

# People-Rating:

## Are you living down to your label?

by Wayne Froggatt

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What do you think you are? A bastard, beauty, whiner or witch? Do you see yourself as considerate, honest, lazy or crazy? Or believe you're a hopeless case, worrier, martyr, monster, bad person, good-for-nothing, neurotic or nerd? Ever call anyone a bad boy, good girl, bitch, bad egg, slob, gossip, hypocrite or slut?

You have probably used these — and worse — to describe yourself and others. Most of us do it; but it is illogical and troublesome. Why? Because we may end up believing the labels we use, then act in compliance with them.

When Tim was a child, his father used to tell him he was stupid, a no-hoper who would never amount to anything. He took his resulting lack of confidence with him to school. When he didn't try to achieve up to his potential, some of his teachers reapplied the no-hoper label.

Leaving school early, Tim left home and went to another city in the hope of finding work. Unsuccessful, he began to drift with a group of unemployed youths who likewise lacked confidence and self-respect. Soon he was being picked up for theft, possession of marijuana, and then a conviction for selling drugs. In his view, there was no point in trying. He had been told all his life he was a no-hoper — now the judge was saying the same thing. Tim decided that his father must have been right all along.

### What is people-rating?

People-rating is like judging a book by its cover. Let us say the rating is directed at yourself. You start by evaluating one of your personal traits — how you look, what you are like at sports or study, how you do as a worker or parent — or you focus on something you have done — a behaviour.

You then rate (or evaluate) the trait or behaviour concerned. You decide whether it is worthwhile or has value. So far so good. If you stopped there, you would have no problem.

Like most people, however, you probably go a big step further and expand the rating of that one trait or behaviour into a rating of your *total self*. You end up saying things like:

'I did a bad thing, therefore *I'm a bad person*.'

'I said something bitchy — this makes me *a bitch*.'

'Because I can't handle his arguments, *I'm dumb*.'

'I lost my temper with the kids today — this shows *I'm hopeless* as a parent.'

It is as though, in some magical way, one *part* of a person becomes the *total* person. This doesn't make sense. People are mixtures of positive and negative traits, but a single rating of your total self suggests that the rating applies to *all* of your many traits and behaviours. Not only is this an overgeneralisation, but you can never know every one of a given person's characteristics and actions anyway. People-rating, too, implies that someone has always been this way and always will be, while in reality people are always changing.

People-rating also implies that there is a universally accepted guideline for judging the worth of people. To rate yourself as, say, a 'good' or 'bad' person suggests that you have some kind of standard of what is good or bad against which you can compare yourself. Yet there is no such standard with which everyone would agree. The standards which do exist for judging people and their characteristics vary over time and between social groups. People who behave aggressively, for instance, may be defined as 'courageous' in wartime, but in periods of peace be regarded as 'violent'.

Note, too, that people-rating is based on the irrational process of demanding discussed in chapter 5. According to this, if you compare yourself with some kind of standard, you believe you *should* live up to that standard. In other words, you operate according to some kind of Universal Law of Human Behaviour.

But where does this universal law come from?  
Your own head!

Unfortunately, most of us engage in self-rating to some extent. You are probably doing it when:

- You forever strive — no matter what the cost — to achieve and succeed: at work, as parent and homemaker, with your possessions, or even in your recreation.
- You feel guilt or shame when you don't live up to what you expect.
- You get anxious about trying anything which may involve a risk of failure.
- You compare yourself with other people.
- You worry overmuch about how others see you.
- You get defensive, hostile, and feel hurt when you think someone is criticising you.
- You go out of your way to seek approval from others, conforming to what they expect and putting their views before your own.
- You often check your opinions with others because you don't value your own judgements.
- You put up a false front with grandiose talk, attention-seeking, or trying to be one-up on others.
- You underrate and neglect your talents, thinking you are not good enough to enjoy pleasurable things, and reject compliments by saying you don't deserve them.

### **Where does it come from?**

Given that people-rating is so bad for us, why do we do it? For the same reasons we engage in the other types of irrational thinking: lazy brains, early learning, and the subconscious 'gains' we receive.

People-rating seems to come naturally. Our brains find it hard to evaluate more than one item at a time, hence we often take the easy way and use simplistic, total ratings of ourselves and others. It is easier to say, 'I'm a bastard', than to say more precisely, 'I tend to voice my opinions without considering how other people might feel'; or, 'She's useless', rather than, 'She finds it hard to carry out tasks without someone telling her what to do.'

This innate tendency to one-dimensional rating is enhanced by conditioning. It is not hard to see where we get the idea from — parents, the mass media, educational institutions, the legal system, to name but a few. It is all around us. How many of us have been brought up on, 'You're a naughty boy', rather than 'That was a naughty thing to do'?

There are many reasons why people-rating is so pervasive. For a start, criticism (and praise) of another person is often used to shape or control their behaviour. As a client once summed it up: 'The only time my husband says anything good about me is when I fit in with what he wants. The rest of the time, especially when I want to do something for myself, I'm just "selfish" or a "bitch".'

Rating others may also be a way of justifying how we treat them. A graphic example is the mass murder of millions of people in concentration camps during the Second World War. It seems incredible that men and women treated other human beings in such a way, until we see how systematically the victims were labelled as 'subhuman'.

We also see this dehumanising process in the way rapists view their victims. At a rape trial in Auckland it was shown that the gang members involved had referred to the victim, a young girl they had abducted off the street, as a 'block' and described her in terms such as 'stupid bitch' and 'slut', which implied that she had asked for what happened or deserved to be raped and beaten. Just as significant were the labels they gave each other: by regarding themselves as 'animals' they could excuse, or at least explain, their behaviour.

People-rating can also help us avoid trying to understand those who differ from us in viewpoint, colour or culture. All we have to do is define them as 'just wrong-thinking people, fascists, communists, religious fanatics, unbelievers, ignorant' and the like.

This is neatly illustrated by a 1946 quote from the *Saturday Evening Post*. A visitor declared that New Zealanders were 'so much alike that it is hard to remember the names of people you meet casually', and that they 'are a biologically standardised product' which makes for 'cultural uniformity'. I wonder how helpful this gentleman found it to explain away his poor memory for people's names by telling himself they were all the same anyway?

Possibly the main reason self-rating is perpetuated is that we can unwittingly reinforce it by trying to feel better about ourselves. The notion of 'self-esteem' is a popular one, and to achieve it, we try to see ourselves as having 'value' or 'worth'. We are encouraged to add up our good points and see for ourselves that we are of value. We also hear that human beings are naturally 'worthwhile'. Quite how we happen to have such intrinsic worth is never spelt out — it just seems to 'be there'.

This conventional approach simply reinforces the tendency to self-rate. It creates the demanding belief that to be happy we *must* be 'worthy'. This may work for us if we have many talents, few flaws and the ability to always think positively; but how many of us are in this class?

### **A better way: self-acceptance**

Here is a better solution: dispense with the idea of self-esteem altogether! Forget about having a 'self-image'. Give up the notion of liking or disliking your 'self'. You don't need to worry about whether you are worthwhile, because 'worth' and 'value' are concepts that do not apply to human beings.

Sounds a bit radical? Let us take a closer look. What I am saying is: *don't rate yourself at all* — even in a positive direction. Instead, *accept yourself*. Self-acceptance is the opposite of self-rating. It is unconditional. You accept your entire self (flaws and all) as you are now, even if there are things you would like to change.

To accept yourself is to acknowledge three things: (1) you exist, (2) there is no reason you should be any different from how you are, and (3) you are neither worthy nor unworthy. Like it or not, you exist as you are — with all your present traits, good and bad. You know, too, that you have acted in certain ways in the past. To acknowledge these facts is to recognise reality (as opposed to demanding that reality be different.)

There is no Law of the Universe which says you *should* be different from how you are. You may not like some of your present traits and tendencies. You might not feel comfortable with things you have done in the past. You might want to do something to change the way you are now (and perhaps plan to). Acceptance

simply means you avoid *demanding* that the present you (or your past actions) not exist.

### **Rate your behaviour -- not yourself**

'Sounds great,' you say. 'But if I accept rather than rate myself, won't this stop me ever doing anything to improve?' Not at all. Rather than rating your *total* self, you can rate your various traits, behaviours and potentials. In other words, instead of wasting precious time and energy brooding over how 'worthwhile' you are, get on with deciding which *parts* of yourself you could usefully change or upgrade.

Maybe you would like to improve your physical health, to achieve your goal of living longer. Great idea — but you don't have to label yourself as 'unfit' or 'weak'. You can develop your vocabulary without calling yourself a 'useless communicator'. You can admit your marriage is failing, but without thinking this makes you a 'failure'. You can acknowledge that although you sometimes do bastardly things, this doesn't make you a 'bastard'.

### **Value your existence**

If you are prepared to rate specific tendencies and actions, then you can see whether they help you achieve an existence that is worthwhile to you. Ultimately, is it not the quality of your *existence* that matters?

Value your existence, then, rather than your 'self'. You can recognise you exist without putting any rating at all on yourself. You are neither good nor bad, worthy nor unworthy, useful nor useless. *You just exist*. Put your energy into maximising the *quality* of that existence. This will aid your total happiness much more than debating whether you have 'value' or 'worth' as a person.

## **People-rating or behaviour rating?**

Making the switch means changing what you think about yourself and others. Compare the lists below.

### **People-rating**

I'm a loser.  
You're a naughty child.  
I'm a hopeless parent.  
I'm a poor conversationalist.  
I'm a failure.  
I'm a bitch.  
I'm a useless cook.  
I'm stupid.  
I'm a lousy lover.  
I'm unfit.

### **Behaviour-rating**

I lost out on this occasion.  
You did a naughty thing.  
I could learn more about handling children.  
I want to improve my conversational skills.  
I failed at this task.  
I did a bitchy thing.  
My cooking skills are undeveloped.  
I sometimes do stupid things.  
I could learn more about sex.  
I'd be in better shape if I exercised more..

Notice that the people-rating statements include 'I am', 'you are', 'he/she is'. These expressions indicate that you are rating the entire person (be it yourself or someone else). They imply, too, that the person always has been, and always will be, what the label says they are. Rating behaviour, on the other hand, implies a belief that a person can change in specific ways (if they choose) to improve their existence.

## Making the change

Let us summarise what self-acceptance involves:

1. You *acknowledge*, simply, that you *exist* — without making any judgement in respect of your 'worthiness' or any demand that you be different from how you are.

2. You *rate specific traits and behaviours* in a practical and non-moralistic way.

3. You *concentrate on rating and valuing your existence* rather than your 'self'.

Unfortunately, self-acceptance is easier to describe than to practise. Self-rating is a habit for most of us. We also live in a world where people-rating is the norm, so others are unlikely to help us change. But it is not impossible. Here are some strategies which will help:

1. *Be aware when you are rating yourself or others.* Watch for cues such as 'I am', 'you are', 'she/he is'. Change any self-rating to a behaviour-rating. Be *specific* about any changes you would like to make: instead of, 'I must become a better person', say, 'I'd like to learn how to type/start an exercise programme/get up earlier in the morning.'

2. *Accept justified criticism from others of specific behaviours* — but reject ratings of your entire self. Note that disapproval from other people proves nothing about you. Remember, too, that when you do something to less than the standard you prefer, your performance may be flawed but you can still accept yourself.

3. Whenever possible, *treat yourself to things you enjoy* — food, clothes, outings, time to yourself, etc. — but not because you 'deserve' them, rather because you *want* them. Remember that 'deserving' (and its by-product, 'undeserving') is a subtle example of self-rating.

4. *Be gratified when you succeed or receive approval from others* — but don't rely on such occasions to feel good. Remember that real self-acceptance is independent of your performance and the views of other people.

5. *Keep in mind that none of us will ever reach perfection.* Total self-acceptance is an ideal few people are likely to achieve in their lifetime, but even fifty per cent acceptance is worth striving for.

If the idea of living without self-rating still seems radical, you are not alone. Most people probably subscribe to the idea that to be happy you have to see yourself as 'worthwhile'. For a moment, though, put aside conventional thinking. Look closely at those high-sounding words, *human worth* and *value*. They are, in reality, nothing more than that: words — ideas that exist in our heads. Whether or not we apply these ideas to ourselves or other human beings is a matter of choice.

Did you find this article helpful? You may wish to read the book from which it was adapted:

### ***Choose To Be Happy: Your step-by-step guide***

by

**Wayne Froggatt**

(HarperCollins, Auckland, 2<sup>nd</sup> Edition 2003)

Also, by the same author, specialist books on anxiety and stress:

### ***FearLess: Your guide to overcoming anxiety***

### ***Taking Control: Manage stress to get the most out of life***

(HarperCollins, Auckland 1997 & 2003)

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