

# Decision Processes Colloquia

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Monday, September 11, 2017

Where: 250 JMHH

When: 12:00 – 1:15 pm

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## Too Busy to Feel Shame: The Performance Benefits of Cognitive Job Challenges for High Shame-Prone People

### ABSTRACT:

When thinking about the employee characteristics that promote high performance, there are common traits that come to mind. A tendency to experience shame is likely not one of them. This is for good reason. A proneness to experience shame relates negatively to scholastic achievement, effective conflict resolution, and leadership effectiveness and positively to intrapsychic strife, delinquency, and even recidivism rates among incarcerated populations. These relationships have led some to conclude that there is “virtually no evidence supporting the adaptive nature of shame” (Tangney, Stuewig, & Mashek, 2007, p. 10). In the present work, we push back on the general conclusion that shame lacks an adaptive benefit. Instead, we focus on understanding how changes in employees’ job characteristics can minimize the undermining effects of shame, allowing those who highly shame-prone to perform better. We integrate task characteristics theory with distraction theories of emotion regulation to propose a unique means of overcoming the undermining effects of shame: increasing cognitive job challenges. We contend that cognitive job challenges improve the performance of high shame-prone employees because cognitive job challenges help to “block” high shame-prone people’s intrusive thoughts, allowing them to focus better on the task at hand. We begin in the field to provide initial tests of these predictions in externally valid contexts (Studies 1-2). We then go to the lab to assess both the underlying role of intrusive thoughts in explaining the benefits of high cognitive job challenges for high shame-prone employees and the causal relationship between cognitive job challenges and task performance. To this end, we measure participants’ experience of intrusive thoughts during a task and show that this experience mediates the negative relationship between shame proneness and task performance (Study 3). We then manipulate the cognitive job challenges of a task and assess the effect on participants’ experience of intrusive thoughts (Study 4) and task performance (Study 5).