

A vintage-style photograph of a woman standing on a wooden pier, facing away from the camera with her arms outstretched. She is wearing a floral-patterned one-piece swimsuit. The background is a calm body of water under a hazy sky. The entire image has a warm, yellowish-green tint.

measuring up

How Advertising Affects Self-Image

Vickie Rutledge Shields
with Dawn Heinecken

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with DAWN HEINECKEN

PENN

University of Pennsylvania Press
Philadelphia

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Printed in the United States of America on acid-free paper

10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2

Published by
University of Pennsylvania Press
Philadelphia, Pennsylvania 19104-4011

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data
Shields, Vickie Rutledge.

Measuring up : how advertising affects self-image / Vickie Rutledge Shields with
Dawn Heinecken.

p. cm.

ISBN 0-8122-3631-9 (cloth : alk. paper)—ISBN 0-8122-1791-8 (pbk. : alk. paper)

Includes bibliographical references and index.

1. Gender identity in mass media. 2. Advertising. 3. Semiotics. I. Title.

II. Heinecken, Dawn

P96.G44 S54 2001

305.3—dc21

2001041462

For Peter, Claire, and Ava

My sources of inspiration, love, and joy

Preface

How do you “measure up” against the perfect bodies in fashion ads, in films, and on TV? Do you spend much time thinking about this question? Does trying to measure up have any real or lasting effects on your life? Are you critical of your body, its shape, size, or even color? Or do you consider yourself immune from mass media’s powerful prescriptions? If popular culture is an indicator of the concerns of everyday people, then evidence for the popularity of the subject of “how we measure up” is all around us. The lead story for the June 3, 1996 edition of *People*, for example, reads, “Too Fat? Too Thin? How Media Images of Celebrities Teach Kids to Hate Their Bodies.” TV talk shows and entertainment specials focus on eating disorders, celebrity plastic surgery, personal trainers, silicone breast implants, pressures from mates to look like models, and so many more ways to change ourselves. In the popular press, feminist critiques of the cosmetics, diet, and exercise industries, such as Naomi Wolf’s *Beauty Myth* and Susan Faludi’s *Backlash*, hit a nerve with millions of women readers, becoming bestsellers. In the academy, the influential work of Jean Kilbourne in her films *Still Killing Us Softly (I, II, III)* and *Slim Hopes* and her book *Deadly Persuasion*, Catherine Gilday’s film *The Famine Within*, and Susan Bordo’s book, *Unbearable Weight*, just to name a few, have entered into this terrain, theorizing the relationships among gender, media, and culture.

This book is about a particular, complex relationship between the idealized images of gender we see in advertising everyday and our own thoughts, feelings, and behaviors in relation to those images. Any woman who has ever avoided a trip to the beach because she could not bear to be seen in a bathing suit has first-hand knowledge of this relationship. Any man who has insisted on spending two weeks lifting weights before sporting a sleeveless summer tank top is in this relationship. Anyone who is frightened to leave the house without first rolling on a particular brand of deodorant is in a complex relationship with media images about gender and gendered behaviors. Anyone who chooses to implant silicone in healthy breasts is a partner in the relationship with culturally constructed beauty ideals. And anyone who starves him- or herself in response to cultural pressures and personal desires to be “thin” is head deep in this complex relationship. Whether we are deep in the relationship with advertising images of perfect bodies or in the average maze of everyday existence with them, on a cultural level advertising affects us all.

This book focuses on advertising as a key institution of socialization in

modern/postmodern society (e.g., Ewen 1976; Jhally 1987; Schudson 1984). Fueled by the perennial struggle to market goods and services and by the development of a multimedia environment, advertising images increasingly pervade our everyday lives, bombarding us with snapshots of what we supposedly lack and what we need to fill the void. What we supposedly lack typically has more to do with the lifestyles, looks, and aspirations advertisers seek to associate with the products they are trying to sell, than with the inherent qualities and attributes of the products themselves (e.g., Jhally 1987; Kellner 1990; Leiss, Kline, and Jhally 1986; Williamson 1978). Almost from its inception, mass advertising has played a central role in perpetuating particular definitions—often in the form of stereotypes—of gender roles and gender relationships.

Images of ideal bodies, most often female bodies, are some of the most dominant and consistent messages produced by advertisers. The current fashion season's definition of perfection in body image pervades Western(ized) cultural landscapes and gives shape to expectations of what it means to be a "gendered body" in twenty-first century global capitalism. Throughout the history of advertising, messages detailing the perfect female—her beauty, her societal roles, and her sexuality—have occupied a central role. These images, used to sell everything from cosmetics to cars to cybersex, provide prescriptions for how we should look and be looked at, how we should feel and be made to feel, and how we should act. In short, these messages prescribe particular gender identities to aspire to for all of us, but for women in particular. They also prescribe how men should relate to women and how women should see themselves. More recent trends in advertising forefront the perfect male body as an object to admire, suggesting how women should relate to men.

In other words, advertisements show us and tell us how to "gender" ourselves. This statement makes more sense when the concept of "gender" itself is more closely examined. Feminist scholars, particularly in the fields of communication and mass media studies, define gender as the term that describes the cultural and social basis of roles assumed daily by men and women. Gender is the effect of and is constructed in our everyday involvement in culture, whether that involvement is dressing for class or taking the children to daycare or running a corporate board meeting.

Gender is reproduced and continuously assigned according to our actions and behaviors. Gender is not simply the outcome of our biological sex assignments, but a kind of "cultural accomplishment" that is at play in both women's and men's lives in an everyday ongoing way. As communication scholar Lana Rakow explains, "Gender is both something we do and something we think with, both a set of social practices and a system of cultural

meanings" (1986, 21). In other words, what we do and how we think about what we do are filtered through gender. Assigning gender to others and gendering ourselves is work we do as members of a culture. We gender ourselves to convey information to others about our gender identities, how we continuously regard ourselves as men or women. This is not to say that gender identity is confined only to male/female heterosexual configurations. Our constructions of a gendered identity for ourselves can be seen as a process by which identities can fall anywhere on a continuum between society's ideal of "femininity" and society's ideal of "masculinity." To complicate matters further, our gender identities are also filtered through race, class, or socioeconomic positionings and personal histories.

For some, a personal gendered identity may be a steadily evolving process. For example, an adolescent girl may only conceive of herself as attractive if she has her make-up on, has her hairstyle just right and is at her optimal weight. In her mid-twenties she may begin to believe that she could be attractive for other reasons, such as when she is showing her intelligence or telling a good joke or helping out a friend. For others, strict, rigid gender behaviors instilled in childhood may be the codes a person lives by most his or her life and never really breaks from or evolves out of. For example, a boy who was raised to believe that domestic chores are women's work may carry this expectation throughout his life, especially if he seeks out and finds relationships where the woman willingly takes up this role in the household.

Studying gender and the construction of gender identities as a culturally constructed process instead of a biologically based fact is particularly important for gaining a clearer understanding of the complex relationship between gender representations in media and our own constructions of gender identities. If gender representations are seen as culturally produced and reproduced, then they can also be seen as malleable and changeable.

Acknowledging that gender representations are culturally produced and reproduced allows us to deconstruct, or analytically take apart, how seemingly "natural" gender relationships came to be and how they are maintained. It allows us to ask the question, "In whose interest was it that gender be defined this way at this time?" For example, it seems "natural" that we gaze upon the female body as an object of beauty and that particular attributes naturally make one female body more attractive than another, refined nose, full flowing hair, straight teeth, rounded breasts, small and long-flowing waist, slightly rounded buttocks, long shapely legs, perhaps. However, the pioneering work of such scholars as John Berger (1972), Laura Mulvey (1975), and a host of feminist cultural studies scholars who have criticized and built upon their work, deconstructs the "naturalness" of looking at the female body and ques-

tions the stability of the attributes of ideal beauty listed above. Berger explains that the rise to prominence of the female nude in European oil painting depicts a turning point when women's bodies became the object of the "gaze." At the time it was considered socially unacceptable to gaze at "nakedness," but quite a different matter to gaze upon the "nude." The nude is a form of high culture occupying a space in the lives of the privileged class; the properties of the "nude" have come to define a quality in high art aesthetics. The popularity of the nude, then, was conceived and enjoyed within a particular material context. According to Berger, "in the art-form of the European nude, the painters and spectator-owners were usually men and the persons treated as objects, usually women" (63). The aesthetic value invested in the tradition of the nude in European oil painting has been instrumental, according to Berger, in molding the acceptable way of viewing women today.

The female nude as the object, or repository, of looking (or staring, as the case may be) and assessment is not so much "natural" as cultural. For one thing, if the objectification of the ideal female form were a timeless, inevitable fact outside cultural politics, trends and tastes, then the plump, alabaster-skinned, inactive European aristocratic female would remain our society's ideal female. Of course, we know that the ideal female form has endured numerous incarnations in the United States alone since the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries (Morse 1987–88).

The past century alone has witnessed the following changes in ideal female body types: the cinched-waist ideal of 1900, the flat chested and straight bodied flapper of the 1920s, the full-chested hourglass figure of the 1950s, the skinny waif of the 1970s, the muscular, tanned breast-implanted aerobicized body of the 1980s that continues today, albeit with smaller hair. Trends in ways of seeing the female body are cultural. They are closely tied to the gender politics, economic conditions, and popular culture of an era. The mass media continue to play a pivotal role in reflecting and promoting gender ideals. Representations of idealized bodies and gender roles always have been available through advertisements, whether it be the Sears Roebuck catalogue or a newspaper ad for Pears soap. For over a century idealized gender relations have been projected by way of the silver screen. For at least fifty years most people have received the majority of their representation of idealized bodies and gender roles through television. Today, in a complex combination of cinema, television, magazine, newspaper, billboard, and internet viewing, mass media define, refine, and reproduce idealized gendered bodies and gender roles for all of us in early twenty-first-century global capitalism.

My personal interest in the relationship between the idealized images of gender we see in advertising every day and our own thoughts, feelings, and

behaviors in relation to those images has a long history. I grew up in this media-saturated culture. As a girl growing up and now as a woman, I have endured a particular love-hate relationship with idealized images in advertising and across the mass media. I am a feminist media scholar, but that does not somehow place me outside the culture that has socialized me. I hope my training and experience have given me the insights and tools to deconstruct the “naturalness” of the socialization process and to share that deconstruction.

I have fantasized about looking like actresses in Hollywood films, especially brunettes like Demi Moore and Andie McDowell. I dreamed of having the celebrity status to be able to wear designer gowns to fancy parties. I love to watch the Oscars and the Emmys to see what the stars are wearing. It used to be interesting only to look out for the female bodies in beautiful clothes, but the male celebrities are now dressing outside the usual black and white tux and they are very interesting to look at too. I succumb to the seduction of glossy women’s magazines, with their waif-thin models and diet tips, but also their intoxicating perfume smell and their slick, satiny pages. These are not fascinations I have given up, but I certainly see them in a different light now. These images used to dictate how I felt about myself. How I measured up to models and actresses in popular culture defined my confidence level and how I interacted with others, both women and men. Now I can enjoy them and critique them at the same time. I can also begin to imagine what alternative images might look like.

Our highly gendered relationships to culturally prescribed ideal bodies begin very young in life. I have distinct girlhood memories of the incredible importance of appearance placed on my older sister and myself. My mother had been “a real beauty,” especially in her teens and twenties. She competed in some local pageants and dabbled in modeling. She has always been very conscious of her weight and appearance, so it is no surprise that we two girls became very conscious of such issues too. Of course this hyper-awareness of how we looked to others was nurtured outside the family as well. At school, teachers always had a kind remark when one was wearing a nice dress and a pretty bow. The same remarks were conspicuously absent when one showed up in a sweat shirt and jeans. Another social discourse continuously reinforcing the importance of focusing on how well the body was measuring up was television. Of course all the famous people on TV were tall and thin. In the 1970s, when we were kids, the actresses and models were downright emaciated!

My sister always considered herself to have a “weight problem” and believed that I was the skinny one. Our weights and appearances have changed and flipfopped throughout the years. At one point in the mid-1980s she was super-skinny and I was putting on the pounds. Sometimes she had the great

perm and I had the bad haircut. At one point in her early twenties she got braces on her teeth and, although she was confident that the results would be worth it, her self-confidence took a pounding during that period because of her metal mouth. What is important here is not so much how we saw each other at different stages, but that the way we each thought “others” saw us has been a defining component of our relationship our entire lives. Much female bonding in this culture occurs in the exchanging of discourse over how others see us. Why is this so and why is it different for men? This is one of the questions to be explored in this book.

This question has occupied my intellectual life since I was an undergraduate studying interpersonal communication in the early 1980s. This is when I discovered feminism. I had come of age in the 1970s and early '80s with an all-too-comfortable feeling that girls could now be anything and do anything they wanted. I certainly felt that way. In college, however, I began to realize that many doors had opened for me not because I was the smartest or most capable, but because I fit a particular cultural ideal of femininity. I had the right body shape and the right skin color, for example. I began to realize that many of my friends who were not of the same body type or size or skin color weren't getting the same opportunities and were not nearly as confident in a “post-feminist” era as I had been. I was benefiting from a cultural way of seeing I did not yet understand, but was beginning to feel increasingly uncomfortable with. I knew I was smart and capable, but what if I gained a lot of weight? What if I became disfigured in some way or disabled in some way? What would happen when I got older? Would the same opportunities be open to me? Why weren't my male friends feeling any of these fears?

My intellectual pursuit of answers to these questions continued in graduate school. There I was introduced to feminist film theory, critical theory, and cultural studies. I was also introduced to the analytical tools of psychoanalysis, semiotics, and post-structuralism. These influences have shaped my understanding of how advertisements depicting gender relationships “work.” In particular, feminist research that examines the content of advertisements depicting idealized images of women, provides the basis for my work. However, these textual approaches always left nagging questions unanswered. How do real people experience the influence of advertisements in their everyday lives? Do men and women experience ads differently? Do different types of women experience ads differently from one another? What about men? In other words, I was as interested in the audience of advertisements as the advertisements themselves, knowing from experience that the relationship between the two is neither easy nor uncomplicated. More specifically, however, I was interested in what kinds of influence, if any, the ubiquitous image of the ideal female

in advertising has on both women and men. Understanding the connections between idealized gender images in advertising and the effects they have in the everyday lives of people means unwrapping many layers of cultural and personal experiences. It also involves a certain tolerance for the fact that the connections we uncover, either through research or in our own lives are at any given moment changeable.

There is little doubt that the messages and images that surround us every day via the mass media have an impact on our attitudes, perceptions, and behaviors. Just how this is accomplished and to what degree it is accomplished has been the preoccupation of mass communication researchers and media critics for the better part of this century. There is profound evidence suggesting that girls and young women in this culture are particularly vulnerable to particular kinds of mass media messages: those pertaining to body image, size, and appearance. They are not more vulnerable than boys or men because they are somehow weaker against the power of these messages. They are more vulnerable because the culture they are born into subscribes to the notion that women should be the objects of vision. Female bodies are held up to inspection to a much greater degree than are men's in this culture. Women's worth is judged generally by appearance first and abilities second. Granted, many of these norms are beginning to change in the everyday world in which we live, but in the world of representation, whether film, TV, or advertisements, the premium placed on the sleek, firm, yet shapely female body is at an all-time high. Supermodels are some of the most highly paid individuals in the world.

This cultural overemphasis on female body perfection is not lost on very young girls. My oldest daughter is nine and I have had my work cut out for me for at least six years, trying to counterbalance all the cosmetic and diet ads on TV and in magazines; trying to explain to her why I think little girl beauty pageants are probably not a very good extracurricular activity as compared to, say, piano lessons or soccer; trying to suggest subtly that "being pretty" is not a bad thing, just not the highest attribute a woman should strive for; and perhaps the biggest challenge of all—not to pass on my own obsessions and insecurities about my female body to her. In this regard, I slip up often. One way I consistently slip up is in the mirror inspection (that torturous ritual that most women partake in daily) when I'm dressing. The dissatisfied scowl on my face is my dead giveaway. When my daughter is there she might ask, "What's the matter, Mommy?" and before I take a moment to reflect, the words are spilling out: "I really wish I could lose some weight." These kinds of slipups serve to undermine other moments when I'm thinking clearly, as a good feminist Mom should. One such moment is when I put on the shorts and tennis shoes and pop

the aerobics tape into the VCR. I try to tell my daughter that the prime objective of working out is to be healthy, to increase my energy level, and to boost my immune system. To which she might say something like, "and won't you be happy if you lose some weight!" in her most sincere and supportive voice.

These examples point out what an incredible struggle it is to give girls the emotional armor they need in their most formative years to be able to concentrate on developing all of their attributes and not get incredibly sidetracked and waylaid by how their bodies "measure up." Advertising messages are one of the major instigators keeping not only girls and women but the entire culture "body obsessed." Advertising images, then, are the primary media images to be interrogated here. It will quickly become apparent, however, that the basic elements of gender construction so prevalent in advertising resonate across mass media. This book examines how women in particular are mandated to measure up to the perfect bodies in the media on a daily basis. The book is an in-depth look at how these messages are encoded with cultural "ways of seeing" the perfect female form; most importantly, the book examines the gender "decoding" of these messages by both women and men. Focusing on how both women and men relate to the idealized female body in the media is important. Gaining a keener understanding of how these images work on women is extremely educational for them; understanding how men see these images that socialize them is also important to women.

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1. Theory and Method

A particular challenge faces researchers interested in how real people experience media in their everyday lives. There is often an overwhelming gap between our theories about how particular media affect us (from a production and content standpoint, for example), and figuring out how media weave through people's lives (Abercrombie and Longhurst 1998; Lull 1995; Moores 1993; Press 1996, 1991; Seiter 1998). As Colin Sparks points out, "Boundaries in actual social life are inevitably messy and blurred. Actual social formations always display a greater richness and complexity than the theoretical abstractions we use to understand them"; however, "We are forced to use those abstractions because we cannot hope to understand reality simply by observing its surface features" (1998, 29). Most of the time theoretical insights guide us in a particular way toward a better understanding of how the discourses of people *might* be interpreted.

Advertising permeates our everyday lives insisting we be its audience. Marketers have made a fine-tuned science out of targeting particular demographic groups to position products. Furthermore, there is now little dispute that the content of commercial television is primarily a vehicle to deliver audiences to advertisers and that glossy magazines serve the same purpose. However, real people do not experience their lives as target audience members. Sometimes we are audiences of many media at once; at other times we choose to tune out altogether (if this is really possible). Sometimes we are passive: the television is on in the background, but we are having a phone conversation, or we have it on just to pass an hour. At other times we are highly attentive, playing along with every question on *Who Wants to Be a Millionaire?* and talking back to the television set.

A useful way to think about the active or passive positions we take up with media comes from Stuart Hall's concept of encoding/decoding (1980). Cultural studies in the past has ap-

proached the reader/media text relationship as a series of positions viewers take up given their ideological predisposition to the media message they are attending to. Viewers may be seen as taking up either preferred/dominant, negotiated/resistant or oppositional subject positions in regard to the text (Johnson 1986; Morley 1980, 1986, 1989). To illustrate, consider examples of possible dominant, negotiated, and oppositional readings of the popular television series *Ally McBeal*. A dominant reading of this show might see Ally as a hip professional woman, trying to make it in the cut-throat world of litigation and law practices. She is quirky and unlucky in love, but she shows a lot of gumption, spirit and hope. She's a real '90s woman, trying to have it all (Heywood 1998).

A negotiated reading of the show might find many elements believable and others not. For instance, the fact that Ally, a young single woman, has achieved success in a prominent law firm may seem very real and believable. Her yearning for love in the midst of a single life may ring true for many also. Yet, an audience member may think many of the silly choices she makes and things she does wouldn't actually be tolerated in such a competitive field, or they might feel that the female competition on the show is really unnecessary and detracts from the show's potential.

Finally, an oppositional reading of *Ally McBeal* might read a lot like some of the critical reviews the show received in the popular press. In her article for *USA Today*, "Ally, Real Life Has No Commercial Breaks," Colleen D. Ball (1998, 27a) talks back to Ally (the way many of us talk back to our television sets) about what would actually happen to her career if her yearnings for Mr. Right and a baby came true right away. Ball explains that having a baby will involve daycare choices and perhaps even part-time work arrangements. Ally's boss probably wouldn't understand, she would be slow-tracked and probably would never make partner—or she can keep up her current work schedule, never see her family, risk divorce from Mr. Right, and maybe even lose custody of dancing baby because she works too much! In *TV Guide*'s "Insider: Smart Women, Foolish Choices" (1998), Beth Brophy called these foolish choices the "Ally McBeal-ization" of TV. "Like the Harvard-trained lawyer—who often wins in court but loses control outside of it—these women share a startling disconnect between professional competence and personal ditziness" (6).

Popular TV shows are certainly not the only media we take up various subject positions with. We even take up active "subject positions" with our favorite commercials. Sometimes we don't get a snack or change the station when they come on. We sit in our chairs to watch and sing along. However, generally we experience advertising not as something we actively seek out, as we do a TV program, magazine, newspaper, or website. Even billboards by the

side of the road are encountered because we are driving *by* them, not driving *to* them. Advertising comes to us “bundled” with these media and we think of viewing ads as secondary to the medium we seek out.

Ethnography and Sense-Making

Ethnographic methods provide many of the best tools for studying media and everyday life. A methodology used in anthropology, ethnography in the authentic sense of the word is a research methodology that involves extended periods of participant observation and emphasizes extensive field notes and the final ethnography produced (Seiter 1998). “Ethnography is the work of describing a culture” (Spradley 1979, 3). The aim of ethnography is to grasp a way of life from “the Natives’ point of view” (Geertz 1983), and to understand a way of living that is usually different from but sometimes a part of the researcher’s own experience. It is a method more concerned with learning from people than with studying them.

Cultural studies scholars have held up ethnography as a methodology best suited for studying popular culture’s “elusive audience” (see Ang 1989, 1990; Ang and Hermes 1991; Bacon-Smith 1992; Bird 1992a,b; Erni 1989; Fejes 1984; Press 1996, 1991; Radway 1989). Media reception analysis studies by cultural studies and communication scholars tend to be hybrids of ethnography and qualitative interviewing. Influential examples include David Morley’s research on lower-middle-class London families and television use (1986); Janice Radway’s study of female readers of romance novels (1984); Ien Ang’s analyses of fan’s letters about the television show *Dallas* (1985); and Ann Gray’s research on video cassette recorder use (1992).

More recent influences in feminist reception analysis have built upon this tradition of using ethnographic and qualitative interviewing approaches to study media use in everyday life. Such studies include Camille Bacon-Smith’s study of U.S. Star Trek fans (1992); Jacqueline Bobo’s study of black women’s readings of *The Color Purple* (1988); Elizabeth Bird’s examination of tabloids and their faithful readers (1992); Robin Means Coleman’s in-depth research on African American viewers of black situation comedies (2000); Andrea Press’s study of female television viewing and social class (1991); and Ellen Seiter’s research on children’s television and computer use (1998).

In studying men and women’s relationship with gender representations in advertising I made methodological choices based on what would most effectively draw out people’s experiences in their own words and on their own terms. At the same time the methods needed to be informed by theoretical advances

in audience reception research and feminist media studies. An ethnographic approach guided the sampling of participants and the coding and writing up of transcripts which resulted, ultimately, in a “writing of culture” that attempts to present a portrait of how men and women experience advertising in their everyday lives, and how they decode the repetitious, ubiquitous image of the idealized female body in advertising in particular.

The Interview Participants

The pool of participants totaled 73. The men and women who lend their insights and voices to this book do not come from one discrete sample, however. The core sample is a group of 15 women and 15 men who were interviewed during a three-month period in the late fall and early spring of 1993. The remaining 43 men and women are from two other studies. The first was conducted as part of a gender and communication class at a major midwestern research university. The second was an independent study I conducted in the fall of 1995 at my current university. In actuality, more than these 73 voices will be speaking. Over the past six years in the undergraduate and graduate university courses I teach on women, mass media, and culture, I have witnessed numerous recountings of students’ relationships to gender images in media as well as their explanations of how they see media images affecting other significant individuals in their lives. These testimonies weave their way into the discourse of this book also.

The 73 men and women represent a fairly culturally diverse group, although not representative of the larger population. Their ages ranged from 18 to 45. The sample included 6 African American women and 2 Hispanic women; it also included 3 gay men and 5 lesbians. Obviously the second sample for the gender and communication class were university students. But, the core sample and the independent study sample were drawn from the university area, not from university students exclusively. Some men and women in the sample were not students at the time of the interviews, but working in such self-reported positions as receptionist, psychologist, house painter, artist, and “between gigs.”

The Interviews

All the interviews were conducted using ethnographic methods and interviewing techniques from Sense-Making, a set of theory-driven methods developed