



# Rising Above Cognitive Errors: Improving Searches, Evaluations, and Decision-Making

*JoAnn Moody PhD JD*

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Cognitive scientists are proving that many of the selection and evaluation processes we undertake on a daily basis are alarmingly “contaminated,” despite our good intentions. The contaminants—generically termed “cognitive shortcuts and errors”—are present as we gather and sort through information, interpret it, and reach decisions about, for instance: candidates for jobs, tenure/promotion, and contract renewals; applications for grants; nominations for awards and leadership posts. Such errors also bias our judgments about colleagues’ and students’ professional and academic performances, their mastery of new concepts and skills, and their publications, exhibits, and other displays of mastery and creativity. During our various academic evaluation processes, most of us unwittingly commit a variety of errors and automatically take shortcuts. If we are rushed and distracted, then cognitive errors and shortcuts have a way of multiplying. When those involved in evaluation and decision-making are not coached and not given the opportunity to be thorough, deliberate, and self-correcting, then dysfunction is sure to result. What is needed? Individuals should be prompted to build habits of “self-correction” and actively encouraged to routinely use checklists and other safeguard protocols. Likewise, institutional power-holders—senior decision-makers such as chairs, deans, and provosts as well as their gate-keeping bodies like search and tenure committees—should be helped to recognize cognitive errors as they occur, learn ways to minimize the errors that contaminate peer review, and ensure that good practices are being followed. Such instruction of individuals and committees in workshops and retreats is long overdue. In this widely-used booklet (that many campuses give each year to search and other evaluation committees), Dr. Moody illustrates more than a dozen unintended biases and cognitive shorts—such as Raising the Bar, Negative and Positive Stereotypes, Longing to Clone. She then demonstrates how these errors result in the disproportionate shortchanging of women and U.S. (non-immigrant) minorities. Finally, Moody recommends practical steps that can be taken at institutional as well as individual levels to ensure that evaluators and other power-holders recognize and rise above these errors. JoAnn Moody is the author of three additional booklets used nation-wide by colleges, universities, professional schools, and individuals: Demystifying the Profession: Helping Early-Stage Faculty Succeed; Mentoring Early-Stage Faculty; and “Solo” Faculty: Improving Retention and Reducing Stress. Moody’s four booklets, formerly used in her consulting practice, may now for the first time be ordered through Amazon. Dr. Moody also has written the book, Faculty Diversity: Removing the Barriers, Second Edition (Routledge Press, 2012, 263 pp).

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