



The Metrosexual Defined;
Narcissism and Masculinity in Popular Culture

Marc C.M. van Bree

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“The perpetual obstacle to human advancement is custom.”
John Stuart Mill

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Marc C.M. van Bree
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“Metrosexual (MET.roh.sek.shoo.ul) n. A dandyish narcissist in love with not only himself, but also his urban lifestyle; a straight man who is in touch with his feminine side” (McFedries)

People like to define; every phenomenon must have its own word and every person must fit into a certain category. Consequently, people also like to come up with new words and



The Fab Five

new categories. Yesterday's trendy category was the *soccer mom*; today's trendy category is the *metrosexual*. In July of 2003, VH-1 aired a show called *Totally Gay*, a documentary exploring homosexuality in the world of pop music. It reported about an upcoming trend called the metrosexual. A little while later, *Queer Eye for the Straight Guy* premiered on Bravo and before long, magazines filled up with the metrosexual, newspapers reported on the latest trend and television shows talked about the new kind of guy.

There is no magazine or television show left that has not mentioned the metrosexual yet. A search on the Internet can yield hours' worth of reading material on it. A visit to the Internet site *Wordspy*, a source for new words, taught me that this supposedly new word is not, in fact, so new.

Mark Simpson, freelance journalist, first coined the term in his article *Here Come the Mirror Men* in The

Independent on November 15, 1994. Trendspotters and marketers just recently latched on to the term and re-introduced it to the masses as the next cool thing.

Today it's all about the new generation of men, who are erasing the boundaries between gay and straight. According to Augusten Burroughs in his article *Are Metrosexuals Fake Fags?* his gaydar – the alert system that activates when a gay guy encounters another gay man - has been jammed. “It is no longer possible to tell a homo at a glance. Welcome to the days of the dreaded metrosexual” (par. 3).

The Narcissist and the Ideal Man

“Arnie rules. If he picked up his Conan sword and took over the country tomorrow I swear to God I would fight for him. It sucks that he can't be president” (Male Impersonators, 32).

Wordspy defines a metrosexual as “a dandyish narcissist in love with not only himself, but also his urban lifestyle; a straight man who is in touch with

his feminine side” (McFedries). The most important word of the *Wordspy* definition is *narcissist*, which is vital in both the sociological and the psychological elements of the metrosexual definition.

The word narcissism comes from the Ancient Greek story of Narcissus, who was a beautiful young

man. The Oracle told Narcissus he would live to an old age, as long as he never knew himself. Narcissus did not care for love and broke many hearts of both female and male admirers. Then, one day, he bent down to drink from a pool and, seeing his reflection, Narcissus fell in love with himself. “Now I know,” he

cried, “what others have suffered from me, for I burn with love of my own self – and yet how can I reach that loveliness I see mirrored in the water?” (Hamilton, 92) Narcissus faded away, for his reflection did not return his love, and he turned into what we now know as the Narcissus flower.

As the story of Narcissus implies, a narcissist is someone who is in love with his own self. In *On Narcissism*, Sigmund Freud analyzes the psychological aspect of narcissism and comes up with the following explanation for a narcissistic person:

“... those persons who have to do with the feeding, care and protection of the child become his earliest sexual objects: that is to say, in the first instance the mother or her substitute. Side by side with this type and source of object-choice, which may be called the anaclitic type, a second type, the existence of which we had not suspected, has been revealed by psycho-analytic investigation. We have found [...] that the choice of their love-object they have taken as their model not the mother but their own selves. They are plainly seeking themselves as a love-object and their type of object-choice may be termed narcissistic” (404).

Further in the chapter Freud outlines the possible types of narcissism:

A person may love:

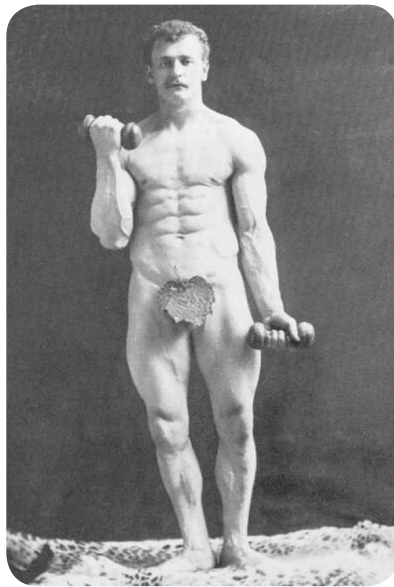
- (1) According to the narcissistic type:
 - (a) What he is himself,
 - (b) What he once was,
 - (c) What he would like to be,
 - (d) Someone who once was part of himself;
- (2) According to the anaclitic type:
 - (a) The woman who tends,
 - (b) The man who protects;and those substitutes which succeed them one after another (406).

The metrosexual is type C: what he would like to be. A magazine like *Details*, that “entertains, inspires and educates a new generation of men” (Fairchild), fills its pages with images of young men in fashionable clothes, persuading other young men into desiring to be like them. The idealized image of the models in magazines is what the narcissistic metrosexual wants to be.

From the beginning of civilization, people idealized the human body. For example, the *Woman of Willingdorf* with its round forms, was in prehistoric times an idealized appearance. When food is scarce, wealth is portrayed by voluptuous, voluminous figures. Perhaps the best-known examples of idealization are the classical Greek and Roman sculptures. For instance, a marble sculpture like *Augustus of Prima Porta* shows emperor Augustus as a vigorous young man, although at the time he was well over the age of seventy (Stokstad, 241). When Greek and Roman culture weakened, Christianity, with its quest for spiritual perfection, denied the representations of the body in art. With the cultural (r)evolution of the Renaissance, depictions of the idealized male and female nudes became the preferred style again. In addition, beginning in the 1840s, the new medium of photography

offered an expanding range of images of the nude in more and less acceptable guises (Kasson, 21).

Eugen Sandow, revered as the father of modern bodybuilding and pioneer of physical culture, became internationally famous in the late nineteenth century by posing as the classical idealized man. He showed his masculine, well-built body and claimed to be *World's Strongest Man*. "Sandow's success as a performer of masculinity suggested the changing status of gender in the modern world. His physique was widely



Eugen Sandow

interpreted not simply as an individual achievement but as a reaffirmation of male identity at a time when it seemed to be losing authority and coherence" (Kasson, 76). Sandow obtained interest from women and especially men at a time when a man's outspoken admiration of another man's body was not acceptable. "Spectators viewed Sandow's body as both an attraction

and a challenge, a model of strength and an object of desire, an inspiration, a rebuke and a seduction" (Kasson, 29).

Bodybuilding consequently received a reputation of turning boys into homosexuals. As Wardell B. Pomeroy wrote in 1968: "...they compare their bodies with those of other boys, and they both admire and envy those with better bodies than their own. This admiration can take the form of being sexually aroused by the others, and out of this comes the desire to have sex with the body of another person" (Male Impersonators, 21).

In the mid-eighties this taboo was broken as Eric E. Rofes explained in 1986: "Twenty years ago the notion of a gay man achieving success through bodybuilding would have caused snickers everywhere - even among the gay populace. In those days muscles and homosexuals didn't go together. They do now" (29).

Arnold Schwarzenegger, with his Republican "Mr. Clean" image, taught America and the world that it had nothing to fear from bodybuilding. "It became apparent that bodybuilding could be an *adaptation* of masculinity to the radical changes that

had occurred in sexual politics and attitudes towards the male body in the 1960s and 1970s, and that left the essentials – heterosexuality and patriotic conservatism – more or less intact.” The mid-eighties were packed with muscle power movies like *Conan the Barbarian*, *The Terminator*, *Rambo* and *Rocky*, portraying the bodybuilder as a fantastic warrior patriot, a role that legitimized gazing at his body, though disavowing any suggestion of homosexuality (Male Impersonators, 24).

Going back to Freud, the young man practicing bodybuilding, like the metrosexual, is a narcissist of the type C: what he would like to be. The well-built body of Sandow or Schwarzenegger

is what the starting bodybuilder wants to have. “Bodybuilding has come to be seen as a means by which boys can turn desire into identification” (Male Impersonators, 23). This is

exactly the reason why it *sucks* that Schwarzenegger can’t be president.

The Metrosexual and Traditional Masculinity

“The queer guy who tries to remake me will have his face rearranged” (Free Republic).

Mark Simpson presents to us a more detailed description of the metro-



Schwarzenegger as Conan

sexual: “a young man with money to spend, living in or within easy reach of a metropolis – because that’s where all the best shops, clubs, gyms and hairdressers are. He might be officially gay, straight or bisexual, but this is utterly immaterial because he has clearly taken himself as his own love object and pleasure as his sexual preference” (“Meet the Metrosexual,” par. 7). Already

there is a difference in McFedries’ *Wordspy* definition and Simpson’s definition: the metrosexual is not necessarily a straight man, but can be gay or bisexual as long as he is a narcissist. We also see a demographic profile in the description; the young man has money and lives within easy reach of a metropolis.

There is another reason, not mentioned by Simpson in his description, but not less important, why the metrosexual lives in a metropolitan area. This reason is of a more psychographic nature, although it starts out demographically with the fact that a larger percentage of metropolitans are liberal minded as opposed to a smaller percentage of conservatives. According to a popular on-line dictionary the word liberal means, “favoring proposals for reform, open to new ideas for progress, and tolerant of the ideas and behavior of others; broad-minded.” The word conservative means, “favoring traditional views and values; tending to oppose change.” In our light, liberalism can be seen as the reformed or the metrosexual, whereas conservatism can be seen as opposing change or traditional masculinity.

Conservative norms,

or traditional masculine norms, are, as described in *Masculinity Reconstructed*, "(1) avoidance of femininity; (2) restricted emotions; (3) sex disconnected from intimacy; (4) pursuit of achievement and status; (5) self-reliance; (6) strength and aggression; and (7) homophobia" (Levant, 9).

On conservative on-line forums such as *Free Republic* and *Free Dominion*, I found discussions, about the metrosexual concept and *Queer Eye for the Straight Guy* that mirror these traditional masculine norms. The discussion participants took a fiercely negative stance against the metrosexual and countless times I read the word *faggot* and exclamations like "the queer guy who tries to remake me will have his face rearranged" (Free Republic). In these examples we see several of the seven traditional norms: homophobia; strength and aggression; avoidance of femininity (or avoidance of the feminine metrosexual); and self-reliance (standing and acting alone against the metrosexual conquest). Thus, for a metrosexual to come out, he will most likely live in a liberal environment, which is statistically most often found in metropolitan areas.

Like bodybuilders,

metrosexuals came out of the closet after cultural changes in their environment and changes in views on masculinity. "Gay men provided the early prototype for metrosexuality. Decidedly single, definitely urban, dreadfully uncertain of their identity and socially emasculated, gay men pioneered the business of accessorizing –and combining – masculinity and desirability." Cultural changes, like the rise of feminism, made straight men increasingly single, uncertain and socially emasculated. "Straight men adopted the strategies of gay men as a way of advancing themselves in an increasingly visual, aestheticized world" ("Rings a Bell," par. 10).

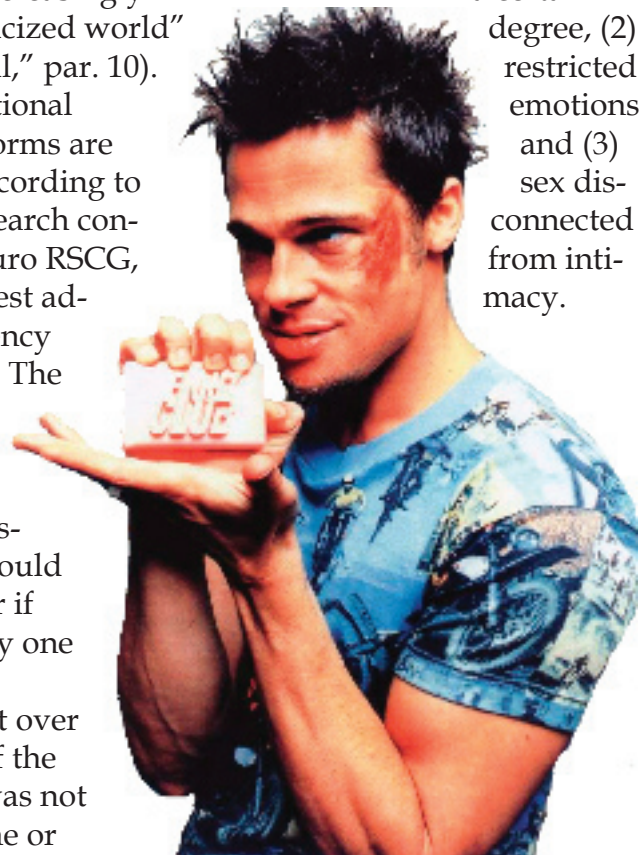
Traditional masculine norms are changing, according to a market research conducted by Euro RSCG, the fifth largest advertising agency in the world. The company conducted a survey with the question: what would men wish for if they had only one wish?

"What over two-thirds of the men chose was not riches or fame or

glory, but love, family, and friendship. More than a third (35%) want more than anything "to grow old with a woman I love." Next was "to have happy, healthy kids" (22%), followed by "to have a circle of friends who support me unconditionally and whose company I enjoy" (10%). Only 8% dreamed of heading a Fortune 500 company, with most of those coming from the under-30 and childless cohorts" (Alzheimer, par. 6).

What these statistics show is that (4) pursuit of achievement and status is not as important to men as years before, as well as, to

a certain degree, (2) restricted emotions and (3) sex disconnected from intimacy.



The last norm change is supported by research showed that men “no longer find sexual freedom universally enthralling” (Alzheimer, par. 7). Most important shift in masculinity is that there is less avoidance of femininity (1), the “emergence of a segment of men who have embraced customs and attitudes once deemed the province of women” (Alzheimer, par. 12).

The Metrosexual and Advertising

“A man, in other words, who is an advertiser’s walking wet dream” (“Rings a Bell,” par. 8).

It is important to note that there are two sides of the metrosexual concept: (1) the commercial and marketers side and (2) the psychological and sociological side. The commercial concept of the metrosexual differentiates itself both psychographically and demographically from the original, psychological and sociological concept. This is due to the marketers, who are trying to broaden the appeal and maximize the profitability of “their” new metrosexual

category. This explains the repeated reassurances that the metrosexual is actually straight, although Simpson clearly stated earlier that the sexual preference is immaterial. (“Rings a Bell,” par. 14).

The commercial vision of the metrosexual concept blocks out the narcissistic aspect almost entirely. According to the Euro RSCG research, the metrosexual is “any straight man who has a salmon pink shirt in his wardrobe” (“Rings a Bell,” par. 12). The results showed that the age range of metrosexuality is 21 to 48 and that the men are “no longer self-absorbed and dandyish as they once appeared and much more family-oriented” (“Rings a Bell,” par. 12).

This commercial vision is also adapted in television’s metrosexual archetype: Bravo’s *Queer Eye for the Straight Guy*. The “Fab Five” transform the straight guy into the man society (or his girlfriend) wants him to be, but “sticking feathers up your butt does not make you a chicken” (*Fight Club*). In other words, the Fab Five only transform the appearance of the straight guy and make him use hundreds of dollars worth of cosmetics, but they do not transform

an *anaclitic* person into a *narcissistic* person. One persuaded “metrosexual” told Jane Standley, BBC New York correspondent, “I feel like I am wearing the clothes – but I just don’t feel the part physically inside the suit” (par. 8).

Although these two sides of metrosexuality are different from each other, they do flow into each other: Metrosexuality = narcissism and homoeroticism = advertising. The dandyish narcissist from the *Wordspy* definition appears on the face of every advertisement in magazines like *GQ*, *Esquire* and *FHM*. If we take a look at an advertisement for *Guess Leather* in the male magazine *Details*, we quickly discover the narcissistic and homoerotic aspects. The full-page ad is covered with a young man wearing an open leather jacket and open shirt so the viewer can see his clean-shaven, well-built torso. The model is looking straight at the viewer, but his hair covers his face, leaving the face more or less to the viewer’s imagination or fantasy. Showing their torsos “these men are the essence of masculinity: the desired male body. In fact this technique has long been understood by advertisers in the gay press who have often employed

photos of headless idealized male bodies, allowing the punters to complete the fantasy themselves" (Male Impersonators, 107). The advertisement attracts the viewer because of the homoerotic image - it is advertised in a male oriented magazine - and because of the desire to be that body, which brings us back again to Freud's type C narcissism: what he would like to be.

Commercializing metrosexuality is nothing more than trying to get young men to buy expensive designer brand clothes and expensive brand moisturizers, something that these companies have always done. Starting in the mid-eighties, advertisers began to use images of naked male torsos, which led to the tremendous popularity of Calvin Klein and Levi's commercials in the mid-nineties. Marky Mark became the face, or body, for Calvin Klein and nineties fashion, something David Beckham is now for the metrosexual.

Beckham is *used* by side number one (commercial), but is a good example of side number two (psychological). The British soccer player and multi-millionaire earned around 8 million US dollars for sponsoring male

fashion accessories in 2001. This clearly demonstrates Beckham being used by the commercial side. In an interview with the British gay magazine *Attitude*, Beckham admits he likes to be admired, whether it is done by women or men, which is an example of Beckham *being* a narcissistic metrosexual ("Meet the metrosexual," par. 4).

David Beckham is admired by hundreds of thousands, maybe even millions, of boys and young men. Most of those millions of boys and young men

would fall into the top category of admiring: imitation.

"His boundless narcissism, proudly on display in newspapers, magazines, billboards and TV advertising, not only persuades other men to buy, but also encourages them to aspire to the same level of corporate-sponsored exhibitionism" ("Rings a Bell," par. 9).

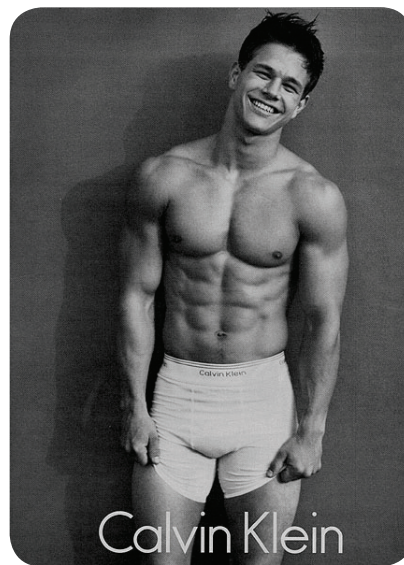
The main target

of the corporations who contract David Beckham is a market of 14 to 21 year-old males. For example, Calvin Klein's fragrance Crave is aimed primarily at 15 to 22 year-old males ("Rise of the Metrosexual," par. 22). These advertisements, along with ads for *Gucci*, *Armani* and *Guess*, to name a few, are found in metrosexual magazines, in denial of their metrosexuality. Mark Simpson explains, "these magazines perform a kind of hysterical heterosexuality of tits, beer, sports, cars and fart-light-

ing - but the real money shot is the pages and pages of glossy, straight-faced fashion spreads and ads featuring glossy male models selling male vanity" ("Meet the Metrosexual," par. 24).

In contrast to this is the Euro RSCG survey that declared

family oriented men between the ages 21 to 48 as the metrosexual target market. This is also seen in the latest episodes of *Queer Eye for the Straight Guy*, where the "Fab Five" visit mostly older men with wives and children. The commercial



Marky Mark

“family-man” metrosexual stands far from the narcissistic and dandyish teenager found reading *GQ*, *FHM* and *Details*. The advertiser’s walking wet dream is the man with money to spend for moisturizers and designer clothes. For marketers it does not matter whether this is the 21 to 48 year-olds or the younger 14 to 21 year-olds.

The Metrosexual Defined

“The typical metrosexual is a young man with money to spend, living in or within easy reach of a metropolis – because that’s where all the best shops, clubs, gyms and hairdressers are. He might be officially gay, straight or bisexual, but this is utterly immaterial because he has clearly taken himself as his own love object and pleasure as his sexual preference” (“Meet the Metrosexual,” par. 7).

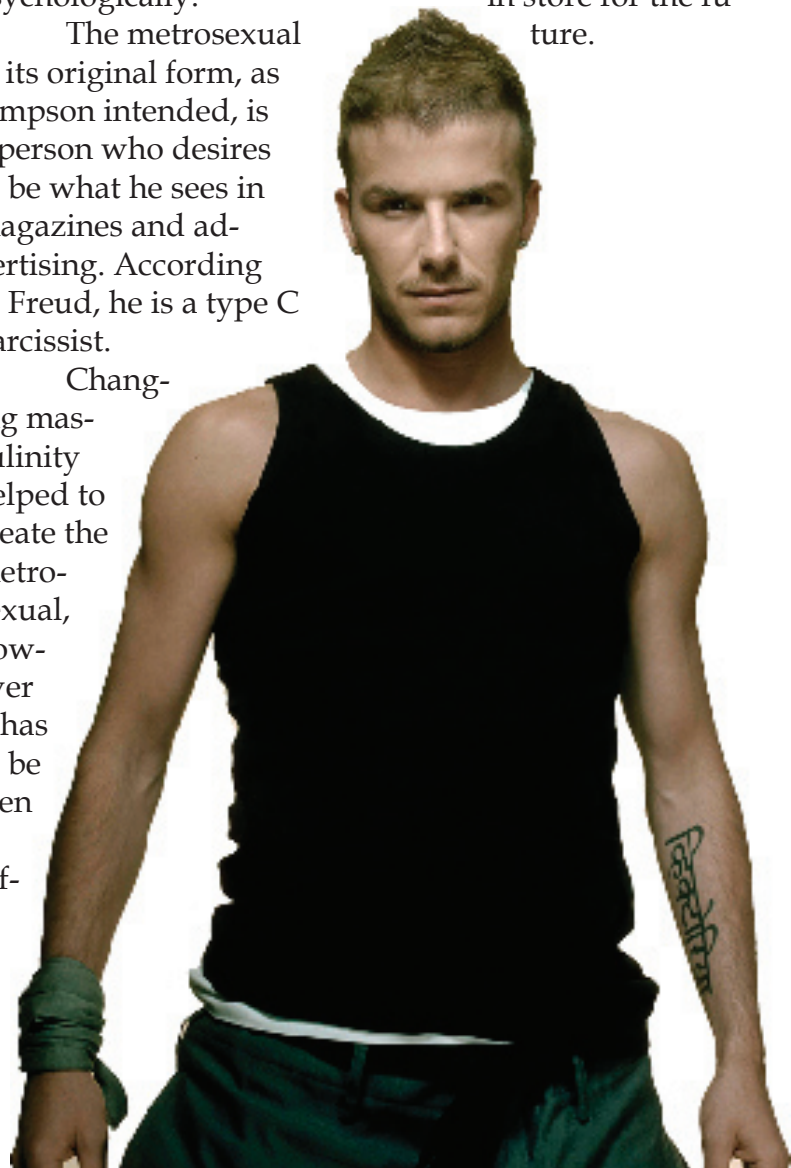
Whether the metrosexual is 18 years old or 45 years old, one thing we can be sure of, is that the metrosexual is a narcissist, persuaded by consumer culture to desire to be what he sees in glossy magazines. Mark Simpson originally used the word to satirize

what he saw as consumerism’s toll on traditional masculinity. Men didn’t go to shopping malls, so consumer culture promoted the idea of a sensitive guy who went to malls, bought magazines and spent freely to improve his personal appearance (St. John, par. 10). Simpson’s description in his article *Meet the Metrosexual* is the most accurate, both commercially and psychologically.

The metrosexual in its original form, as Simpson intended, is a person who desires to be what he sees in magazines and advertising. According to Freud, he is a type C narcissist.

Changing masculinity helped to create the metrosexual, however it has to be seen as dif-

ferent from the metrosexual concept. The marketer’s metrosexual in its commercial form is just a trend; *Queer Eye for the Straight Guy* does not have an infinite life. The buzz will eventually fade, like any other trend, but the change in masculinity was there before, is here to stay and will most definitely develop with whatever the social and cultural evolution has in store for the future.



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The Metrosexual Defined;

Narcissism and Masculinity in Popular Culture

People like to define; every phenomenon must have its own word and every person must fit into a certain category. Consequently, people also like to come up with new words and new categories. Yesterday's trendy category was the soccer mom; today's trendy category is the metrosexual.

"I found it very interesting - and heartening that someone has actually done some research and some thinking about the subject. Of course the distinction between a marketing trend and the deeper impact of metrosexuality was most gratifying of all."

- Mark Simpson
Author of Male Impersonators

"What a phenomenal and fascinating read. Not only was the article highly informative, it was very well written."

- Christine Efken
Focus Group Counselor Doyle Research Associates Inc.

"Very interesting work."

- Herb Allen
Director of Advertising Program Columbia College Chicago