The Meaning Maintenance Model
Humans as Meaning Makers

• Human beings are meaning-makers, driven to make connections, find signals in noise, identify patterns, and establish associations in places where they may not actually exist.

• When elements of perceived reality are encountered that do not seem to be part of people's existing understanding, this motivates people to re-establish a sense of meaning and order in their lives.
The Meaning Maintenance Model
(HEINE, PROULX, VOHS, 2006).

• Meaning is relation. Meaning is what links people, places, objects and ideas to one another in expected and predictable ways.

• "a network of diverse theories and representations, and strongly held set of assumptions about the world and the self."

2. Humans are Meaning Makers

- Humans are meaning makers: they impose expected relationships or associations that human beings construct and impose on their worlds.
  - “Humans find it problematic to be robbed of meaning, or otherwise confronted with meaninglessness & therefore seek to reconstruct a sense of meaning whenever their meaning frameworks are disrupted.”
- The greater the disruption in the mental representations of expected relations, the more urgent is the need to regain meaning.
- Some meaning domains have more of an effect than others.
3. Fluid compensation model

• People whose meaning framework has been disrupted / threatened, react by strengthening other meaning frameworks that remain intact.

• Meaning is found in different domains, and a threat in one domain can result in strengthening the meaning in another domain.
The self – meaningful relations

• We expect that we will be related to who we were in the past.
• We expect that our beliefs / attitudes and our behavior should be consistent.
  – (No one likes being a hypocrite)
• We expect that other’s views of us should be consistent with our own views of ourselves.
• We are motivated to feel a part of a coherent cultural worldview (e.g. our nationality, our religion).
Evidence for fluid compensation: Self esteem

• Self-esteem has been viewed as an indicator of people's success at relating to their external world (Crocker & Park, 2004).

• There is a basic motivation to maintain self-esteem.

• Cialdini and colleagues (1976) showed after college students failed a trivia test they were more motivated to affiliate themselves with their school’s football team after the team’s win.
• Tesser et al. 2000 has shown that people affirm their values more after they have been induced to make negative social comparisons or have written an essay that is against their attitudes.

• People show stronger intergroup discrimination following a threat to their self-esteem (Hogg and Sunderland, 1991).
Certainty needs

• We have a need to feel correct in our understanding of how the world works.

• We compensate for a lack of certainty in one domain by creating a sense of certainty in another (McGregor & Marigold, 2003).
Social relations

• Maintaining successful relations with others is a core human need (Baumeister & Leary 1995), and is an important source of meaning in our lives.
  – Shared attitudes, understanding, culture, etc.

• Milardo, Johnson, and Huston (1983) demonstrated that as people develop new intimate relationships they spend less time with existing relationships
• When ‘belongingness’ needs are no longer adequately satisfied in one relationship, the urgency to find new relationships increases.
Mortality

• The largest threat to the meaning frameworks in our lives is our own death (and thus the destruction of all the meaning in our lives).

• Experiments prime subjects’ sense of their own mortality, and then look at what happens in compensation.
• Threats to meaning framework by being primed of one’s mortality include:
  – prejudice against outgroups (e.g., McGregor et al., 2001).
  – maintenance of cultural norms (Rosenblatt et al. 1989).
  – protection of cultural icons (Greenberg et al., 1995).
  – supernatural beliefs (Norenzayan & Hansen, 2005).
  – Preference for authoritarian political leaders over non-authoritarian ones (supernatural beliefs (Norenzayan & Hansen, 2005)).
Learning & perception

• Meaning threats (reading a Kafka passage) improves implicit learning of an artificial grammar (Heine, 2009).

• Also a better ability to see information in random dot patterns.

• Here the compensation is in the domains of learning and perception!
Summary

• Meaning can be found through:
  – Cultural values
  – Religion
  – Personal values
  – Social roles
  – Relationships
  – Group belonging
  – Our understanding of the world
  – Self esteem
  – Perception (seeing patterns and meaning)

• If we threaten any of these (e.g. by a mortality prime, or by lowering self-esteem), there is a strengthening of some or all of the others to compensate for that threat.
• In class we did an exercise in which we invented our own experiment, based on the meaning maintenance model.

• The independent variable
  – E.g. High self esteem vs low self esteem (by giving positive or negative feedback on an exam)

• The dependent variable
  – E.g. How patriotic you feel (measured by a rating of how much you like your national flag from 1-10).