Diminishing the Perceived Importance of the Self: An Alternative Route to Self-Protection

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Abstract

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Diminishing the Perceived Importance of the Self: An Alternative Route to Self-Protection

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A large body of literature has documented the existence of numerous strategies designed to protect and promote the self-concept. Indeed, a number of researchers have viewed affirming and asserting self-aspects as the primary vehicle for promoting resilience in the face of threat and maintaining positive overall self-evaluations. The present studies depart from this approach and instead propose an alternative means by which one may alleviate the personal impact of negative life events—diminishing one’s perceived importance. It is argued that diminishing one’s perceived importance by viewing oneself within the context of a broader life perspective (i.e., within “the grand scheme of things”) can help ameliorate the deleterious psychological consequences of negative events. Study 1 demonstrated that the construct of diminished self-importance can be manipulated by video exposure to nature images in a laboratory setting. Study 2 examined whether diminishing the perceived self-importance would help alleviate stressful reactions to hypothetical negative events. Study 3 and 4 attempted to show that diminished self-importance induced by other manipulation techniques would buffer the impact of actual negative events and that the effects were moderated by levels of state self-esteem. The results provided partial support for the hypothesis that diminished self-importance serves as a buffer against negative events. Discussion focuses on issues
associated with manipulating the construct of diminished self-importance as well as
directions for future research.

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Overview

The expanse of the ocean, or the size of a whale or a mountain; these all can make you feel small. And oddly enough, feeling small is on some level comforting.

- Bergen, 2007

A large body of literature has been devoted to examining the contributing factors that lead to well-being and coping with threat. In particular, researchers have documented the existence of numerous strategies designed to protect and promote the self-concept. Self-enhancement and self-serving biases are perhaps one of the most pervasive phenomena found in social psychological literature that underscores remarkable repertoire for bolstering self-aspects. For instance, research has consistently shown that people perceive themselves as better than others in a wide variety of domains (e.g. Alicke, 1985; Balcetis, 2009; Weinstein, 1980), they tend to take credit for success while denying responsibility for failure (Zuckerman, 1979), they have better recall for positive as opposed to negative self-relevant information (Sanitiosso, Kunda, & Fong, 1990; Sedikides & Green, 2000), and lastly, they find favorable feedback to be more credible than unfavorable feedback (Ditto & Boardman, 1995; Ditto & Lopez, 1992).

A number of researchers have conceptualized affirming and asserting the sense of self as the primary vehicle for coping with threat and maintaining positive overall self-evaluations (e.g. Tesser, 2000). For example, self-affirmation theory postulates that focusing on important aspects of the self unrelated to threatening events and affirming those valued self-aspects protects one’s overall self-integrity (Steele, 1998), and terror
management theory posits that embracing cultural worldviews and asserting one’s place in culture helps manage the potentially paralyzing effects of mortality salience (Solomon, Greenberg, & Pyszczynski, 1991). Be it academic underachievement (Crocker, Karpinski, Quinn, Chase, 2003), interpersonal rejection (Leary, Koch, Hechenbleikner, 2001), inconsistent cognitions (Aronson, 1969) or foreboding messages (Cohen, Aronson, & Steele, 2000), self-threats are assumed to undermine one’s sense of self, and it would therefore seem useful to examine the means by which one bolsters the self in the service of self-protection.

While this approach yielded a wealth of insight into how people maintain the positive sense of self in the face of threats, researchers have found that there are negative consequences derived from bolstered self-concepts. Specifically, there is evidence linking self-enhancement to potentially damaging personal and interpersonal consequences (Baumeister, Heatherton, & Tice, 1993; Burger & Burns, 1988; Colvin, Block, & Funder, 1995; Paulhus, 1998), and the pursuit of self-esteem has been thought to entail a variety of long-term costs that outweigh short-term benefits (Crocker & Park, 2004). Likewise, Baumeister, Smart, and Boden (1996) postulate that violence and aggression emerge from an attempt to protect highly favorable self-appraisals when such views are challenged or disputed. In light of this, investigators have begun to examine alternative ways that people use to protect the self and maintain healthy psychological functioning that involve no augmentation or assertion of the self. For example, Neff (2003a) proposes that self-compassion is a psychological resource that provides buffer against negative events, and Crocker and colleagues (Crocker, 2008; Crocker, Niiya,
Mischkowski, 2008; Crocker & Canevello, 2008) suggest that concern for others is an effective self-protection process that helps manage challenging events. A central theme emerging from these works is a “quiet ego”, characterized by the tendency to transcend egotism, self-interest, and self-preoccupation, providing an alternative form of well-being (Bauer & Wayment, 2008). Spurred in part by these works, I depart from predominant theories on the self that hinge on the assumption that bolstering the self-concept serves as the primary mode of self-protection and instead propose an alternative means by which one may alleviate the impact of self-threats—diminishing one’s perceived importance.

Given the emphasis traditionally placed on the importance of the self, this idea may appear at first blush to be counter-intuitive. Consider, however, how easily people relate to the solace found in the diminished sense of the self afforded in everyday life. For example, people anecdotally report that gazing stars under the vast night sky or standing in front of a majestic mountain makes them feel small, which in turn evokes a sense of inner peace. The present research suggests that the sense of tranquility and equanimity gained from the recognition of one’s own smallness in the grand scheme of things reflects the beneficial effects of self-diminishment—the adoption of a perspective that one’s worries, concerns, and problems are not so threatening after all.

This paper will provide a brief review of research highlighting negative consequences of bolstered self-concept that have directly or indirectly sparked the conceptualizations of alternative self-resources. I will then discuss these alternative self-resources—divergent theories that broadly conform to the notion that transcending and extenuating the self is another promising route to self-protection and well-being. An
attempt will then be made to show that diminishing the perceived importance of the self is another alternative means that may provide buffer against threats to the self. This paper will then discuss four experiments designed to provide support for the beneficial effects of the diminished self-importance.

Bolstered Self-Concepts

There is a long-standing belief within and outside the field of psychology that high self-esteem provides a myriad of physical, mental, and social benefits. Research findings suggest that self-esteem is positively correlated with life satisfaction (Diener & Diener, 1995), mental health (Orth, Robins, Roberts, 2008), academic performance (Davies & Bremer, 1999; Hansford & Hattie, 1982), job satisfaction (Judge & Bono, 2001), and resilience in the face of adversity (McFarlin, 1985; McFarlin, Baumeister, & Blascovich, 1984). People with higher self-esteem are also found to show lower psychological and physiological reactions to negative events, providing evidence that self-esteem is a protective resource that offers a buffer against threats to the self (Ford & Collins, 2010). Given the beneficial effects of high self-esteem on a broad range of psychological outcomes, low self-esteem has been thought to have profound adverse consequences. Branden (1984, p. 12) went so far as to claim that he “cannot think of a single psychological problem—from anxiety and depression, to fear of intimacy or of success, to spouse battery or child molestation—that is not traceable to the problem of low self-esteem”.

In light of the potency of self-esteem in providing a variety of benefits, processes to maintain and boost self-esteem have generally been thought to contribute to positive
outcomes. Self-enhancement, in particular, has garnered substantial evidence to show that boosting positive self-image provides physical and mental health benefits. In highly influential work examining the effects of positive illusion, Taylor and Brown (1988) argued that unrealistic self-enhancement, along with other forms of positive illusion, is adaptive for psychological adjustment and healthy coping. This conceptualization of self-enhancement derives from the observation that women with breast cancer often made downward comparisons in an attempt to bolster self-image by inferring how relatively well they were coping (Taylor, Lichtman, & Wood, 1984). Based on the beneficial effects of such self-augmentation on adjustment, self-enhancement is hypothesized to be an indicator of general well-being and contribute to common features of adjustment: namely, the ability to be content with one’s life, the ability to care for others, openness to new ideas, the capacity for creative and productive work, and the ability to cope with stressful events. In support, evidence has shown that self-enhancement is associated with a variety of mental health indicators (Taylor, Lerner, Sherman, Sage, & McDowell, 2003a), and laboratory experiments demonstrate that people who enhance themselves to a greater extent exhibit lower physiological reactions and faster recovery from stress (Taylor, Lerner, Sherman, Sage, & McDowell, 2003b). Findings of research also suggest that self-enhancing beliefs are an effective tool of self-protection under conditions of extreme adversity, such as civil war and the death of a spouse (Bonanno, Field, Kovasevic, Kaltman, 2002; Taylor & Armor, 1996; Taylor, Lichtman, Wood; 1984).

These findings coexist, however, with alternative literature indicating that there are risks and costs involved in bolstering self-aspects. Despite the benefits widely observed
in previous research, there is evidence suggesting that self-enhancement is associated with poor social skills and psychological maladjustment (Colvin, Block, & Funder, 1995; Paulhus, 1998), and a longitudinal study shows that self-enhancement predicts decreasing levels of self-esteem and well-being over time (Robins & Beer, 2001). Similarly, Crocker and Park (2004) argued that the pursuit of validation of self-worth undermines learning, relationships, autonomy, self-regulation, and ultimately, mental and physical well-being. From this perspective, the motivation to obtain outcomes that validate one’s self-worth compels people to focus on defending and augmenting self-image while neglecting to fulfill fundamental human needs. Moreover, evidence indicates that high self-esteem itself is associated with negative attributes, such as narcissism (Bushman & Baumeister, 1998; Raskin & Hall, 1979), increased prejudice toward outgroups (Aberson, Healy, & Romero, 2000; Crocker, Thompson, McGraw, Ingerman, 1987), and distorted assessment about themselves (Baumeister, Heatherton, & Tice, 1993; Sedikides, 1993). Similarly, Baumeister, Smart and Boden (1996) proposed that inflated self-appraisals combined with an ego threat play an important role in aggression. People with highly favorable self-appraisals are presumably more likely than those with less favorable self-appraisals to resort to violence to protect the self when threatened by unflattering external evaluations. Indeed, Ellis (as cited in Epstein, 2001) asserts that self-esteem is the greatest sickness known to the human race because of the conditional nature of the construct that leads to a variety of negative consequences.
An Alternative Route to Self-Protection and Well-Being

**Self-compassion as a self-resource.** In light of these works that broadly implicate negative consequences of bolstering the self, researchers have begun to examine alternative routes to self-protection and well-being. One program of research that has addressed alternative means that may lead to self-protection suggests that self-compassion provides similar benefits to that of self-esteem but with fewer harmful effects. According to Neff (2003a), self-compassion entails extending nonjudgmental understanding and kindness toward one’s inadequacy. Self-compassionate people view their experience as part of the broader human experience. Recognizing that one’s pain and suffering are shared with others alleviates negative emotional reactions and self-blame. Having self-compassion also involves the state of mindfulness that allows for a detached view on life’s challenges. This perspective prevents people from becoming absorbed by their problems and immersed in painful thoughts and feelings. Consistent with the view, evidence suggests that self-compassion is positively correlated with life satisfaction, social connectedness, and emotional intelligence, whereas it is negatively correlated with depression, anxiety, self-criticism, rumination, and neurotic perfectionism (Neff, 2003b). Furthermore, studies show that self-compassion helps buffer anxiety in coping with an ego-threatening laboratory task (Neff, Kirkpatrick, & Rude, 2007). In kind, Neff, Hsieh, and Dejitterat (2005) showed that people high in self-compassion are more likely than people low in self-compassion to utilize adaptive rather than maladaptive coping strategies.
It is worth noting that self-compassion is positively correlated with self-esteem, but it is conceptually distinct from self-esteem to provide unique contributions to adoptive psychological functioning (Neff, 2003b). Whereas self-esteem is based on the outcome of self-evaluation, self-compassion has no bearing on perceived success or failure as indicators of self-worth (Neff, 2003a). Therefore, it is not necessary for self-compassionate people to defend and bolster the self-concept in order to maintain positive self-feelings. Instead, self-compassion is concerned with self-kindness that engenders positive emotion toward oneself and acceptance of personal shortcomings in the face of perceived inadequacy. Given the complexity and multifaceted nature of self-compassion, there are likely to be multiple dimensions of the construct that differentially exerts positive influence on psychological outcomes. These individual components as well as the construct of self-compassion as a whole present an alternative route to self-protection and well-being, thereby providing a useful antidote to the current emphasis on augmenting and asserting the self as a primary vehicle for coping with threat and maintaining positive overall self-evaluations.

**Caring concerns for others as a self-resource.** Self-affirmation theory (Steele, 1988) is one of the frameworks in research on the self that places emphasis on augmenting the self in the service of self-protection. The theory postulates that people are motivated to maintain global self-integrity—a belief in one’s adaptive and moral adequacy. When an important self-concept is threatened, self-affirmation processes are activated in order to repair damage. The primary goal of the self-system that is composed of different self-domains is to protect the overall worth and general integrity of the self,
not to resolve a provoking threat to a specific self-concept. Thus, affirming other valued self-concepts unrelated to threat allows restoration of the broader self-integrity without directly removing the threat. When the global self-integrity is affirmed, negative events become more tolerable as they lose self-threatening capacity.

Self-threats have been shown to induce a wide variety of defensive biases (e.g. Greenwald, 1980; Jemmott, Ditto, & Croyle, 1986; Major, Spencer, Schmader, Wolfe, & Crocker, 1998; Steel, 1997). Although such defensiveness is pervasive, affirmation of self-integrity can effectively reduce or eliminate negative reactions to various sources of self-threats (McQueen & Klein, 2006; Sherman & Cohen, 2006). For example, self-affirmation has been shown to reduce stereotype threat concerning math performance for women (Martens, Johns, Greenberg, & Schimel, 2006), defensive denial of racism among Whites (Adams, Tormala, & O’Brien, 2006), self-handicapping after non-contingent success (Siegel, Scillitoe, & Parks-Yancy, 2005), biased assessment of threatening health information (Harris & Napper, 2005; Sherman, Nelson, & Steel 2000), and the tendency to derogate a member of a marginalized group (Fein & Spencer, 1997).

In much of this research, self-affirmation is most often manipulated by having participants write an essay about a value that is personally important to them. Reflecting on a personal value serves as an affirmation of alternative self-resource unrelated to threat, which in turn satisfies the need to secure the overall self-integrity. As a result, defensive responses are diminished, allowing participants to be more open toward sources of threat. Some researchers have attempted to identify the process through which writing about an important value reduces defensive reactions. Based on the logic of self-
affirmation theory, much of this effort has focused on examining self-directed thoughts and feelings. For example, Koole, Smeets, van Knippenberg, and Dijksterhuis (1999) showed that implicit positive mood mediates the effect of value reflection on eliminating rumination, and Stapel and van der Linde (2011) demonstrated that self-clarity is an underlying mechanism that drives the effect of value reflection on dissonance threat reduction. Notably, recent work by Crocker, Niiya, and Mischkowskki (2008) suggests that value reflection eliminates defensive responses to self-threats by enhancing positive other-directed feelings—particularly love. In examining the influence of value reflection on the acceptance of a threatening health message, they demonstrated that writing about personal value increased feelings of love and connection, which in turn mediated the threat-reduction effects. Crocker et al. argued that reflecting on an important value serves as a reminder of things and people they care about. These caring feelings, in turn, allow people to think beyond themselves, shifting focus away from sources of threat and their implications for self-integrity. At physiological levels, feelings of love are hypothesized to increase levels of oxytocin, a hormone related to caregiving and trust. This in turn reduces stress-related cortisol responses (Gonzaga, Turner, Keltner, Campos, & Altemus, 2006; Zak, Krzban, & Matzner, 2005; Henry & Wang, 1998), thereby enabling people to process potentially threatening information in a less defensive manner.

Given the diversity of psychological phenomena self-affirmation impacts, some theorists have argued that there are likely to be multiple mediators, including affective, cognitive, and motivational processes to account for affirmation-induced threat reduction effects (Crocker, Niiya, & Mischkowskki, 2008; Sherman & Cohen, 2006; Staple & van...
der Linde, 2011). Nevertheless, Crocker et al.’s (2008) work is noteworthy of recognition in that it puts forth a novel interpretation that caring feelings for others rather than affirmation of self-integrity per se is ultimately responsible for lessening self-threatening capacity of negative events.

The notion of caring concerns for others as a self-resource is more clearly articulated in Crocker’s (2008) theorization of ecosystem motivation, which is characterized by the tendency to prioritize others’ needs and well-being over one’s own. Ecosystem motivation derives from the recognition “in which people see themselves as part of a larger whole, a system of individuals whose actions have consequences for others, with repercussions for the entire system” (p64). This motivational framework is directly juxtaposed with egosystem motivation—the desire to protect and promote a positive self-image. Egosystem motivation drives people to seek success, acknowledgement, admiration, and a sense of superiority while avoiding criticism, failure, rejection, and a sense of inadequacy. From this perspective, self-enhancement, self-serving attributions, and defensive responses to self-threats are assumed to be motivated by egosystem goals. In contrast to theories on the self that view such processes as means to maintain positive sense of self, Crocker argues that egosystem motivation entails substantial costs that undermine one’s well-being. Although people are thought to have both types of motivation, with each providing different benefits, ecosystem motivation is presumably more effective and sustainable way to satisfy fundamental human needs.
Crocker and colleagues (Crocker & Canevello, 2008; Crocker & Garcia, 2009) hypothesized that positive effects of ecosystem motivation are delivered through multiple routes, including physiological, emotional, cognitive, and behavioral processes. When encountered with stressful events, ecosystem motivation activates species-preservation system, raising levels of oxytocin to inhibit the fight-or-flight responses (Crocker, Garcia, & Neuer, 2008). Activation of species-preservation system also diminishes the perception of threat itself. In addition, ecosystem motivation triggers positive other-directed feelings, such as love, compassion, and empathy. Offering support to others out of genuine concerns for their welfare helps build supportive environment, contributing to physical and psychological well-being (Cohen & Syme, 1985).

To provide evidence for hypothesized effects of ecosystem motivation, Crocker and colleagues (2008; Crocker & Canevello, 2008) showed that goal pursuit based on ecosystem motivation (e.g. “have compassion for others’ mistakes and weaknesses,” “be supportive of others”) were associated with an increase in relationship closeness, social support, and general well-being, whereas egosystem goals (e.g. “get others to recognize or acknowledge your intelligence,” “do things you know you can succeed at”) were associated with increased feeling of loneliness, relationship conflict, anxiety, and depression. The results of the study suggest that working toward others’ needs rather than toward one’s own positive self-image paradoxically satisfies one’s own needs while challenging the theoretical perspective that identifies enhancing and bolstering the self as an important theme in psychological adjustment.
**Self-transcendence as a self-resource.** The theorization of ecosystem motivation places emphasis on other-directed thoughts and feelings. Implicit in this idea is the notion that self-concerns are minimized as they give way to concerns for others’ needs and well-being. Although positive effects of ecosystem motivation are assumed to derive from caring concerns for others, the flip side of the same coin—rising above self-concerns—may also play a role in contributing to well-being. Indeed, several lines of work examining the effects of self-transcendence suggest that going beyond self-concerns is a significant predictor of mental health.

Self-transcendence, as conceptualized by Reed (1991), referred to the experience of expanding self-boundaries to acquire broadened life perspectives. Self-transcendence is characterized by the ability to transcend preoccupation with the self, personal interests, and one's immediate needs. Reed viewed that self-transcendence is born out of developmental maturity, particularly for those facing with end-of-life issues, whether through aging or terminal illness. Transcending perspective is assumed to help integrate meaning of living, aging, and dying in order to provide a way to maintain psychological health when nearing death. To provide support for the theorized relationship between self-transcendence and psychological health, Reed (1986) compared mentally healthy and clinically depressed older adults. Consistent with his views, mentally healthy participants reported higher levels of self-transcendence than did depressed participants. Moreover, the longitudinal design of the study enabled him to show that lower levels of self-transcendence were a significant predictor of subsequent occurrence of depression among mentally healthy participants. Similarly, self-transcendence emerges as a correlate of
psychological adjustment among people with AIDS (Coward, 1994), breast cancer (Coward, 1991), and psychiatric illnesses (Cloninger, Svrakic, & Svrakic, 1997) as well as healthy middle-aged adult sample (Ellermann & Reed, 2001).

These findings corroborate Erikson’s (1982) view that rising above self-concerns is a strength and virtue associated with older adulthood. In proposing a psychosocial developmental model, Erikson argued that lives are organized into eight developmental stages from birth to death, each of which is marked by a life-stage challenge they must grapple with. Successful resolution of a challenge at each stage results in an acquisition of a virtue, which facilitates optimal personal development. According to Erikson, the last stage extending from 65 years onward requires “informed and detached concern with life itself in the face of death itself” (p. 61) to resolve the final task of achieving integrity to acquire a virtue of wisdom.

More recent research suggests that positive impact of self-transcendence extends to younger population across cultures. In examining the interrelation of values, spheres of concerns, and well-being in undergraduate students in multiple cultures, Boehnke, Schwartz, Stromberg, and Sagiv (1998) found that macrosocial worries—concerns for broader social entities, such as social class, country, and the world—were associated with greater mental health and reduced anxiety. In contrast, microsocial worries—personal concerns for the self and others in close personal contact—were associated with poor mental health and higher anxiety.

The lack of self-focus is also an important component in the construct of humility, which involves becoming “unselved” (Templeton, 1997) or “forgetting” the self
Contrary to dictionary definitions that equate humility with weakness, unworthiness, or self-deprecation, psychologists have conceptualized humility as a strength and virtue (Emmons, 1999; Exline, 2008; Tangney, 2000; 2002; Vera & Rodriguez-Lopez, 2004). For an “unselved” person, self-concerns are no longer at the center stage, and attention is directed toward the greater world beyond one’s immediate environment. By its very nature of the construct, humility has been proven difficult to measure, and thus, little empirical research has been conducted on the topic (Tangney 2000; 2002; Exline, 2008). However, a study examining lay perceptions of humility provides evidence that humility is viewed as a strength associated with positive attributes (Exline & Geyer, 2004). Although conceptualizations of self-transcendence are somewhat different among researchers, evidence consistently appears to suggest that transcending self-concerns by adopting a broadened perspective serves as a self-resource.

**Detachment from the self as a self-resource.** Insofar as rising above self-concerns provides psychological benefits, preoccupation with self-concerns is thought to be a general risk factor for dysfunction. Leary (2004) argued that people become overinvested in thoughts about themselves by virtue of having the sense of self, resulting in a variety of physical and psychological problems. Indeed, Leary referred to negative consequences of self-preoccupation as a “curse” of the self because such problems stem from the inherent nature of the self. This view resonates with research findings suggesting that being aware of oneself is generally aversive (Duval & Wicklund, 1972; Wicklund, 1975), and attention focused on the self is associated with a variety of problems, such as depression (Musson & Alloy, 1988; Pyszczynski, Holt, & Greenberg,
anxiety (Carver & Scheier, 1986), social anxiety (Buss, 1980), test anxiety (Wine, 1971), negative thinking (Lyubomirsky & Nolen-Hoeksema, 1995), and coronary heart disease (Scherwitz & Canick, 1988). An attempt to escape from the burden of the self may result in self-defeating behaviors, such as alcohol abuse (Hull, 1981), cigarette smoking (Wicklund, 1975), sexual masochism (Baumeister, 1988) and binge eating (Heatherton & Baumeister, 1991).

Based on the literature suggesting that excessive self-concerns are associated with a variety of problems, researchers have examined ways to ameliorate self-preoccupation. In particular, a perspective known as “decentering” or “metacognitive awareness” has been proposed as a way to reduce negative impact of self-focus (Safran & Segal, 1990; Teasdale et al., 2002). In decentered perspective, negative experiences are viewed as temporary mental phenomena rather than absolute, immutable reality. Decentering involves awareness of experiences without personally identifying with one’s thoughts and feelings or being carried away by them.

The notion of decentering forms an important cornerstone in clinical research and practice. Indeed, some theorists view decentered perspective as a potential mechanism and precondition for therapeutic change in cognitive treatment (Ingram & Hollon, 1986; Safran & Segal, 1990). Presumably, therapeutic benefits result not from altering thoughts themselves but from a renewed perception that thoughts represent passing events in the mind rather than reality itself. Consistent with the theorization, Fresco, Segal, Buis, and Kennedy (2007) showed that people with major depressive disorder treated with cognitive-behavioral therapy were more likely to exhibit decentered perspective than
those treated with antidepressant medication. Evidence also suggests that lower levels of decentered perspective are a significant predictor of relapse in depression (Fresco et al., 2007; Teasdale et al., 2002).

Conceptually similar to the notion of decentering, self-distancing has been investigated in social psychological literature as a tool to facilitate adaptive coping. According to Kross and Ayduk (2008), whether recalling past negative events leads to maladaptive rumination or adaptive reflection depends on psychological distance from the self. That is, when psychological distance from the self is low, people are likely to recount emotionally evocative details of their experiences, resulting in maladaptive rumination. On the other hand, when psychological distance from the self is high, people are likely to reflect and reconstrue the meaning of their experiences in ways that help facilitate insight and closure. In laboratory experiments, self-distancing was manipulated by having participants to recall a negative autobiographical experience either by taking a few steps back to observe it from a third person perspective (i.e. self-distanced perspective) or by visualizing it from their own eyes as if they are reliving the event (i.e. self-immersed perspective). The results of the studies showed that a self-distanced perspective led to reduced depressed affect and lower physiological reactivity to a greater extent than did self-immersed perspective (Kross & Ayduk, 2008; Ayduk & Kross, 2008). Additional evidence showed that a spontaneously generated self-distanced perspective (as opposed to experimentally manipulated one) in recalling negative events also led to fewer ruminating thoughts, lower emotional reactivity, and more adaptive reconstruing of the event in comparison to a self-generated self-immersed perspective.
(Ayduk & Kross, 2010). Taken together, the findings of the research suggest that detached perspectives on the self can facilitate adoptive coping and well-being.

**Diminishing the perceived importance of the self as a self-resource.** The theoretical perspectives on self-resources reviewed up to this point may appear to offer divergent underpinnings for an alternative route to self-protection and well-being. Taken collectively, however, they conform to the notion that a “quiet ego”, characterized by the tendency to transcend egotism, self-interest, and self-preoccupation, is a source of strength (Bauer & Wayment, 2008). More importantly, these approaches appear to represent a unifying perspective that the self may be conceived as liability; thus, solutions to self-related problems lie in extenuating aspects of the self. This view runs counter to predominant theories on the self that place emphasis on bolstering self-aspects whereby the self is conceptualized as an asset. Under this perspective, problems concerned with the self may be resolved through strengthening and affirming self-aspects. The present research takes on the view that the self is a liability and proposes another way to extenuate the self—diminishing the perceived importance of the self. Specifically, I propose that diminishing one’s perceived importance by viewing oneself within the context of a broader life perspective (i.e., within “the grand scheme of things”) can help ameliorate the deleterious psychological consequences of negative events. Just as failure is perceived as less threatening when the domain is thought to be irrelevant (Crocker & Wolfe, 2001; Tesser, Millar, & Moore, 1988), negative events should be perceived as less impactful when the self is perceived to be less important. Put another way, when the self is of paramount importance, reactions to self-threats may be particularly severe. To the
extent that the self is prominent, one becomes more vulnerable because negative events are perceived as more threatening. On the other hand, when self-importance is diminished, the same negative event becomes less threatening. Accordingly, diminishing the perceived importance of the self helps mitigate the impact of negative events while simultaneously lessening the need to protect and defend the self.

Though not directly focused on the effects of modifying the perceived importance of the self, an analogy can be drawn from the cognitive dissonance literature that recognizes how diminishing the importance of dissonant elements can enhance one’s ability to cope with self-threats (Joule & Martinie, 2008; Martinie & Fointiat, 2006; Simon, Greenberg, & Brehm, 1995). According to Festinger (1957), discrepancies between cognitions result in an aversive tension-state labeled cognitive dissonance that threatens perceptions of self-integrity. As the theory goes, people are motivated to reduce this tension-state by changing either their attitudes or behaviors, adding consonant cognitions, or trivializing dissonant elements. Consistent with Festinger’s formulation, Simon et al. (1995) demonstrated how trivializing an issue that involved counter-attitudinal behavior effectively reduced the cognitive dissonance evoked by engaging in that behavior. More specifically, participants who were asked to write a counter-attitudinal essay in support of mandatory comprehensive exams were more likely to perceive the issue of mandatory comprehensive exams as being less significant, thereby eliminating the need for attitude change. Similarly, I argue that threat to the self can be lessened by diminishing the importance of the self. Because self-threats have a more severe impact when the self is perceived as more rather than less important, diminishing
the perceived importance of the self should mitigate the deleterious impact of negative events.

Although counterintuitive, positive take on the notion of diminished self-importance can be gleaned from literature within and outside psychology. For example, Buddhist traditions emphasize the nonessential nature of the self by perceiving the self as transient and illusory (Bhikkhu, 1990). Known as *anatta*, this concept is commonly translated as “no-self”, and the failure to recognize the self as such is believed to be a significant cause of human misery and suffering. From this perspective, belief in the selfhood reflects ignorance and misconception—only when one rejects the notion of the self, it becomes possible to attain inner peace. The Judeo-Christian tradition is also imbued with the moral of the recognition of the insignificant nature of human in comparison to the divine. Likewise, “Twelve-Steps” implemented by Alcoholic Anonymous and similar programs to address a wide-range of substance abuse places premium on acknowledging one’s powerlessness and surrendering to a Power greater than oneself (Kurtz & Ketcham, 1992). Indeed, the recognition of one’s fragility is deemed prerequisite for overcoming dependency problems. Similarly, wilderness writing addresses the merit of the recognition of one’s smallness in nature. For example, Marshall (as cited in Zahnister, 1957) views that the primary contribution of wilderness to society is its ability to remind people of “being part of an immensity so great that the human being that looks upon it vanishes into utter insignificance”. For Muir (1918), wilderness offers the benefit of facilitating the perception that one is “a small part of the one great union of creation”. Additionally, research on humility identifies the recognition
of one’s smallness in a greater world as one of the key components of humility (Tangney, 2000; 2002; Templeton, 1997). This recognition, in turn, helps relinquish the tendency toward egocentric focus as well as the need to defend and enhance the all-important self. Taken together, these perspectives, either directly or indirectly, provide strong initial support for the notion that self-diminishment can have positive psychological consequences. Armed with this assumption, the present research attempts to demonstrate that diminishing the perceived importance of the self by viewing oneself within a broader life perspective would serve as a buffer against negative events.
Overview of the Studies

Study 1 examined whether exposure to images of nature would diminish perceived self-importance. In contrast to self-augmentation processes widely observed and documented in past research, diminished self-importance as a self-resource is a novel concept in psychological literature. Therefore, it is important to establish that the construct can be manipulated in a laboratory setting. Anecdotal evidence as well as wilderness writing suggest that being in nature often provokes a diminished sense of self and feeling of insignificance (e.g. Muir, 1918; Zahnister, 1957). Consistent with the observation, Study 1 showed that viewing images of nature diminished the perceived importance of the self. Study 2 demonstrated that the diminishment manipulation used in Study 1 decreased the magnitude of perceived stress levels in response to a variety of hypothetical negative events. Thus, Study 2 provided the initial evidence that diminishing the perceived self-importance helps alleviate stressful reactions to negative events. Study 3 examined the effects of diminished self-importance on an actual unpleasant event, one in which negative feedback on a task was delivered. Study 3 also utilized a different way to induce diminished self-importance. Past research suggests that natural environment provides a sense of rejuvenation and relaxation (Kaplan, 1995; Ulrich, 1983). Therefore, it is possible that the beneficial effects of the diminishment manipulation found in Study 2 could be accounted for by the effects of nature per se rather than the diminished importance of the self. To eliminate the possible confound, Study 3 utilized a decontextualized manipulation to induce diminished self-importance—an image of human figure decreasing in size to serve as a pictorial representation of
diminished self-importance. Contrast to the hypothesis, this manipulation failed to induce the intended effects of diminished self-importance. Neither did it provide protective effects on self-threats. Instead, the manipulation appeared to have elicited adverse psychological outcomes. Study 4 was designed to address the problem of self-diminishment manipulation used in Study 3 by utilizing another way to manipulate the construct—presenting photos of the universe, which is often associated with a sense of comfort found in one’s perceived smallness in anecdotal evidence. Contrast to the hypothesis, the manipulation failed to induce diminished self-importance. Neither did it provide protective effects on self-threats.
Study 1

Study 1 was conducted to examine whether video exposure to images of nature would induce participants to diminish the perceived importance of the self. The experience of being in the wilderness has been reported to evoke a diminished sense of self and feeling of insignificance (Muir, 1918; Zahnister, 1957). Although watching wilderness scenes on video is not quite the same as being in the wilderness, past research suggests that virtual environments in the form of photographs, video presentations, and imagination can be used to demonstrate psychological effects analogous to those evoked by in vivo exposure (e.g. deKort, Meijnders, Sponselee, & IJsselsteijn, 2006; Tussyadiah & Fesenmaier, 2009). Therefore, it was expected that relative to a control condition, viewing an absorbing nature video would lower participants’ perceived self-importance.

Method

Participants. Fifty undergraduates (9 men, 41 women) at Ohio University participated in exchange for course credit. Half of the participants were randomly assigned to a control condition, whereas the other half were randomly assigned to a diminishment condition.

Diminishment manipulation. Diminishment of perceived self-importance was induced by having participants view a 10-minute video clip comprising various dramatic moments culled from the television show Planet Earth. Those in the diminishment condition viewed a video clip that presented various wilderness scenes, including images of towering snowcapped mountains, a sunset at the North Pole, an avalanche, and a colossal waterfall, all chosen because of their potential to lead participants to reflect upon
the immensity of nature. In the control condition, on the other hand, participants were shown a 10-minute video clip edited from the film Red Balloon, a 1956 short film depicting a young boy exploring a Parisian neighborhood. In order to enhance the comparability of the control and nature videos, most of the original audio from both of the clips was removed and replaced by nearly identical soundtracks.

**Procedure.** After participants arrived at the lab, they were seated in individual cubicles that were each equipped with a computer. After watching either the nature or control video clip, they were asked to indicate, on a scale of 1 (strongly disagree) to 9 (strongly agree), their agreement with the following items: “I thought about how small I was in the grand scheme of things;” “I felt I was as trivial as the grass on the ground or the birds in the trees within the greater reality;” and “I felt my existence was relatively insignificant within a larger system.” These ratings were then averaged to create a single index of perceived self-importance (α = .70). Participants then completed Heatherton and Polivy’s (1991) state self-esteem scale (e.g. “I feel confident about my abilities,” “I feel inferior to others at this moment”) on a 9-point scale (1 = not at all, 9 = extremely). Following completion of these items, participants were debriefed and thanked for their participation.

**Results and Discussion**

As predicted, participants who watched the diminishment (i.e., nature) video (M = 5.03, SD = 1.79) reported feeling less important (i.e., smaller and more insignificant) than did those who watched the control video (M = 3.69, SD = 1.85), t(48) = 2.59, p = .01. Thus, the diminishment manipulation successfully lowered the perceived self-importance.
There were no significant effects of condition on the overall as well as the performance, social, or appearance components of the state self-esteem scale (all \( ps > .25 \)). Thus, participants in the *diminishment* condition did not report any greater feelings of self-denigration or worthlessness relative to participants in the *control* condition. At first blush, this may seem counterintuitive as one might expect that diminished self-importance should result in lower self-esteem. However, it is not surprising when one considers the fact that diminishing perceived self-importance does not entail downgrading one’s standing in evaluative domains as does low self-esteem. Threats to the self are not threatening when the perceived importance of the self is diminished precisely because the outcome of self-evaluation—the foundation of self-esteem—loses its impact. Therefore, diminished self-importance is expected to reduce self-evaluative concerns by extenuating the weight and implications of such self-related processes.
Study 2

Study 2 examined the effects of the diminishment manipulation on the magnitude of perceived stress levels in response to a variety of negative events. It was expected that participants would view negative events as less stressful following the diminishment manipulation. In addition, affect and a sense of connection with nature were measured in order to examine their effect on stress perceptions. It is conceivable that watching a nature video may simply elicit a more positive mood that in turn alleviates the magnitude of perceived stress levels associated with negative events. By the same token, it is also possible that a sense of connection with nature elicited by the nature video may mitigate the perceived impact of negative events (see Leary, Tipsord, & Tate, 2008; Mayer & Frantz, 2004). In order to rule out these possibilities, measures of affect and a sense of connection with nature were included.

Method

Participants. Fifty undergraduates (15 men, 35 women) at Ohio University participated in exchange for course credit.

Procedure. As in Study 1, participants were seated in individual cubicles after they arrived at the lab. They were randomly assigned to either the diminishment or control condition. After viewing the nature or control video clip, participants responded on scales of 1 (strongly disagree) to 9 (strongly agree) to the following questions that comprised the perceived self-importance measure: “When I think about nature I feel insignificant;” “I feel just as trivial as the grass on the ground or the birds in the trees;” and “In the grand scheme of things my existence is inconsequential.” These ratings were
averaged to create a single index of perceived self-importance (α = .53). Next, a sense of connection with nature was measured by the following questions on a 9-point scale (1 = *strongly disagree* to 9 = *strongly agree*): “I feel connected to the broader natural world;” “I feel I am a part of the web of life;” “I think of the natural world as a community to which I belong.” These ratings were averaged to create a single index of a sense of connection with nature (α = .56). To assess perceived stress levels, participants were then presented with 21 negative events (e.g. “being let down or disappointed by friends;” “too many things to do at once;” “lower grades than expected”). These items were adopted and modified from the Inventory of High-School Students’ Recent Life Experiences (Kohn & Milrose, 1993). Each item was scored on a 9-point scale (1 = *not at all stressful*, 9 = *extremely stressful*), and all the ratings were collapsed into a single index (α = .92) with higher scores indicating higher perceived stress levels. Finally, participants completed the Positive and Negative Affect Schedule (PANAS; Watson, Clark, & Tellegen, 1988) that comprises 10 positive (e.g. “interested”) and 10 negative (“distressed”) emotions in order to assess current mood on a 9-point scale (1 = *not at all*, 9 = *extremely*). Following completion of these items, participants were debriefed and thanked for their participation.

**Results and Discussion**

**Diminishment of perceived self-importance.** Consistent with Study 1, participants in the *diminishment* condition (M = 4.90, SD = 1.67) rated their perceived self-importance to be lower than did those in the *control* condition (M = 4.09, SD = 1.15),
Thus, viewing the nature video appeared to diminish the perceived importance of the self relative to the control condition.

**Perceived stress levels.** As hypothesized, participants in the diminishment condition \( (M = 6.09, SD = 1.20) \) rated negative events as being less stressful than did those in the control condition \( (M = 6.96, SD = 1.35) \), \( t(48) = 2.38, p = .02 \). Moreover, there was a significant correlation between perceived self-importance and stress levels, \( r(48) = -.31, p = .03 \). Participants who rated their self-importance as being lower also tended to view negative events as being less stressful. However, perceived self-importance did not mediate the relationship between the conditions and perceived stress levels.

**Affect.** There was no significant difference between the diminishment condition \( (M = 5.44, SD = 1.28) \) and the control condition \( (M = 5.44, SD = 1.28) \) on positive affect, \( t(48) = .42, p = .68 \). On the other hand, participants in the diminishment condition \( (M = 2.68, SD = 1.27) \) reported higher levels of negative affect than did those in the control condition \( (M = 2.07, SD = .87) \), \( t(48) = 2.00, p = .052 \). Perceived self-importance was marginally correlated with positive affect, \( r(48) = .26, p = .07 \), but not with negative affect, \( r(48) = .002, p = .99 \). Importantly, the effect of the manipulation on perceived stress levels remained significant after controlling for positive and negative affect, \( \beta = .31, p = .03 \). Combined with the lack of difference between conditions for positive affect, this suggests that positive affect cannot account for the effect of watching the nature video on mitigating perceived stress. As for the effect of viewing the nature video on enhancing negative affect, a potential explanation resides in the diametrical property of
nature, representing beauty and life on the one hand, and fear and anxiety arising from untamed and uncontrollable aspects of nature on the other (Bixler & Floyd, 1997; Koole & Van den Berg, 2005). The rugged force and austere beauty of the wilderness captured in the video clip might have tapped into participants’ implicit beliefs regarding the darker side of nature (Koole & Van den Berg, 2005), thereby invoking a sense of disquiet.

**Sense of connection with nature.** There was no significant difference between the diminishment condition ($M = 6.25$, $SD = 1.05$) and the control condition ($M = 5.99$, $SD = 1.58$) on a sense of connection with nature, $t(48) = .69$, $p = .50$, and the effect of the manipulation on perceived stress levels remained significant after controlling for a sense of connection with nature, $\beta = .33$, $p = .02$. This suggests that a sense of connection with nature cannot account for the effect of watching the nature video on mitigating perceived stress.

A possible alternative interpretation of the findings is that participants who watched the nature video viewed negative events as being less stressful as a defensive response to self-diminishment. Given the lack of association between perceived self-importance and negative affect, however, this interpretation seems unlikely. Indeed, diminished self-importance tended to be associated with positive affect, and thus it was unlikely to be construed as a negative experience that threatened the self-concept.

In all, Study 2 provided the initial evidence that diminishing the perceived self-importance helps alleviate stressful reactions to negative events. The lower participants’ perceived self-importance, the less stressful reactions they reported having to negative
life events. Moreover, this effect cannot be accounted for by mood improvement or a greater sense of connection with nature following exposure to the nature video.
Study 3

Study 3 was designed to extend the findings of Study 2 by examining the effects of diminished self-importance on an actual unpleasant event, one in which negative feedback on a task is delivered. Being negatively evaluated presents threat to the self. In order to protect the sense of self-worth, people are motivated to engage in defensive strategies, such as discrediting the source of negative evaluation and downplaying the importance of attributes being evaluated (e.g. Ditto & Boardman, 1995; Ditto & Lopez, 1992; Zuckerman, 1979). When self-importance is diminished, negative events are expected to have less impact, thereby invoking less defensive reactions to the unflattering evaluation.

Study 3 also employed a different way to manipulate diminished self-importance. Although the findings of Study 2 were promising, they nevertheless leave an alternative explanation due to the possible confound of rejuvenating effects of nature images. Research suggests that natural environment can aid stress reduction. According to Ulrich (1983), seeing particular features of nature, such as moderate depth, moderate complexity, the presence of a focal point, and vegetation facilitates psychophysiological stress recovery. Kaplan (1995) postulates that the exposure to nature facilitates recovery from attention fatigue arising from information processing overload of daily life. In light of this, decreased levels of perceived stress may, at least in part, be accounted for by the beneficial effects of the exposure to nature images. To eliminate the possible confound, Study 3 utilized a decontextualized manipulation to induced diminished self-importance.
Specifically, participants were presented with a diminishing human figure designed to simulate a pictorial representation of diminished self-importance.

Furthermore, Study 3 examined another possible mediator of the protective effects of diminished self-importance. Diminishing perceived importance of the self may be followed by another psychological outcome which better accounts for variability in decreased threat responses. It was hypothesized that diminished self-importance would mitigate the impact of negative events via lessening self-obligations that bind one to meet standards of values. James (1890) suggested that “pretensions” or goals in which people have staked their sense of personal worth present vulnerability to the sense of self because perceived shortcomings in these areas lead to devaluation of the self. Similarly, self-discrepancy theory highlights negative consequences of the failure to adhere to the “self-guides” or internalized standards (Higgins, 1987). Rogers (1959; 1961) argues that the pressure to meet societal standards leads to the development of conditional positive self-regards, which poses a significant impediment to fulfilling one’s potentials. The ability to act spontaneously and autonomously without the need to conform to such standards is regarded as one of the main features of fully functional, self-actualized individuals (Maslow, 1968; Rogers, 1961). Similarly, Neff et al., (2004) postulate that the strength of self-compassion as a self-resource resides in its ability to circumvent self-evaluation processes and maintain positive emotion toward the self in the face of failure. These theoretical perspectives underscore the notion that people are encumbered by the sense of responsibilities to meet certain goals and standards so as to maintain a sense of self-worth. Moreover, constant challenges to meet such standards impose psychological
burden, and a reprieve from the self-imposed obligations may provide a sense of relief and comfort. I argue that all-important self is inherently tied in with the burden of having to fulfill goals and standards to maintain the perceived importance of the self. Diminishing self-importance sets people free from the responsibilities, enabling them to maintain a sense of equanimity and self-acceptance in the face of failure. Thus, beneficial effects of diminished self-importance are expected to be delivered through lessening of such self-obligations.

In addition, Study 3 examined moderating effects of trait self-esteem. Self-esteem has been regarded as a self-resource that provides protective effects against negative events, and it is maintained by a variety of self-augmentation processes. If diminished self-importance serves as an alternative self-resource that does not rely on self-augmentation, it stands to reason that diminished self-importance constitutes a more valuable resource for those who are disinclined to augment self-aspects. In other words, diminished self-importance is expected to offer greater benefits to those who have low self-esteem as it supplements the peril of low self-esteem.

**Method**

**Participants.** Sixty-nine undergraduates (20 men, 49 women) at Ohio University were recruited to participate in exchange for course credit.

**Procedure.** Participants were seated in individual cubicles after they arrived at the lab. They were randomly assigned to either the *diminishment* or *control* condition. Participants first completed the Rosenberg’s (1965) Self-Esteem Inventory, a widely-used measure of trait self-esteem (e.g. On the whole I am satisfied with myself). Participants
then received a bogus negative feedback on a social sensitivity test adopted from threat manipulation used by Knowles, Lucas, Molden, Gardner, and Dean (2010). Participants were told that they would take a well-validated social sensitivity test. They were told that people who score higher on this test tend to be adept at reading interpersonal cues and enjoy successful marriage, rewarding friendships, and positive interpersonal interactions at workplace, whereas people who score lower tend to be less popular and have negative relationships in general. In this task, participants were presented with 36 images of sets of eyes. They were asked to identify emotion for each image by choosing one of 4 response options (e.g. reflective, aghast, irritated, impatient). Participants were told that most people get 70% or 25 choices correct. After completing the test, they received a failure feedback by being informed that they have scored 45% or 16 choices correct. Participants then rated the degree to which the feedback on the social sensitivity test was positive or negative (1 = very negative, 9 = very positive). To manipulate perceived self-importance, participants in the diminishment condition were presented in the computer screen with a diminishing human figure. They were told that their task was to press a computer keyboard when the human figure reached one inch in size. Participants in the control condition were presented with an equal size of a human figure moving from one side to the other side of the computer screen. They were told that their task was to press a computer keyboard when the human figure reached one inch away from the side of the computer screen. All participants completed 5 trials. After completing the diminishment manipulation task, participants responded to the following questions to examine perceived self-importance on a 9-point scale (1 = strongly disagree, 9 = strongly
disagree); “I feel small in the grand scheme of things;” “My existence is relatively insignificant within a larger system.” These ratings were averaged to create a single index of perceived self-importance (α = .74). Participants then respond on scales of 1 (strongly disagree) to 9 (strongly agree) to the following questions designed to assess diminished self-obligations: “I feel okay about myself even when I fail to meet an important goal;” “I can accept myself even when I make serious mistakes;” “Botching an important task does not really change how I feel about myself;” “Even when things go wrong, it doesn’t affect how I perceive myself.” These ratings were averaged to create a single index of self-obligations (α = .91). Next, to examine levels of defensive reaction to the negative feedback on the social sensitivity test, the perceived validity of the test, the importance of social sensitivity, and excuses or justification for the poor performance on the test were assessed. Participants responded to the following questions on a 9-point scale (1 = strongly disagree to 9 = strongly agree) that were averaged to form a measure of the perceived validity of the test: “The test is diagnostic in predicting interpersonal skills;” “Complex skills such as social sensitivity cannot be measured by a paper-and-pencil test;” “It is difficult to believe that social sensitivity can be captured by the test I took” (α = .40). Participants then responded to the following questions designed to assess the extent to which they downplayed the importance of social sensitivity on a 9-point scale (1 = strongly disagree to 9 = strongly agree) that were averaged to form a composite measure: “Social sensitivity is important in order to be successful in career;” “Social sensitivity is critical for maintaining good relationships with others;” “Social sensitivity is essential for leading a happy and productive life” (α = .87). Participants
then responded on scales of 1 (*not at all*) to 9 (*very much*) to the following questions to assess excuses or justification for their poor performance on the test that were averaged to form a composite measure: “How hard did you try to do well on the test?” “How motivated were you to do well on the test?” “How much did you focus on the task when you took the test?” (α = .83). Participants then completed the PANAS and the state self-esteem scale. Finally, participants were debriefed and thanked for their participation.

**Results and Discussion**

**Diminished self-importance.** There was no significant difference between the diminishment condition (M = 4.43, SD = 1.62) and control condition (M = 4.57, SD = 1.80) in perceived self-importance, *t*(67) = .35, *p* = .73. Thurs, the manipulation used in Study 3 failed to induce diminished self-importance.

**Self-obligations.** There was a marginally significant difference between participants in the diminishment condition (M = 4.51, SD = 1.68) and the control condition (M = 5.21, SD = 1.62) in self-obligations, *t*(67) = 1.75, *p* = .08. Unexpectedly, the diminishment manipulation appeared to enhance rather than diminish the sense of self-obligations. One possible explanation for the findings is that the manipulation used in Study 3 tapped on a negative form of diminished self-importance, and thus it enhanced the need to validate the sense of self (i.e. self-obligations). Although I have emphasized positive profiles of diminished self-importance whereby perceiving the self as small in the grand scheme of things serves as a self-resource, feeling small can take on negative meanings depending on the contexts. For example, feeling small can be equated with a sense of meaninglessness, powerlessness, and inadequacy. Indeed, a negative form of
diminished self-importance may be a more dominant, rudimentary, and better-rehearsed interpretation of the sense of smallness that is more readily accessible than a positive form of diminished self-importance. In contrast, diminished self-importance as a self-resource is a more elaborate concept that is cultivated via reflective contemplation. The simplified diminishing human figure stripped of any sociocultural contexts is perhaps more conducive for priming the primitive (i.e. negative) form of diminished self-importance but insufficient for bringing to mind the elaborate (i.e. positive) form of the construct. Participants who were threatened by the negative form of diminished self-importance might have felt an increasing need to meet standards of value, resulting in a heightened sense of self-obligations.

Correlational analysis revealed a marginally significant association between the perceived self-importance and self-obligation $r(67) = -.21, p = .08$. Participants who rated their self-importance as being lower reported higher levels of self-obligation. It appears that the self-importance measure captured a negative rather than positive form of diminished self-importance.

**Defensive responses to the failure feedback.** Regression analyses revealed that the main effects for perceived validity of the social sensitivity test, importance of social sensitivity, and excuses for poor performance on the social sensitivity test were not significant. Means and standard deviations for these ratings by condition are presented in Table 1.
Table 1

Means and Standard Deviations for Defensive Responses to the Failure Feedback, Study 3.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Diminishment</th>
<th></th>
<th>Control</th>
<th></th>
<th>t(67)</th>
<th>p</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>M</td>
<td>SD</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>SD</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Perceived Validity</td>
<td>5.04</td>
<td>.60</td>
<td>5.09</td>
<td>.59</td>
<td>.35</td>
<td>.73</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Importance of Social Sensitivity</td>
<td>6.39</td>
<td>1.36</td>
<td>6.61</td>
<td>1.35</td>
<td>.67</td>
<td>.51</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Excuses</td>
<td>6.60</td>
<td>1.29</td>
<td>6.34</td>
<td>1.37</td>
<td>.80</td>
<td>.43</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

However, there was a significant condition × trait self-esteem interaction for perceived validity of the social sensitivity test, $\beta = 2.07$, $t(65) = 3.06$, $p = .003$. As shown in Figure 1, tests of simple slopes revealed a significant association between self-esteem and perceived validity of the test among participants in the diminishment condition $\beta = -.53$, $t(65) = 3.58$, $p = .001$, but nonsignificant association for those in the control condition, $\beta = .20$, $t(65) = 1.98$, $p = .26$. The interaction was decomposed by performing separate regression analyses to compare the effects of diminishment manipulation on perceived validity of the social sensitivity test for those with low and high levels of trait self-esteem. Contrast to the hypothesis, there was no significant difference between the conditions among participants with low self-esteem $\beta = -.18$, $t = -.98$, $p = .34$ and a marginally significant difference among those with high self-esteem $\beta = .32$, $t = 1.89$, $p = .07$. Participants with high self-esteem in the diminishment condition perceived the social sensitivity test to be less valid, and thus responded to the
failure feedback on the test with more defensiveness than did those in the control condition.

Figure 1. Self-Esteem x Diminishment Manipulation on Perceived Validity of the Social Sensitivity Test, Study 3

Thus, it can be interpreted that the effects of negative connotations associated with diminished self-importance were more detrimental to participants with high self-esteem than to those with low self-esteem. It is possible that although high self-esteem typically provides protection against self-threats, the threat of diminished self-importance induced by the diminishing human figure was presented to participants without being consciously recognized as a threat, thereby failing to activate processes of self-protection that are otherwise afforded by high self-esteem. Moreover, diminished self-importance is perhaps a more novel and unfamiliar concept to people with high self-esteem than to
people with low self-esteem, and thus, it may present a greater threat to those with high self-esteem.

Correlational analyses revealed no significant association between perceived self-importance and perceived validity of the social sensitivity test $r(67) = .02, p = .91$, importance of social sensitivity $r(67) = .09, p = .45$, or excuses for poor performance on the social sensitivity test $r(67) = -.06, p = .64$.

**Affect.** There was no significant difference between the *diminishment* condition ($M = 6.27, SD = 1.28$) and the *control* condition ($M = 6.33, SD = 1.28$) on positive affect, $t(67) = .42, p = .87$. Neither was the different between the *diminishment* condition ($M = 2.09, SD = 1.26$) and the *control* condition ($M = 2.08, SD = 1.58$) significant on negative affect, $t(67) = .05, p = .96$. Perceived self-importance was marginally correlated with negative affect, $r(67) = .22, p = .07$, but not with positive affect, $r(67) = -.19, p = .12$.

**State self-esteem.** There was no significant difference between the *diminishment* condition ($M = 6.23, SD = 1.43$) and the *control* condition ($M = 6.07, SD = 1.35$) on the overall self-esteem $t(67), p = .64$. Neither was the different between the two conditions significant on the performance, social, or appearance components of the state self-esteem scale (all $ps > .30$). Correlational analyses revealed significant associations between the diminished self-importance and the performance, $r(67) = -.48, p < .001$, social $r(67) = -.53, p < .001$, as well as appearance $r(67) = -.50, p < .001$ components of the state self-esteem scale. Participants who rated their perceived self-importance as being lower tended to show lower levels self-esteem.
In all, Study 3 failed to support the hypothesis that participants in the\textit{diminishment} condition would respond less defensively to negative evaluation than would those in the \textit{control} condition, particularly for those with low trait self-esteem. Contrast to the hypothesis, participants with high self-esteem presented with a diminishing human figure tended to show more defensive reaction to negative feedback on the social sensitivity test than did those with low self-esteem. In addition, participants in the \textit{diminishment} condition tended to report higher levels of self-obligations than did those in the \textit{control} condition. Taken together, the manipulation used in Study 3 appeared to activate a negative construct, thereby eliciting adverse psychological effects.
Study 4

The goal of Study 4 was to address the problem of self-diminishment manipulation used in Study 3 and to demonstrate protective effects of diminished self-importance on an actual negative event. To manipulate diminished self-importance, participants were presented with photos depicting the universe. People anecdotally report that looking at photos of the universe remind them of how small they are in the grand scheme of things and that these experiences often bring a sense of inner peace. Therefore, presenting photos of the universe provides a context that is often associated with a positive form of diminished self-importance. The procedure for creating a negative event was identical to Study 3.

In all, Study 4 examined the hypothesis that participants presented with photos of the universe would respond less defensively to negative evaluation than would those in the control condition presented with photos of office spaces. Furthermore, it was hypothesized that diminished self-importance would mitigate the impact of negative events via lessening self-obligations that bind one to meet standards of values. In addition, Study 4 examined moderating effects of trait self-esteem. It was expected that diminished self-importance would offer greater benefits to those who have low self-esteem than to those with high self-esteem.

Method

Participants. Seventy undergraduates at Ohio University were be recruited to participate in exchange for course credit.
Procedure. As in previous studies participants were seated in individual cubicles after they arrived at the lab. They were randomly assigned to either the diminishment or control condition. Participants first completed the Self-Esteem Inventory. Threat manipulation identical to the one used in Study 3 was administered. Participants then completed the diminishment manipulation task. Participants in the diminishment condition viewed 15 photos of the universe. Those in the control condition viewed 15 photos of office spaces. Each photo was presented for 10 sec. All participants indicate the extent to which they liked each of the photos on a 5-point scale (1 = extremely unlikable, 5 = extremely likable). Participants then responded to the perceived self-importance measure, which included the items used in Study 3 as well as the following items: “when I think about the universe, I feel small”, “my existence is insignificant in the vast universe”. All ratings were averaged to create a single index of perceived self-importance (α = .78). Participants then filled out the self-obligations scale and the measures of defensive reaction identical to Study 3. In addition, participants responded to the following questions on a 9-point scale (1 = strongly disagree, 9 = strongly agree); “The feedback I received on my performance on the social sensitivity bothers me a lot;” “I don’t feel good about myself after I received the feedback on the social sensitivity test.” These ratings were averaged to create a single index of feeling about the feedback (α = .79). Participants then completed the PANAS and the state self-esteem scale. Finally, participants were debriefed and thanked for their participation.
Results and Discussion

**Diminished self-importance.** There was no significant difference between the diminishment condition \((M = 4.66, SD = 1.63)\) and control condition \((M = 5.11, SD = 1.84)\) in perceived self-importance, \(t(68) = 1.07, p = .29\). Thurs, the diminished manipulation failed to induce diminished self-importance. Although people anecdotally report that looking at images of the universe remind them of how small they are in the grand scheme of things to bring a sense of peace and comfort, such moments may not be frequently experienced by most individuals. The sense of inner peace arising from the realization of one’s smallness may require contemplative and self-reflective thought processes, and the presentation of photos of the universe in a laboratory may not be sufficient to induce such thoughts. Although the diminishment manipulation used in Study 4 provided more contextual information that is closely related with everyday experiences of diminished self-importance than did the human figure decreasing in size used in Study 3, it was not as powerful or effective as the nature video used in Study 1 and 2.

**Self-obligations.** There was no significant difference between participants in the diminishment condition \((M = 4.77, SD = 1.84)\) and the control condition \((M = 4.74, SD = 1.44)\) in self-obligations, \(t(68) = .09, p = .93\). Correlational analysis revealed no significant association between the perceived self-importance and self-obligation \(r(68) = -.13, p = .30\).

**Responses to the failure feedback.** Regression analyses revealed that the main effects for the perceived validity of the social sensitivity test, importance of social
sensitivity, excuses for poor performance on the social sensitivity test, and feelings about the negative feedback were not significant. Means and standard deviations for these ratings by condition are presented in Table 2.

Table 2

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Diminishment</th>
<th>Control</th>
<th>t(68)</th>
<th>p</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Perceived Validity</td>
<td>4.12, 1.12</td>
<td>4.21, 1.29</td>
<td>.62</td>
<td>.54</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Importance of</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Social Sensitivity</td>
<td>6.63, 1.42</td>
<td>6.82, 1.17</td>
<td>.67</td>
<td>.51</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Excuses</td>
<td>6.85, 1.48</td>
<td>6.83, 1.39</td>
<td>.06</td>
<td>.95</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Feeling</td>
<td>4.48, 1.87</td>
<td>4.24, 2.09</td>
<td>.52</td>
<td>.61</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Neither was condition × trait self-esteem interaction significant for any of the dependent variables, (all ps > .13). Additionally, correlational analyses revealed no significant association between perceived self-importance and perceived validity of the social sensitivity test $r(68) = .12, p = .32$, importance of social sensitivity $r(68) = .01, p = .95$, excuses for poor performance on the social sensitivity test $r(68) = .04, p = .75$, or feeling about the feedback test $r(68) = .05, p = .69$.

Affect. There was no significant difference between the diminishment condition ($M = 6.19, SD = 1.67$) and the control condition ($M = 6.23, SD = 1.72$) on positive affect, $t(68) = .09, p = .93$. Neither was the different between the diminishment condition ($M =
2.34, \(SD = 1.86\)) and the control condition \((M = 2.75, SD = 1.45)\) significant on positive affect, \(t(68) = .102, p = .32\). Perceived self-importance was not significantly correlated with positive affect, \(r(68) = -.18, p = .13\) or negative affect, \(r(68) = .18, p = .14\).

**State self-esteem.** There was no significant difference between the diminishment condition \((M = 5.91, SD = 1.63)\) and the control condition \((M = 6.11, SD = 1.16)\) in the overall self-esteem \(t(68), p = .55\). Neither was the different between the two conditions significant on the performance, social, or appearance components of the state self-esteem scale (all \(ps > .25\)). Correlational analyses revealed no significant association between the diminished self-importance and the performance component of the state self-esteem scale, \(r(68) = -.16, p = .19\). However, the diminished self-importance was significantly correlated with the social, \(r(68) = -.49, p < .001\), and appearance components, \(r(68) = - .40, p = .001\) as well as the overall state self-esteem, \(r(68) = -.43, p < .001\). Participants who rated their perceived self-importance as being lower tended to show lower levels self-esteem. Thus, the self-importance measure appeared to capture a negative rather than positive form of diminished self-importance.

In all, Study 4 failed to support the hypothesis that participants in the diminishment condition would respond less defensively to negative evaluation than would those in the control condition, particularly for those with low trait self-esteem. The manipulation used in Study 4 was not sufficient to elicit diminished self-importance to provide buffer against negative events.
General Discussion

Previous research has shown the pervasive tendency for people to protect and promote the self-concept. The considerable empirical research in this area has focused on affirming, augmenting, and asserting self-aspects as the primary vehicle for promoting resilience in the face of threat and maintaining positive overall self-evaluations (e.g. Fein & Spencer, 1997; Greenberg & Pyszczynski, 1985; Taylor & Sherman, 2008; Wicklund & Gollwitzer, 1982). Although a large number of studies suggest that the tendency to bolster the sense of self provides physical and mental benefits (e.g. Diener & Diener, 1995; Ford & Collins, 2010; Taylor & Brown, 1988), self-augmentation has also been linked to potentially damaging personal and interpersonal consequences (e.g. Baumeister, Heatherton, & Tice, 1993; Crocker & Park, 2004). With increasing recognition of negative implications of self-augmentation processes, a number of psychologists have begun to chart alternative ways in which people promote a positive sense of self. In light of these works on the self and well-being, the current research presented a potentially novel approach to self-protection. Specifically, I attempted through four studies to demonstrate that diminishing one’s perceived importance by viewing oneself within the context of a broader life perspective serves as a self-resource, which provides buffer against threats to the self. This approach to self-protection is based on the idea that negative events are threatening to the sense of self to the extent that the self is prominent. When the self is perceived as less important, negative events become less threatening as they loose their impact on self-regards. Accordingly, diminished self-importance is expected to serve as a psychological resource that helps manage challenging events.
Study 1 examined whether video exposure to images of nature would diminish perceived self-importance. Although anecdotal evidence suggests that people experience a sense of comfort when contemplating on their own smallness in the grand scheme of things, diminished self-importance as a self-resource is a novel concept in psychological literature. Therefore, it is important to establish that the construct can be experimentally manipulated in a laboratory setting. As predicted, participants who viewed a video clip that presented various wilderness scenes reported feeling less important than did those who watched the control video. Thus, Study 1 demonstrated that exposure to nature images can induce diminished self-importance.

Study 2 examined whether diminished self-importance would attenuate perceived stress levels in response to a variety of negative events. Participants who viewed the nature video reported negative events as being less stressful than did those who watched the control video. Moreover, there was a significant correlation between perceived self-importance and stress levels. Participants who diminished self-importance to a greater extent saw negative events as being less stressful. Therefore, Study 2 provided the initial evidence that diminishing perceived self-importance helps alleviate perceived stress levels associated with a variety of negative events. Although the findings of Study 2 were promising, the failure of diminished self-importance to mediate the relationship between the conditions and stress perceptions leaves open alternative explanations. In particular, environmental psychologists have shown that natural environment in and of itself provides psychophysiological benefits (e.g. Ulrich, 1983; Kaplan, 1995). Thus, it is possible that decreased levels of perceived stress observed in participants who viewed the
nature video may, at least in part, be accounted for by rejuvenating effects of nature images.

Study 3 was designed to eliminate the possible confound by utilizing a decontextualized self-diminishment manipulation. To induce diminishment of self-importance, participants were presented with a diminishing human figure that served as a pictorial representation of diminished self-importance. Study 3 also used an actual rather than hypothetical negative event to examine the beneficial effects of diminished self-importance on self-threats. Furthermore, Study 3 examined another possible mediator to account for the protective effects of diminished self-importance. It was hypothesized that diminished self-importance would mitigate the impact of negative events via lessening self-obligations that bind one to meet standards of values. That is, the all-important self imposes the burden of having to fulfill personal wishes and sense of duties to maintain the perceived importance of the self. Diminishing perceived importance of the self sets people free from the responsibilities, enabling them to maintain a sense of equanimity and self-acceptance in the face of failure. Although the meditational analysis in Study 2 did not yield significant results, it is still possible that diminished self-importance does provide stress-buffering effects, yet variability in decreased threat responses may be better accounted for by another factor that subsequently follows from diminished self-importance. Additionally, self-esteem was hypothesized to moderate the protective effects of diminished self-importance on self-threats. Self-esteem has been shown to mitigate the impact of threatening events. Thus, diminished self-importance is expected to constitute a more valuable resource for those who do not possess high self-esteem.
Accordingly, diminished self-importance should offer greater benefits to those with low self-esteem than to those with high self-esteem as it supplements the peril of low self-esteem.

Unexpectedly, the self-diminishment manipulation used in Study 3 tended to enhance rather than decrease self-obligations to meet standards of value. The manipulation seemed to tap on a negative form of diminished self-importance that is associated with a sense of meaninglessness, powerlessness, or inadequacy, thereby increasing the need to validate the sense of self (i.e. self-obligations). Additionally, it appeared that the negative impact of diminished self-importance was more detrimental to participants with high self-esteem than to those with low self-esteem.

Study 4 was designed to address the problem of self-diminishment manipulation used in Study 3 that seemed to produce negative effects. In order to manipulate diminished self-importance, participants were presented with photos depicting the universe, which is often associated with a sense of tranquility found in one’s perceived smallness. Contrary to the prediction, the results revealed that the manipulation did not influence self-diminishment, nor did it provide protection against self-threats.

Challenge of Self-Diminishment Manipulation

The present research encountered the challenge of inducing diminished self-importance in laboratory experiments. Although video exposure to images of nature in Study 1 and 2 was successful in eliciting diminished self-importance, the decontextualized pictorial representation of the concept used in Study 3 and photograph presentation of images of the universe in Study 4 failed at the task. Despite the ubiquity
of the anecdotal reports, the occurrence of actual experiences of diminished self-importance as conceptualized in the current research may be few and far between. Therefore, thoughts and feelings associated with diminished self-importance may be difficult to elicit even if people can personally relate to the sense of equanimity found in their perceived smallness from past experiences.

Social and cognitive psychologists have successfully utilized the exposure to a given stimulus as a way to activate a wide-variety of associated thoughts, feelings, and behavior (e.g. Dijksterhuis, Chartrand, & Aarts, 2007; Greenwald & Banaji, 1995). However, in order for the stimulus to lead to cognitive, affective, and behavioral responses without conscious mediation, the stimulus must be repeatedly paired with the responses (Bargh, 1997). Based on the notion of automaticity, the presentation of a diminishing human figure used in Study 3 was designed to activate the construct of diminished self-importance as well as positive responses to diminished self-importance while bypassing conscious interpretation of the construct. However, these thoughts and feelings are not well-rehearsed responses, and thus they are difficult to be activated by the mere perception of related stimuli. Perhaps the diminishing human figure used in Study 3 activated a negative form of diminished self-importance as well as thoughts and feelings associated with the negative construct because they more frequently encountered in everyday experiences.

The same logic applies to the possible reason why photograph presentation of images of the universe in Study 4 failed to induce diminished self-importance. Even though people anecdotally report experiencing diminished self-importance and a sense of
solace found in viewing images of the universe, the paucity of such experiences makes it
difficult to activate the responses to the stimuli. This can be contrasted with the nature
video used in Study 1 and 2, which seemed to enable participants to have actual
experience of diminishing self-importance during the experiment just as they would in
their daily lives because of the dynamic and absorbing nature of the video content.
Although the universe photos provided a context that often gives rise to the actual
experience of diminishing self-importance, 10 sec. presentation of each of the photos was
not sufficient for participants to have such experiences during the task.

Reed (1991) conceptualizes an acquisition of a broader life perspective as a
transformative experience that is often associated with major life challenges. Erikson
(1982) suggests that expansive views on the self emerge in late adulthood as a result of
retrospective contemplation on one’s life. These analyses seem to suggest that stepping
beyond one’s ordinary self-boundary is accompanied by extensive self-reflection and
significant changes in one’s worldview. In light of this, in order for people to diminish
perceived self-importance by situating themselves in the grand scheme of things, they
may need to fully engage in deliberate contemplation that leads to a perceptual shift at a
visceral level. Such an experience is not easily amenable to experimental manipulation,
and thus it poses a challenge to research on diminished self-importance.

The Two Faces of Diminished Self-Importance

It is important to distinguish a positive form of diminished self-importance as
proposed in the present research from a negative form of diminished self-importance.
Contrary to the current conceptualization, feeling small is sometimes equated with a
sense of meaninglessness, powerlessness and inadequacy. In order for diminished self-importance to have positive implications, one may need to perceive the greater world and its relation to the self in specific ways. For example, it is possible that when the greater world in which the self is a small part is perceived as benevolent and congenial, feeling small in the greater world acquires positive meanings. On the other hand, when the greater world is perceived as harsh and barren, diminished self-importance may provoke unnerving hollow feeling of apathy and depression. It is also possible that merging the self with the greater world is the key element that distinguishes positive and negative forms of diminished self-importance. Leary, Tipsord, and Tate (2008) suggest that allo-inclusive identity in which social and natural worlds are incorporated into one’s identity predicts positive psychological outcomes. Similarly, metapersonal self-construal that encompasses all things, all life, and all of creation as parts of the self is associated with lower anxiety (DeCicco & Stroink, 2007). Blurred boundary between the self and the outside world may combat the bleak sense of isolation arising from feeling small and insignificant in the grand scheme of things. This, in turn may allow for a positive form of diminished self-importance to emerge. Although the nature video in Study 2 did not heighten the sense of connection with nature, identification with other entities or the world in general might have contributed to the activation of a positive form of diminished self-importance.

**Self-Diminishment vs. Self-Augmentation**

In the present research, diminished self-importance was conceptualized as a self-resource that serves as a buffer against threats to the self. This proposition is a significant
departure from existing accounts of self-protection that primarily rely upon compensatory augmentation processes. At first blush, this argument may seem inconsistent with abundant evidence demonstrating the robust and pervasive tendency for people to enhance self-aspects as a means of protecting the self. How can we make sense of the seeming contradiction between the beneficial effects of diminishing and augmenting the self? One explanation entails positing that different modes of operation are at work when diminishing versus augmenting the sense of self. Augmentation of the self involves bolstering specific self-aspects, such as abilities, contributions, accomplishments, goals, relationships and values. This process hinges on the assumption that the self-system comprises different evaluative domains, and threats to one domain pose a challenge to global self-integrity (Sherman & Cohen, 2006). Augmentation of the self often occurs when people try to restore overall self-integrity by bolstering a domain that is unrelated to the threat (Tesser, 2000). In contrast, diminishing one’s perceived importance by seeing oneself within the grand scheme of things requires people to step beyond the ordinary boundaries of everyday life. This process involves transcending and disengaging from evaluative concerns, rendering one’s standing in each of the domains as irrelevant. Self-diminishment, therefore, is not the polar opposite of self-augmentation, and it does not amount to downgrading one’s perceived status in evaluative domains. Instead, it entails diminishing the need to satisfy contingencies of self-worth (Crocker & Wolfe, 2001).

**Diminished Self-Importance: When Is It Useful?**

**Domains.** An important question remains as to when diminishing one’s perceived importance might be more effective than augmenting the self for alleviating the
impact of negative events. Although self-augmentation may be more prevalent, self-diminishment may be particularly useful when people face threats in domains that are central to their self-conceptions. Compensatory augmentation of threat-irrelevant domains may be insufficient for repairing damage to core values. Moreover, domains of contingencies of self-worth are assumed to develop over a long period of time and remain relatively stable (Crocker & Wolfe, 2001), and thus it would be difficult to remap one’s contingencies by developing and substituting different, but equally important, domains to effectively deal with impending threats (Carver & Scheier, 1998). Self-diminishment may occur relatively quickly in particular contexts. Therefore, it may be more effective in dealing with threats in central or over-invested domains that are otherwise difficult to compensate for.

**Individual differences.** The current research failed to provide the evidence that diminished self-importance is more useful for people with low self-esteem than for people with high self-esteem. Nevertheless, it is still possible that people who are disinclined to augment the self, including those with low-self esteem (Brown, 1993), depression (Lewinsohn, Mischel, Chaplin, Barton, 1980) and a collectivistic cultural background (Heine, Lehman, Markus, & Kitayama, 1999) are the primary beneficiary of this alternative self-protection processes. Low self-esteem has been attributed to be a cause of problems at personal and societal levels (e.g. Donnellan, Trzesniewski, Robins, Moffitt, & Caspi, 2005; Whiting, Simmons, Havens, Smith, & Oka, 2009). Although interventions designed to address problems associated with low self-esteem tend to focus on enhancing self-evaluations, self-diminishment may offer an alternative means by
which to cope with life’s challenges. Conceptually parallel to the notion of diminishment of the self, Buddhism emphasizes the fleeting and ephemeral nature of the self, known as anatta (Bhikkhu, 1990), and the failure to recognize this nature of the self is believed to be a significant cause of human misery and suffering. The conceptual similarity between the process of self-diminishment and the Buddhist notion of the self suggests the possibility that diminishment may be a preferred and perhaps prevalent mode of self-protection in collectivistic Asian cultures where Buddhism remains the dominant religion.

**Disadvantages of Diminished Self-Importance**

Although the present studies provide initial evidence that diminishing one’s perceived importance can offer self-protection, this process undoubtedly offers drawbacks. As much as diminishing the self ameliorates the impact of negative events, it may also mitigate the impact of positive events. Not only might self-diminishment blunt experiences such as joy and excitement, but it may also undermine achievement motivation if accomplishment is construed as trivial. Therefore, self-diminishment may be a double-edged sword that requires a delicate balance in order to be an effective self-protection tool. Given the benefits and shortfalls of both self-augmentation (Colvin, Block, & Funder, 1995; John & Robins, 1994; Paulhus, 1998) and self-diminishment, the global experience of well being may best be achieved by a flexible and carefully balanced use of both types of compensatory processes.
Future Directions

To address the failure to induce diminished self-importance by the mere exposure to relevant stimuli in Study 3 and 4, future studies might utilize recall of personal experiences with diminishing the perceived importance of the self. By directly asking participants to think about the time when they felt small in the grand scheme of things that concurrently brought a sense of solace and comfort, researchers can ensure to activate a positive form of diminished self-importance while overcoming the problem of paucity of such experiences. It is also useful to explore guided imagery techniques in which the self is imagined to be small in a particular context. A gradual, step-by-step introduction to the notion of diminished self-importance may help participants to experience reflective contemplation, allowing thoughts and feelings associated with the construct to emerge.

As discussed in the previous sections, future research should also focus on identifying specific conditions in which diminished self-importance is particularly useful.Diminishing perceived self-importance may provide more effective protection than augmentation processes when negative events threaten one’s core values. Diminished self-importance may also provide greater benefits to those with low self-esteem, depression, and collectivistic cultural backgrounds based on the notion that these individuals are less inclined to augment self-aspects as a way to protect positive self-evaluation. Identifying personal characteristics and situational contexts in which diminishment might be particularly beneficial would provide a new avenue for research with potential for practical and therapeutic application.
Concluding Remarks

A large body of literature has documented the existence of numerous strategies designed to protect and promote the self-concept. Indeed, a number of researchers have viewed affirming, augmenting, and asserting self-aspects as the primary vehicle for promoting resilience in the face of threat and maintaining positive overall self-evaluations (e.g. Fein & Spencer, 1997; Greenberg & Pyszczynski, 1985; Taylor & Sherman, 2008; Wicklund & Gollwitzer, 1982). In the present studies, however, I departed from this approach and instead proposed an alternative means by which one may alleviate the personal impact of negative events—diminishing one’s perceived importance. To the extent that the self is prominent, one becomes more vulnerable because negative events are perceived as more threatening. Thus, diminishing the perceived self-importance by viewing oneself within the context of a broader life perspective (i.e., within “the grand scheme of things”) was expected to ameliorate negative impact of self-threats.

The present research provided the initial evidence that diminishing the perceived self-importance helps alleviate the impact of negative events. However, attempts at replicating and extending the initial findings were unsuccessful because of the difficulty with inducing diminished self-importance. Thus, continued investigation is critical to uncover ways to manipulate the construct, which allows for further examination of the current approach to self-protection.
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