context (Marsh & Yeung, 1999). Having established in Study 3 that DP exposure has effects on both role-contingent state self-esteem and global trait self-esteem measures, we felt justified in continuing to use the Rosenberg scale to assess global self-esteem in Study 4.

⁵ After reading either the DP or system threat essay, participants responded to four manipulation check items. The results for these items strongly suggest the effectiveness of the manipulation. For the item “The essay argued that the U.S. government and economy are failing,” system threat participants agreed more strongly ($M = 5.73$, $SD = 1.16$) than did DP participants ($M = 2.55$, $SD = 1.73$), $t(199) = 15.26$, $p < .001$. For the item “The essay argued that U.S. culture is false or an illusion,” DP participants agreed more strongly ($M = 5.22$, $SD = 1.34$) than did system threat participants ($M = 3.88$, $SD = 1.39$), $t(199) = 6.99$, $p < .001$. Similarly, DP participants agreed more strongly with the item “The essay argued that the roles we play in U.S. culture are like performances in a play” than did system threat participants ($M = 5.54$, $SD = 1.28$ vs. $M = 3.58$, $SD = 1.44$), $t(199) = 10.21$, $p < .001$. Finally, it is interesting to note that for the item “The essay was very critical of the United States,” system threat participants agreed more strongly ($M = 5.58$, $SD = 1.38$) than did DP participants ($M = 4.48$, $SD = 1.55$), $t(199) = 5.33$, $p < .001$. This latter finding confirms our expectation that the system threat induction would be perceived as more of a direct threat to the U.S. cultural worldview.

Self-esteem manipulation. We threatened or affirmed self-esteem with specific reference to U.S. cultural standards for achievement. Our participants (all undergraduates) first read an article about college and career readiness, which described the typical achievements of U.S. undergraduates in preparing for future careers and mainstream success. This article was designed to threaten self-esteem by inducing either downward or upward social comparison. In the *self-esteem threat* condition, the (fabricated) article listed especially high standards for achievement that participants were unlikely to have met. In the *self-esteem affirmation* condition, the article listed easily attainable standards for success. For example, the articles claimed, “Americans who go on to successful careers have already participated in at least one internship by age 18 [formed some ideas about what kind of career they would like to have by age 18]” and “Studies show that Americans who are likely to be successful later in life have already saved over \$5,000 [\$500] of their own money by age 19.”

After reading one of these two articles, participants completed a short written induction. In the threat condition, participants responded to this prompt: “Please tell us about some ways in which you have *failed to achieve* everything that you would have liked to achieve so far as a young American.” In the affirmation condition the prompt read: “Please tell us about how you have *achieved* some of the things that you would have liked to achieve so far as a young American.”

Investment in U.S. standards. Participants completed four items assessing the extent to which they invest in U.S. standards for success and evaluate their self-worth based on these standards: “I care a lot about living up to America’s standards for success”; “I think the goals and ideas that most Americans have about success are all wrong” (reversed-scored); “I think the kind of achievements that most young Americans strive for are the right kind of achievements”; “I often judge my own success compared to what other Americans I know are achieving” ($\alpha = .67$). Participants responded to all items included in the study on scales of 1 (*strongly disagree*) to 7 (*strongly agree*).

Role-contingent self-esteem. We first assessed self-esteem with reference to the domain in which it was threatened: “Right now, I feel good about the level of success I’ve achieved as a young American so far”; “Right now, I feel disappointed about my accomplishments compared to those of most young Americans” (reverse-scored); “Right now, I feel satisfied with what I’ve achieved in life compared to most young Americans” ($\alpha = .85$).

Global self-esteem. We then assessed global self-esteem with Rosenberg’s (1965) 10-item scale ($\alpha = .90$).

Results and discussion. All results for the study are presented graphically in Figures 5, 6, and 7.

Investment in U.S. standards. We submitted scores for investment in U.S. achievement standards to a 2 (DP vs. system threat) \times 2 (self-esteem threat vs. affirmation) ANOVA and obtained only the expected interaction, $F(1, 197) = 4.91, p < .03, \eta^2 = .02$. Supporting predictions, among participants whose self-esteem was threatened, those who had been exposed to the DP were less invested in U.S. standards ($M = 4.34, SD = 1.34$) than were those exposed to system threat ($M = 4.87, SD = 1.07$), $F(1, 197) = 5.96, p < .02, d = .44$. There was a nonsignificant trend in the DP condition for self-esteem-threatened participants to show less investment than did affirmed participants ($M = 4.70, SD =$

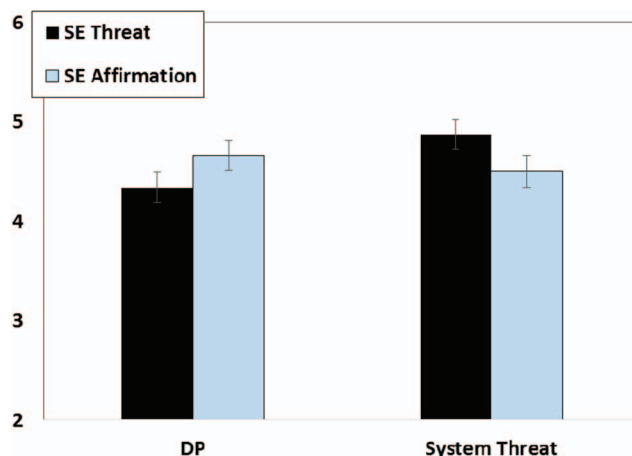


Figure 5. Investment in U.S. standards for success as a function of DP manipulation and self-esteem (SE) manipulation (Study 3). Higher scores indicate greater investment. Scale ranged from 1 to 7. Y-axis values indicate estimated marginal means; bars indicate standard errors. DP = dramaturgical perspective. See the online article for the color version of this figure.

1.10), $p = .15$, whereas the opposite was true for system threat participants (system threat/affirmation: $M = 4.50, SD = 0.76$), $F(1, 197) = 2.79, p = .10, d = .40$.

Role-contingent self-esteem. Submitting role-contingent self-esteem scores to the same analysis yielded only the predicted interaction, $F(1, 197) = 5.89, p < .02, \eta^2 = .03$. Among participants who received a self-esteem threat, those exposed to the DP had higher role-contingent self-esteem ($M = 5.23, SD = 1.32$) than did those exposed to system threat ($M = 4.68, SD = 1.48$), $F(1, 197) = 6.02, p < .02, d = .40$. Also supporting predictions, marginally significant trends suggested that self-esteem threat diminished role-contingent self-esteem in the system threat condition (system threat/affirmation: $M = 5.14, SD = 1.09$), $F(1, 197) = 3.35, p = .07, d = .35$, whereas this trend was reversed in the DP condition (DP/affirmation: $M = 4.89, SD = 1.08$), $F(1, 197) = 2.56, p = .10, d = .28$.

Global self-esteem. Performing the same analysis on global self-esteem scores once more yielded only an interaction, $F(1, 197) = 4.58, p = .03, \eta^2 = .02$. Pairwise comparisons revealed that among participants exposed to the DP, a self-esteem threat increased global self-esteem ($M = 5.77, SD = 0.90$) more than did a self-esteem affirmation ($M = 5.34, SD = 1.03$), $F(1, 197) = 4.71, p = .03, d = .44$. Furthermore, within the self-esteem threat condition, DP-primed participants had higher self-esteem than did those primed with system threat ($M = 5.29, SD = 1.15$), $F(1, 197) = 5.76, p = .02, d = .46$. No other mean differences approached significance (system threat/affirmation: $M = 5.47, SD = 0.95$).

Study 3 built on the contributions of Studies 2A–2C by finding compelling evidence for Hypothesis 3 with high statistical power. Importantly, Study 3 also provided support for a corollary of Hypothesis 3 that the DP’s threat-buffering effect is psychologically distinct from the effect of direct threats to the dominant cultural worldview. Indeed, the data suggest that participants under system threat show greater investment in U.S. standards for suc-

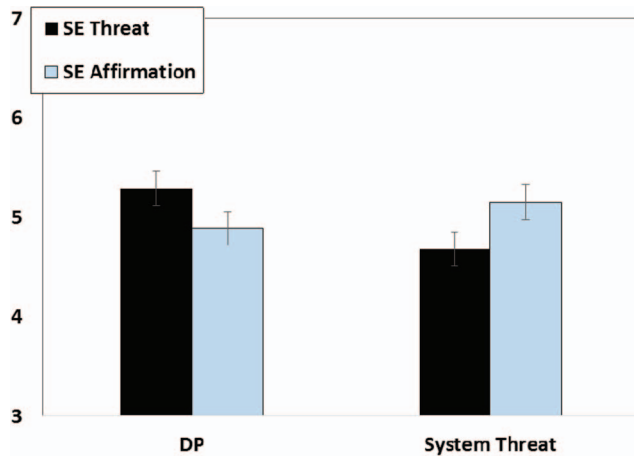


Figure 6. Role-contingent self-esteem as a function of DP manipulation and self-esteem (SE) manipulation (Study 3). Higher scores indicate greater self-esteem. Scale ranged from 1 to 7. Y-axis values indicate estimated marginal means; bars indicate standard errors. DP = dramaturgical perspective. See the online article for the color version of this figure.

cess, presumably as a psychological by-product of defensive system bolstering (observed in many studies on system threat; Jost & Hunyady, 2005). In short, direct attacks on one's worldview elicit greater investment in the worldview and therefore cannot protect the self against threatening information about performance vis-à-vis worldview standards; reflective worldviews such as the DP prompt subtle distancing from the mainstream worldview and hence decrease (or indeed reverse) the impact of negative information about the self's performance.

Having established the predictive validity of the DP (Study 1) and obtained important evidence for its self-esteem threat-buffering function (Studies 2A–2C and 3), we explored this construct further in our final studies. We examined the boundaries of the DP by testing some potential moderators of its effects. Additionally, we examined further consequences of adopting the DP for perceptions of social reality.

Additional Consequences and Moderators of the DP

Study 4

Although the prior studies provide evidence that the DP can ameliorate the negative effects of a self-esteem threat, our analysis does not suggest that adopting the DP will always be beneficial for self-esteem. Because individuals require an intact sense of a meaningful cultural reality in order to seek and maintain self-esteem (Landau et al., 2009), a worldview that calls into question the objectivity of culturally prescribed roles might undermine self-esteem in the long term. To obtain a complete understanding of the DP's relation to self-esteem, researchers should investigate the circumstances under which this perspective may actually be harmful for one's sense of personal worth.

Our analysis draws on theory and research on temporal construal, which suggests that when an individual adopts a long-term or future-oriented perspective on a target, that target will be

construed in more abstract terms (Lieberman et al., 2002). In the context of the DP, it is relevant to consider the difference between imagining an important social role either in concrete, present-oriented terms or in abstract, future-oriented terms. When contemplating current or recent struggles to perform a role, the DP allows distancing from the threat through temporary reflection on how social roles are mere performances. However, given that the capacity to derive a sense of personal value from one's social role(s) is an integral part of a healthy self-concept (Ryan & Deci, 2000), it does not seem to be a sustainable strategy to continually embrace the DP and undermine the value of all one's social endeavors. Therefore, if one adopts the DP in relation to the long-term, ultimate value of a social role in which one is invested, it should have negative consequences for self-esteem (Hypothesis 5).

To examine this possibility, we advanced beyond the prior studies by asking participants to adopt the DP in relation to a particular social role (college student). As discussed in the introduction, this role-specific version of the DP is more akin to how the perspective seems to be most commonly adopted in everyday life. However, we manipulated whether participants considered this role in concrete, present-focused versus abstract, future-oriented terms. We asked college freshman participants to either adopt the DP or not with relation to the role of college freshman or college senior and then measured their level of investment in the overarching role of college student as well as their global self-esteem. We did not expect freshmen asked to adopt the DP with regard to the freshman role to feel particularly threatened, because they would be thinking about the concrete exigencies of the overarching college student role (i.e., their present experience in the role). However, freshmen adopting the DP with regards to the senior role may question the ultimate importance of the overarching college student role. Although under normal circumstances envisioning this end-goal might be motivating and boost self-esteem (Markus & Nurius, 1986), we predicted that contemplating this role from the vantage of the DP would cause role disengagement and lower self-esteem.

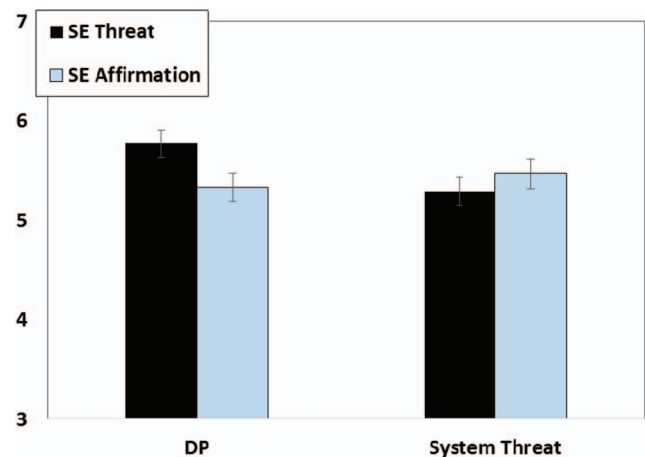


Figure 7. Global self-esteem as a function of DP manipulation and self-esteem (SE) manipulation (Study 3). Higher scores indicate greater self-esteem. Scale ranged from 1 to 7. Y-axis values indicate estimated marginal means; bars indicate standard errors. DP = dramaturgical perspective. See the online article for the color version of this figure.

Method. Fifty-six freshman students (33 women) at the University of Kansas participated in an online study in exchange for course credit. Participants were randomly assigned to condition in a 2 (DP vs. control) × 2 (role: freshman vs. senior) design, with role disengagement and global self-esteem as our outcomes of interest.

Manipulation. The study was ostensibly one on attitudes toward different roles that people play in life. After responding to a few filler items designed to boost the cover story, participants were asked to write about either the role of *college freshman* or *college senior*, from either the DP or a control perspective.

In the DP/freshman condition, participants received the following instructions:

Many of life's roles can be viewed as a type of performance. In many ways, social roles are performed in a way that is very similar to the performance of roles in a stage play. In order to perform effectively in a given social role, "actors" (ordinary people) rely on an accepted framework for appropriate interaction with others, as well as for the types of behaviors and skills that are necessary for that role. Performers attempt to act according to a social "script" that is provided for their role.

Participants were then instructed: "Please think about what it means to perform the role of college freshman." They were asked to list five behaviors "typical of somebody who is performing this role" and then to "describe how these behaviors relate to the idea that social roles are like roles in a play. In other words, how do these features of a role relate to the role being a performance?" In the control/freshman condition, participants received the following instructions:

In life we take on many different social roles. In many ways, social roles are what give structure to our actions every day. In order to effectively carry out a given social role, people have to interact appropriately with others, as well as engage in certain behaviors and develop certain skills that are necessary for that role. People try to live up to the expectations for their role. Much of the effort required to effectively carry out a certain social role involves learning what to do in that role.

Participants were then instructed: "Please think about what it means to carry out the role of college freshman." They were asked to list five behaviors "typical of somebody who is in this role" and then to "describe how these behaviors are different from the behaviors associated with a different role. In other words, how do these features of a role make it different from other roles?" For the senior role conditions, participants responded to parallel questions and prompts with reference to the role of college senior.

Role disengagement. Next, participants rated their level of disengagement from the overarching college student role by responding to two face-valid items: "I don't care about being a college student" and "Being a college student doesn't matter to me" (1 = *strongly disagree* to 7 = *strongly agree*; $r = .94$).

Global self-esteem. Given that Study 3 showed an effect of the DP on global self-esteem, we again assessed self-esteem with Rosenberg's (1965) measure ($\alpha = .89$).

Results and discussion. All results for the study are presented graphically in Figures 8, 9, and 10.

Role disengagement. We first submitted role disengagement scores to a 2 (DP vs. control) × 2 (role: freshman vs. senior)

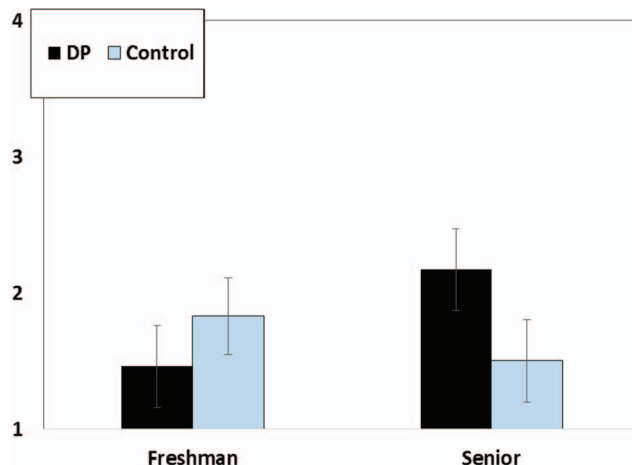


Figure 8. Role disengagement as a function of DP manipulation and role type (college freshman vs. college senior; Study 4). Higher scores indicate greater disengagement from the role of college student. Scale ranged from 1 to 7. Y-axis values indicate estimated marginal means; bars indicate standard errors. DP = dramaturgical perspective. See the online article for the color version of this figure.

ANOVA and obtained a marginally significant interaction, $F(1, 52) = 3.08, p = .08, \eta^2 = .06$. Pairwise comparisons suggest that the interaction was primarily driven by the tendency for participants in the DP/senior condition to show higher levels of role disengagement ($M = 2.17, SD = 1.64$) than those in the DP/freshman condition ($M = 1.46, SD = 0.52$), $F(1, 52) = 2.84, p = .098, d = .58$. Similarly, within the senior condition, DP-primed participants tended to show higher levels of disengagement than control-primed participants ($M = 1.50, SD = 0.65$), $F(1, 52) = 2.54, p = .12, d = .54$ (Control/freshman: $M = 1.83, SD = 1.11$).

Global self-esteem. We then submitted self-esteem scores to the same analysis and obtained the expected interaction, $F(1, 52) = 6.54, p = .01, \eta^2 = .11$. Supporting predictions, in the senior role condition, DP-primed participants showed lower self-esteem ($M = 4.45, SD = 0.56$) than did control-primed participants ($M = 4.85, SD = 0.43$), $F(1, 52) = 5.02, p = .03, d = .80$. Also supporting our predictions, there was a tendency within the DP condition for participants to show lower self-esteem when they wrote about the senior role compared to the freshman role ($M = 4.75, SD = 0.37$), $F(1, 52) = 2.80, p = .10, d = .60$. The opposite was true within the control condition: Participants who wrote about the senior role showed higher self-esteem than those who wrote about the freshman role ($M = 4.51, SD = 0.56$), $F(1, 52) = 3.75, p = .05, d = .68$.

Mediation. We developed a mediated moderation hypothesis, such that the interactive effect of DP and role type on self-esteem occurred through the corresponding effect on role disengagement. Testing this with Preacher and Hayes' (2008) bootstrapping method, we regressed self-esteem scores onto the DP × Role Type interaction, with the main effects entered as covariates and role disengagement entered as the proposed mediator. Five thousand bootstrapping resamples were performed. The 95% CI for the indirect effect of the interaction on self-esteem via the mediator of role disengagement did not contain zero [−.35, −.02], providing evidence in line with our mediational hypothesis.

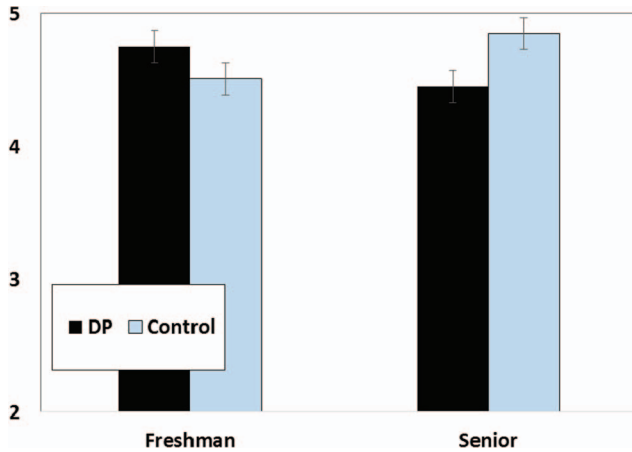


Figure 9. Global self-esteem as a function of DP manipulation and role type (college freshman vs. college senior; Study 4). Higher scores indicate greater self-esteem. Scale ranged from 1 to 5. Y-axis values indicate estimated marginal means; bars indicate standard errors. DP = dramaturgical perspective. See the online article for the color version of this figure.

Although not all trends reached statistical significance, the observed patterns and our mediation model provide compelling evidence for the role of construal level in moderating the effects of the DP on self-esteem, in line with Hypothesis 5. When the DP was not salient, contemplating the role of senior tended to decrease disengagement from (or increase engagement in) the overarching college student role, and to boost self-esteem. This finding accords with prior evidence that imagining the end-goal of a social role can heighten its abstract value and importance (Markus & Nurius, 1986). Furthermore, nonsignificant trends suggest that, when participants contemplated the freshman role, the DP had some of the positive effects observed in prior studies: Participants felt a slight boost in self-esteem and tended to be more engaged than did those in the control condition. However, in the critical condition where participants adopted the DP with regard to the senior role, disengagement increased and self-esteem correspondingly decreased. This supports our contention that the DP is not a viable long-term strategy for maintaining self-esteem: When adopted in the context of a social role's ultimate value, it deflates, rather than protects, global feelings of self-worth. This finding contrasts with the threat-buffering effect demonstrated in Studies 2A–2C and 3, suggesting that the DP does not always have positive consequences for self-evaluations.

In our final studies, we investigated another consequence of adopting the DP that could be considered either desirable or undesirable; namely, a deflated sense of the objectivity of one's moral convictions. We also tested an additional moderation hypothesis. Our guiding analysis suggests that if one's intrinsic or "true" self is dispositionally active or situationally salient, the DP should be less likely to affect one's beliefs and attitudes.

Study 5A

According to Hypothesis 4, adopting the DP should temporarily diminish investment in socially derived standards and beliefs. Studies 2C, 3, and 4 have already provided some evidence for this

hypothesis by showing that taking the DP (especially under certain circumstances) decreases the perceived importance of extrinsic contingencies and social standards/roles. In Study 5A we further tested this hypothesis by randomly assigning participants to either a DP or a comparison induction and then measuring the perceived objectivity of their moral beliefs, as well as their conviction that various behaviors should be understood as moral issues.

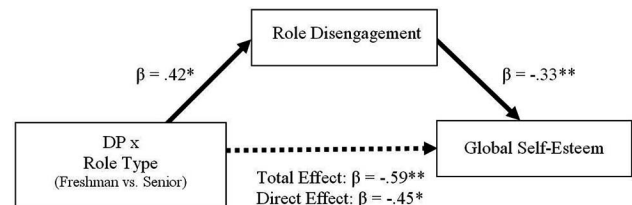
In addition, Study 5A tests Hypothesis 6. Our analysis highlights the idea that an "authentic" or "intrinsic" self model can inoculate individuals from the cognitive and attitudinal effects of the DP. Again, if the individual feels confident that they have a core self that transcends shifting social roles and mores, they may not question their moral convictions even if the DP is salient. We tested this hypothesis by measuring individual differences in the relative strength of the intrinsic self, in particular, differences in a focus on extrinsic contingencies of self-worth with the ECF scale (Williams et al., 2010) used in Study 2C.

Method. One hundred and seven participants (47 female) were recruited through Amazon's Mechanical Turk service and were paid \$1.00 for completing an online study. Ages ranged from 19 to 60 years ($M = 33$, $SD = 11$). We first assessed participants' dispositional level of ECF (continuous) and then randomly assigned participants to either a DP or a system threat condition. Our outcomes of interest were moral objectivism and moralization.

Political orientation. Previous research suggests that the tendency to moralize everyday occurrences (one of our outcomes for this study) is strongly associated with political orientation (Wisneski, Conway, & Skitka, 2014). In order to control for any potential influence of political orientation, we asked participants to respond to the item "How would you describe your political orientation?" (1 = very conservative to 7 = very liberal; $M_{Grand} = 5.00$, $SD = 1.49$).

Extrinsic contingency focus. Participants first completed a modified version of the ECF scale used in Study 2C. We pruned the scale so that participants responded to only the 10 highest loading items (as reported in Williams et al., 2010; $\alpha = .89$).

DP manipulation. Participants read either the DP or the system threat essay used in Study 3. Although the system threat induction



Note. All path coefficients represent standardized regression weights. The direct effect coefficient represents the effect of the independent variable after controlling for the effect of the proposed mediator. Total adjusted R^2 for the model = .16, $F(4, 51) = 3.63$, $p = .01$. * Significant at $p < .10$ ** Significant at $p < .05$

Figure 10. Mediation model (Study 4). DP = dramaturgical perspective.

directly attacked the worthiness of U.S. culture, the DP induction highlighted the socially constructed nature of U.S. culture.⁶

Moral objectivism and moralization. We measured moral objectivism with specific reference to the moral values of U.S. culture. Participants responded to three items: “The American way of life is the most moral way of life in the world,” “American moral values represent universal truths,” and “American morals are just arbitrary and will change over time” (reverse-scored). Participants responded on a 1 (*strongly disagree*) to (7 = *strongly agree*) scale, and we created composite scores ($\alpha = .82$).

We measured moralization using a modified version of the Moralization of Everyday Life Scale (Lovett, Jordan, & Wintermuth, 2012). Participants were administered two items from each of the six subscales of the measure. They rated the immorality of 12 different actions on a scale of 1 (*Not wrong at all; perfectly OK action*) to 7 (*Very wrong; extremely immoral action*). The actions pertained to deception; harming community members; laziness; failures to perform moral acts; and bodily violations or disgusting behaviors. Example items included “Packing for a trip at the last minute,” “Parking in a handicapped parking spot when not handicapped,” and “Defecating, not washing one’s hands, and then preparing dinner for oneself.” We combined moralization of all these actions into a single composite ($\alpha = .88$).

Results

Moral objectivism. We regressed moral objectivism scores onto essay condition (DP vs. system threat; dummy-coded), ECF (continuous and centered) and their interaction, controlling for political orientation in the first step. This analysis revealed an effect of political orientation, such that more liberal participants were less likely to endorse moral objectivism, $\beta = -.26$, $SE = .09$, $t(104) = -2.72$, $p < .01$. In addition, there was a positive association of ECF with moral objectivism, $\beta = .27$, $SE = .15$, $t(102) = 2.98$, $p < .01$, as well as an effect of experimental condition, $\beta = -.20$, $SE = .25$, $t(102) = -2.26$, $p = .03$. However, the interaction was nonsignificant ($\beta = -.18$, $p > .50$). A follow-up analysis of covariance (controlling for political orientation) revealed that participants in the DP condition showed lower moral objectivism scores ($M = 2.95$, $SD = 1.45$) than did those in the system threat condition ($M = 3.45$, $SD = 1.33$), $F(1, 103) = 4.39$, $p = .04$, $\eta^2 = .04$.

Moralization. We regressed moralization scores onto essay condition (DP vs. system threat; dummy-coded), ECF (continuous and centered), and their interaction, controlling for political orientation in the first step. The analysis revealed an effect of political orientation, $\beta = -.26$, $SE = .07$, $t(104) = -2.75$, $p < .01$, as well as the predicted two-way interaction, $\beta = -.35$, $SE = .25$, $t(101) = -2.62$, $p = .01$. We plotted the interaction in Figure 11 using 1 SD above (high-ECF) and below (low-ECF) the centered mean of ECF (as recommended by Aiken & West, 1991).

Simple slopes analyses revealed that, among participants in the system threat condition, ECF was positively associated with moralization, $\beta = .42$, $SE = .18$, $t(101) = 3.17$, $p < .01$. In contrast, ECF was not associated with moralization in the DP condition ($\beta = -.07$, $p > .50$). Comparison of the predicted means at one SD above the centered ECF mean showed that high-ECF participants engaged in less moralization in the DP condition than in the system threat condition, $\beta = -.30$, $SE = .30$, $t(101) = -2.27$, $p = .03$. However, essay condition had no effect on moralization

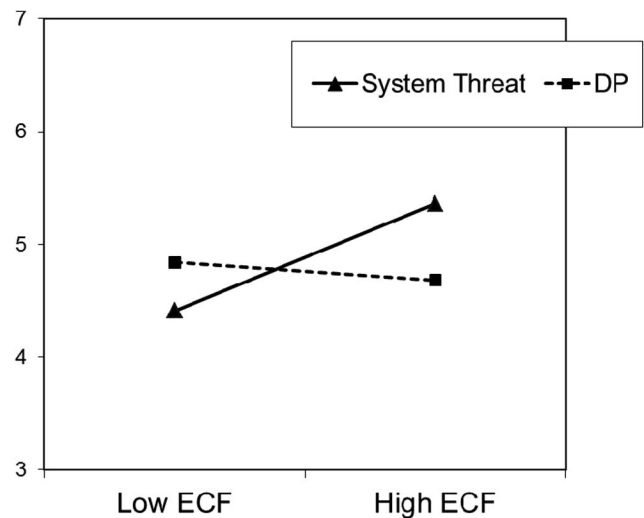


Figure 11. Moralization as a function of extrinsic contingency focus (ECF) and DP manipulation (Study 5A). Higher values indicate greater moralization. Scale ranged from 1 to 7. DP = dramaturgical perspective.

among low-ECF participants, $\beta = .19$, $SE = .30$, $t(101) = 1.48$, $p = .14$.

Hypothesis 4 states that DP exposure will lessen conviction in one’s moral beliefs, and Hypothesis 6 states that this effect will be less likely to occur among individuals with a strong sense of the intrinsic self (operationalized in this study as low investment in extrinsic standards for self-worth). Study 5A provides support for both hypotheses. When moral objectivism was measured with specific reference to U.S. moral standards, investment in extrinsic standards did not moderate the depleting effect of the DP. This finding is understandable, because the DP was operationalized as a reflective threat to U.S. cultural standards. However, when moral objectivism was measured more globally—as the tendency to conceive of various behaviors in strongly moralized terms—our moderational hypothesis was supported. Among high-ECF participants, for whom a sense of the intrinsic self is not dispositionally salient, the DP led to decreased moralization; however, this effect was not observed among low-ECF participants.

Study 5B seeks to conceptually replicate this effect. To increase convergent validity, we used a new DP induction and a novel

⁶ After the manipulation, participants responded to the same four manipulation check items included in Study 3. The results were exactly parallel to those found in Study 3. For the item “The essay argued that the U.S. government and economy are failing,” system threat participants agreed more strongly ($M = 6.54$, $SD = 0.83$) than did DP participants ($M = 1.45$, $SD = 1.01$), $t(105) = 28.61$, $p < .001$. For the item “The essay argued that U.S. culture is false or an illusion,” DP participants agreed more strongly ($M = 5.88$, $SD = 1.49$) than did system threat participants ($M = 3.64$, $SD = 1.80$), $t(105) = -6.96$, $p < .001$. For the item “The essay argued that the roles we play in U.S. culture are like performances in a play,” DP participants agreed more strongly ($M = 6.39$, $SD = .94$) than did system threat participants ($M = 2.41$, $SD = 1.42$), $t(105) = -16.89$, $p < .001$. As in Study 3, for the item “The essay was very critical of the United States,” system threat participants agreed more strongly ($M = 6.30$, $SD = 0.87$) than did DP participants ($M = 3.98$, $SD = 1.66$), $t(105) = 9.20$, $p < .001$, again confirming that the system threat induction is more of a direct threat to the U.S. cultural worldview.

measure of moral objectivism. Further, we manipulated the situational salience of the intrinsic self, rather than measuring it as an individual difference.

Study 5B

In this study we sought further evidence for Hypothesis 4 by manipulating the DP and measuring participants' moral objectivism. We assessed the latter using Goodwin and Darley's (2008) measure of the extent to which people consider various beliefs—ranging from matters of aesthetic taste to opinions on major ethical issues—to be matters of objective fact about the world.

We also further tested Hypothesis 6: A salient sense of a core self that transcends extrinsic, socially derived roles will inoculate the individual against the effects of the DP. Whereas in Study 5A we assessed individual variation in the dispositional strength of the intrinsic self model, in Study 5B we manipulated its salience. We predicted that participants given an opportunity to affirm their intrinsic self-concept (compared to their extrinsic self-concept) would not respond to the DP with decreased moral objectivism.

Method. Sixty-three participants took part in a laboratory experiment in exchange for course credit. We removed data from participants who did not follow instructions ($n = 2$) or who expressed suspicions ($n = 1$), leaving a final total of 60 (41 female) participants in a 2 (self-affirmation: intrinsic vs. extrinsic) \times 2 (DP vs. trivialization essay) design. Moral objectivism was our outcome of interest.

Self-affirmation manipulation. Participants in the *intrinsic self-affirmation* condition wrote a paragraph about “. . . one unchanging, inner quality that clearly makes you feel good about yourself . . . Describe a time when you displayed this personal quality and how this quality reflects on your true self.” Alternately, participants in the *extrinsic self-affirmation* condition wrote about an extrinsically valued success achieved in a particular social role: “. . . something you have accomplished as a student that clearly makes you feel good about yourself . . . Describe what you achieved and how this accomplishment reflects your competence and success as a student.” The prompts in both conditions were adapted from Arndt, Schimel, Greenberg, and Pyszczynski (2002).

DP manipulation. Participants were then told that they would be reading an essay ostensibly composed by another student in an English 101 class about the book *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* by Paulo Freire (1970). As a cover story, participants were told that they were being asked to provide their opinions about other people's writing. In the DP condition, the alleged student essay contained passages like the following:

Society works because we all play our roles, I “play” the role of an athlete, and the person at the front of the gym “plays” the role of the coach. So I guess I am a college athlete, but if I were in a completely different society, or if my society changed, or if I'd been born in a different family I would play a completely different role. As Freire says, our roles in society don't define who we are. My question for Freire and all of us is who are we really, if society doesn't say who we are? Is there really some part of us that exists outside of all these social masks we put on?

Alternately, in the trivialization condition, the alleged essay contained passages like the following:

Hooray, I can write an essay and pass this exam. This doesn't mean I'm going to succeed at anything meaningful beyond being a student, out in the world where things matter. Friere says that being a student is the most important time in our life but I disagree with him . . . walk into [major campus building] and you will see a specimen of a creature that is barely living. Freire was more right when he talked about the university system thinking of us as “banks” to stuff “knowledge” in like cash in a vault. But my question for Freire and all of us is, is the “cash” the university is giving us going to buy us anything in the real world?⁷

Moral objectivism. We measured participants' perceptions of the relative objectivity of their moral beliefs with a modified version of Goodwin and Darley's (2008) moral objectivism scale. Participants rated six statements pertaining to ethical matters and six statements pertaining to matters of social convention on a 1–7 scale, where a score of 1 implied that the statement was clearly an “Attitude or opinion” (i.e., more subjective) and a score of 7 implied that the statement was clearly a “True or false statement” (i.e., more objective). Statements ranged from relatively trivial matters of convention (e.g., “Wearing pajamas and a bathrobe to a seminar meeting is wrong behavior”) to topics that are highly ethically charged and divisive (e.g., “Before the 3rd month of pregnancy, abortion for any reason [of the mother's] is morally permissible”).

We were not interested in whether participants agreed or disagreed with each statement, but rather in their perceptions of the relative objectivity of each statement. We also were not interested in the distinction between matters of ethics and convention, because we predicted that the DP would reduce perceived objectivity of all beliefs (if participants had not been given the opportunity to affirm their intrinsic self). Accordingly, we averaged all 12 items from the objectivism scale, despite low reliability ($\alpha = .51$) resulting from the fact that the items were originally intended to load onto two subscales. However, the pattern of reported results does not change if the items are broken down into two separate six-item scales assessing objectivity of ethics and objectivity of conventions.

Results. We submitted perceived objectivity scores to a 2 (self-affirmation: intrinsic vs. extrinsic) \times 2 (DP vs. trivialization) ANOVA and obtained the predicted interaction, $F(1, 52) = 6.67$, $p = .01$, $\eta^2 = .10$ (see Figure 12). Pairwise comparisons showed that, among participants who received an extrinsic self-affirmation, exposure to a DP essay decreased the perceived objectivity of their beliefs ($M = 3.04$, $SD = 1.03$) more than did exposure to a trivialization essay ($M = 3.70$, $SD = 0.76$), $F(1, 52) = 10.20$, $p < .01$, $d = .73$. However, among participants given an intrinsic self-affirmation, perceived objectivity did not differ between participants who read the DP essay ($M = 3.63$, $SD = 0.54$) and the trivialization essay ($M = 3.53$, $SD = 0.66$), $p = .65$. Considering the data alternatively, only in the DP essay condition

⁷ To control for the possibility that any observed effects might be due to differences in the perceived quality of the essay, we asked participants to rate the essay they read on the dimensions of overall quality (DP: $M = 4.34$, $SD = 1.08$; trivialization: $M = 3.81$, $SD = 1.40$) and originality/creativity (DP: $M = 4.59$, $SD = 1.01$; trivialization: $M = 4.65$, $SD = 1.33$) on a 7-point scale. The essays did not differ on either dimension ($F_s < 2$, $p_s > .16$), and there were no interactions between essay type and self-affirmation condition on these judgments ($F_s < 1$, $p_s > .45$).

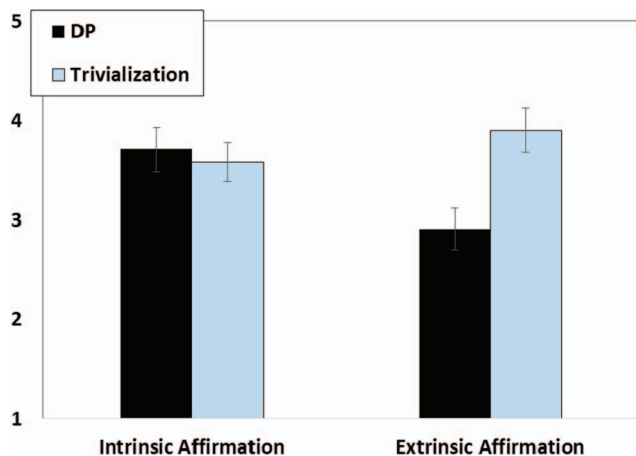


Figure 12. Perceived objectivity of beliefs as a function of self-affirmation and DP manipulation (Study 5B). Higher scores indicate greater perceived objectivity of beliefs. Scale ranged from 1 to 7. Y-axis values indicate estimated marginal means; bars indicate standard errors. DP = dramaturgical perspective. See the online article for the color version of this figure.

did extrinsically affirmed participants score lower in perceived objectivity of beliefs than intrinsically affirmed participants, $F(1, 52) = 7.09, p = .01, d = .72$, whereas in the trivialization essay condition this difference did not emerge ($p = .34$).

Discussion. Studies 2C, 3, and 4 supported Hypothesis 4 by showing that DP exposure decreased investment in living up to socially prescribed standards of value. Studies 5A–5B further support this hypothesis by showing that DP exposure reduces people’s certainty in the objective truth of their moral beliefs, both with specific reference to local (U.S.) cultural standards and more globally in connection with a wide range of social situations. Further, Study 5A provided initial support for Hypothesis 6, showing that the DP’s depleting effect on global moralization does not occur among individuals who are less focused on extrinsic value contingencies. Study 5B provides stronger support for this claim, showing that the DP does not reduce moral certainty among those who thought about an unchanging inner quality of themselves (but not an extrinsically valued success). Thus, if an authentic or intrinsic self model is active, the DP does not weaken moral conviction.

General Discussion

Eight studies using diverse operationalizations obtained support for several key pieces of our analysis of the DP—the tendency to view social reality as a constructed, relativistic, and historically contingent drama—and its relation to culture and self processes. Study 1 found—in accordance with Hypothesis 1—that individual variation in endorsement of the DP was positively associated with modernist tendencies (competitive individualism, secularism, and materialism) and was negatively associated with traditionalist views (fundamentalism, moral objectivism, and system justification). Studies 2A–2C and 3 centered around the notion that the DP can sometimes serve as a strategy to maintain self-esteem. Studies 2A and 2B provided evidence for Hypothesis 2 by demonstrating

that self-esteem threats in a specific role increased endorsement of the DP but did not increase agreement with a mere trivialization of the role. Studies 2C and 3 supported Hypothesis 3, showing that DP exposure eliminated or reversed a self-esteem threat, an effect that did not occur if participants were exposed to a direct system threat (Study 3).

The final three studies explored further consequences and moderators of the DP. In line with Hypothesis 5, Study 4 showed that participants expressed more role disengagement and reduced self-esteem when they adopted the DP with respect to the ultimate value of a particular social role. This suggests that the DP is likely not an effective long-term strategy for maintaining self-esteem. Studies 5A–5B showed that exposure to the DP decreased perceptions of the objectivity of one’s moral beliefs and the tendency to conceive of behaviors in strong moral terms (Hypothesis 4). However, in line with Hypothesis 6, this effect did not occur if participants had low extrinsic contingency focus (i.e., dispositional salience of the intrinsic self; Study 5A) or had been primed with a specifically intrinsic self-affirmation (Study 5B). These results suggest that if a model of the intrinsic, core self is active, exposure to the DP is less likely to influence one’s attitudes and beliefs.

Considering the foregoing studies as a whole, it is clear that the DP can have a range of consequences for the individual and her understanding of the world, and that these consequences can range from positive to negative in valence. We will now discuss the nature of the DP and its relationship to other areas of current social psychological investigation, as well as potential future research directions.

Understanding the Nature of the DP

Considering the present findings as a whole, the DP appears to be a somewhat unique construct, different from many other constructs in contemporary social psychology. As the correlational results of Study 1 suggest, it is clearly related to other self-relevant constructs, yet also demonstrates a pattern of associations more characteristic of a worldview. And as the experimental studies demonstrate, it can have consequences that might sometimes be considered positive, sometimes detrimental for the individual. Although this is only a preliminary investigation into the psychological causes and consequences of the DP, it is important to consider the pattern of results across the studies and attempt an initial elucidation of its nature.

Relation to other social psychological constructs. Returning to our epigraph, the DP can have both undesirable and beneficial effects. We have argued that is partly due to the fact that the DP is a reflective worldview, meaning that it involves reflection on the origins and arbitrariness of mainstream cultural values, without necessarily directly attacking these values. This distinguishes the DP from other worldview threats (e.g., Hafer & Bégué, 2005; Schimel, Hayes, Williams, & Jahrig, 2007) that have been studied in the literature. Study 3 in particular showed that although a direct system threat tends to increase investment in social standards, the DP tends to decrease such investment. Again, we believe this difference stems partly from the fact that DP exposure induces a metacognitive or meta-conscious approach to one’s beliefs, placing the individual in a more rational and typically less defensive psychological mode (Simon et al., 1997). Indeed, our findings suggest that participants do not typically react with defensiveness

to the DP but rather assimilate it (as in Studies 5A–5B, when the DP decreased moral objectivism).

These considerations cast in an interesting light the growing literature showing that very subtle threats to familiar meanings can elicit defensiveness (Proulx & Inzlicht, 2012). One factor that is routinely overlooked in this literature is the fact that there are many situations in which individuals are motivated to seek out a temporary sense of meaninglessness, or at least to metacognitively call into question their preconceived notions and habitual beliefs. Our studies have identified one such moderator: When information from the social environment suggests that the self has underperformed, people seem motivated to view the social environment in less obviously meaningful terms, questioning its objectivity. Future studies should further examine situational influences on tendencies to respond with assimilation versus defensiveness to threats against conventional meaning systems.

As a reflective worldview, the DP is also distinguishable from a mere self-enhancement strategy or self-concept. Higgins' (1996) concept of the self digest and Linville's (1985) self-complexity theory both highlight how the self can experience multiple aspects, concepts, or schemas and can tactically emphasize or deemphasize these aspects to protect self-esteem. By contrast, the DP involves the meta-conscious act of recognizing the self's multiple aspects, their social origin, and potential "groundlessness." Although this reflective perspective can protect self-esteem in a similar manner to a complex self-concept (Studies 2A–2C, 3), it also has other, more negative consequences that do not follow from a mere psychological shift to a different self-aspect. Adopting the DP can decrease conviction in the objectivity of one's beliefs (Studies 5A–5B) and can reduce self-esteem under certain circumstances (Study 4).

Moderators. We have argued that certain situational variables will moderate the effect of the DP and in particular whether it will have positive or negative, motivating or de-motivating outcomes. Our preliminary investigation identified two such moderators, but there are likely others. Study 4 showed that the DP is more likely to decrease self-esteem and role investment when it is adopted with respect to the abstract, long-term value of a social role. Studies 5A–5B showed that the DP is less likely to be assimilated when an intrinsic self model is dispositionally or situationally active.

Furthermore, although we believe that individuals living in modernized cultures have increasingly greater exposure to the DP, we also contend that individual differences moderate the likelihood of endorsing or even being aware of this perspective. Study 1 provides evidence that DP endorsement is positively associated with modernist tendencies, such as competitive individualism and secularism, and negatively associated with traditionalist tendencies, such as religious fundamentalism and system justification. Future studies might profitably investigate the interactional influence of situational and dispositional moderators of the DP. For example, it is likely that individuals with traditionalist beliefs may interpret the DP as more of a direct system threat, but those with modernist beliefs may be more likely to adopt the DP to strategically defend self-esteem.

Investigations of this nature may be especially important in light of the fact that the DP seems to have a fairly small effect on self-esteem outcomes. Although our manipulations had medium-sized effects in Studies 2A–2C, the DP only produced small effects

in our most highly powered study (3). It is quite likely that although most college students are able to temporarily assimilate the DP on account of its permeation through the cultural atmosphere, its effects might be much stronger for individuals who are already strongly integrated into modernist culture.

Cross-cultural differences. Beyond examining the role of within-culture dispositional differences, future research should examine the experience of the DP in substantially different cultural contexts. Our findings (particularly Study 1) and theoretical account suggest that the DP is associated with individualist tendencies. It might then be considered a unique feature of individualist as opposed to collectivist cultures (e.g., Triandis, 1995). Indeed, research suggests that individualism and modernist sociological developments—such as the spread of capitalism and secular, scientific worldviews—have had a bidirectional historical influence (Greenfield, 2013; Hamamura, 2012), and we propose that both of these factors contributed to the rise of the DP. However, it is also the case that a theatrical understanding of the self as shifting between different, contextualized social roles seems to fit the self-concept prominent in many East Asian cultures (e.g., Hwang & Han, 2010; Weber, 1951), where the self has been traditionally required to adopt different attitudes and postures depending on the relative status of an interlocutor and other factors. If holding a dramaturgical view of society is a distinctly individualist tendency, then why does this view seem to match the social attitudes of people in China and Japan, typically characterized as highly collectivist nations?

We believe that although people in collectivist East Asian countries might also endorse the idea that the self has to modify its behaviors and "face" in different social contexts, the implications of adopting the DP as a worldview would be very different in these countries. One important difference stems from Western, individualistic approaches to morality as opposed to Eastern, collectivist concepts. In European American culture, ranging from traditional religious beliefs to Kantian and utilitarian approaches, there is a strong emphasis on the idea that morality should have some objective basis, either in divine order or human rationality (Schweitzer, 1960). In this context, when information is presented suggesting that morality is socially determined and is mere play-acting, such information can have a profound impact, dampening one's sense of objectivism and moral legitimacy (as suggested by Studies 5A–5B). However, countries such as China have traditionally possessed an understanding of morality that is already inherently rooted in social relationships and exchange, rather than universalistic or "objective" principles (Xiaotong, 1992). In such settings, it is less likely that a belief in the socially constructed nature of reality would coincide with skepticism about morality or a lack of motivation to perform social roles.

Another major difference relevant to the DP is the presence of differing self models in individualist versus collectivist settings. Although Chinese traditional morality does not lack the notion of an authentic self (Chen, 2014), in collectivist settings self-authenticity is usually expressed by harmonizing one's unique self-concept with the social roles and obligations one must perform. By contrast, American models of authenticity have usually implied a tense dichotomy between individual and society, or the "true" realm of the inner self and the "outer" social world of illusion (e.g., Potter, 2010). Thus, although individualists rely on models of the intrinsic or authentic self to buffer against the DP's

implications (again, as in Studies 5A–5B), collectivists would be less likely to see any antagonism between the idea of self-authenticity and the socially based nature of reality.

Future Research Directions

The current investigation relates to several areas of contemporary social psychological research, and exploring these connections suggests possibilities for future studies. For instance, [Gino and Ariely \(2012\)](#) found that both high dispositional creativity and primed creativity predict increased cheating behavior. They suggest these effects occur because creativity is associated with moral flexibility, which they define as the “ability to justify . . . immoral actions by generating multiple and diverse reasons that these actions can be judged as ethically appropriate” ([Gino & Ariely \(2012\)](#), p. 447). We propose that adopting the DP can also be a tactic for increasing moral flexibility. Studies 5A–5B suggest that if individuals view the entirety of social reality as staged, they may also view ethical standards as less absolute. Therefore, the belief that morality is socially constructed could enable a person to make an immoral decision if he or she was motivated to do so.

Other studies ([Rai & Holyoak, 2013](#)) examining the connection between cultural relativism, punishment, and cheating offer further evidence that the DP may have an effect on moral decision making. Rai and Holyoak found that participants primed with moral relativism reported that moral offenses are less deserving of punishment. Furthermore, when participants were exposed to a cultural relativist perspective, they were more willing to lie about their performance on a task to obtain an economic incentive. As discussed in the introduction, moral relativism and the DP are both reflective worldviews, requiring a certain amount of meta-consciousness regarding one’s subjective position. Accordingly, these findings further suggest that, in addition to buffering the self against concrete instances of failure, the DP might also alleviate feelings of guilt when performing actions that would otherwise elicit such feelings. Future studies could profitably explore the connections between the DP, creative justifications, and moral behavior.

Although Study 1 demonstrates that DP endorsement is higher for individualists, another potential direction for future research would be to explore the implications of the DP for interpersonal relationships. [Giddens \(1991\)](#) contended that, in individualistic, secularized cultures, people seek “pure relationships” with close, intimate others. These relationships involve feelings of commitment, trust, and the creation of shared histories between the intimates involved. In a committed relationship with a romantic partner, one’s parents, or one’s children, the individual can self-disclose and present the authentic self in informal, “backstage” settings, without having to put on a socially conditioned performance. This suggests that, in response to the DP, people may orient toward intimate, family relationships as a coping mechanism. Indeed, an additional study that we have conducted (see the online supplemental materials) suggests that, when individuals are asked to write about the DP, they become more invested in close relationship goals and less invested in extrinsic goals. Future research should further investigate whether the DP induces a compensatory desire to seek intimate relationships based on trust.

Broader Implications

In the present studies, we found that the DP could alleviate the threat of a concrete failure in a particular social role, but that it could also lead to disengagement and depleted self-esteem when contemplating the ultimate value of a social role (Study 4). This raises the question of whether, at a broad social level, the DP is primarily a positive or negative cultural force: Does such a perspective help people cope with the challenges of social roles, or does it lead to harmful apathy and distance from those roles?

On the one hand, the DP could be viewed as a liberating perspective, insofar as it lifts the weight of everyday social reality from people’s shoulders and blunts the sting of negative social information about the self ([Cohen & Taylor, 1978](#)). For perhaps this reason, several therapeutic approaches—beginning with George Kelly’s fixed-role therapy ([Winter, 2013](#))—encourage individuals to act out alternate social roles or reflect on the socially constructed nature of reality to achieve a more flexible and secure self-concept ([Freedman & Combs, 1996](#)). The correlational findings of Study 1—showing that open-minded secularism and political liberalism are associated with DP endorsement—suggest another way in which the DP might be liberating. That is, the DP could be considered a system-challenging ideology ([Hennes, Nam, Stern, & Jost, 2012](#)), one that prompts critical reflection on and willingness to change the status quo. However, because the DP is a reflective worldview and not a direct worldview threat, it may have the advantage of circumventing typical defensive reactions to system challenge.

In considering the potential social benefits of the DP, it is important to recognize how the DP is typically experienced in people’s lives. As discussed in the introduction, it is unlikely that many individuals spend much time contemplating the theatrical nature of society. Although the DP has global implications, it is probably most often experienced in a temporary way and perhaps is localized to a certain role (as we examined it in Study 4). Here it is worth reconsidering a body of research alluded to in the introduction. The work of [Fleming and Spicer \(2003\)](#) and others has focused on workplace cynicism, which has been traced to feelings of dis-identification with organizations. Such cynicism could be viewed as a localized manifestation of the more global DP.

[Fleming and Spicer \(2003\)](#) claim that many contemporary workers tactically employ a sense of cynicism—and, by extension, the DP—to maintain the sense of a valued self, despite the monotony and lack of autonomy they typically experience on the job. An ironic consequence is that dis-identification and cynical behavior can actually increase the extent to which individuals ultimately consent to exploitive control ([Burawoy, 1979](#)). [Fleming and Spicer \(2003\)](#) asserted that “when the dis-identification process is enacted it can establish an alluring ‘breathing space’ where people feel untrammelled by the subjective demands of the organization, but which ironically permits them to behave as an efficient and meticulous member of the team nevertheless” (p. 167). Based on these analyses, it is reasonable to suggest that the DP, despite having liberating consequences on a subjective and experiential level, may often serve a socially conservative function. Through endorsing the DP, individuals may be more likely to submit to exploitive circumstances while maintaining the illusion of self-authenticity.

Aside from the fact that the DP might ironically facilitate the performance of unrewarding or extrinsically demanded tasks, our data suggest another aspect of this perspective that might call into question its liberating or positive function. Study 4 provided evidence that although the DP might be beneficial for self-esteem and role performance in the short term, the opposite is true if one is considering the long-term performance or value of a role. This pattern, combined with the applied research of Fleming and Spicer, suggests that the benefits of the DP may be short-lived. Temporarily, this perspective may allow the individual to achieve a sense of self-authenticity or even to behave more creatively or less in line with extrinsic demands. However, over the long term, the DP probably facilitates submission to social roles by providing an artificial sense of distance and uniqueness. Furthermore, if one consistently adopts the DP or embraces it in a more global or abstract sense, this may eventually lead to a conviction that social roles are actually unimportant and therefore that one cannot derive any real value from one's performance. Although this still (possibly) leaves open the prospect of deriving value from intimate personal relationships or other sources, it is doubtless an impediment to full social functioning and a sense of self-determination.

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