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## Supermarket proves itself a fascinating laboratory on human behavior

*By Diether Haenicke*

*May 27, 2009*

After almost 40 years of active feminism and constant redefinitions of gender roles, most grocery shopping is still done by women.

Walk through any supermarket and you will notice that most shoppers in the grocery and produce section are females. If men are present, they are either college students with expertise in the fast food and beer aisles, or they are husbands who trot behind their wives through the store, patiently and with little active involvement.

Ask any married man if he can name the price of a dozen eggs, a loaf of bread, a bar of soap, or a gallon of milk, and, in most cases, you will meet with empty stares. Men don't know food prices. Men know the price of six-packs, gasoline, replaceable toilet seats, car tires and oil changes. Of course there are exceptions, but only precious few.

I am not one of the exceptions. I could not price most food items. When I go grocery shopping with my wife, I push the shopping cart and watch my wife's handbag in the cart. She is the one who composes the shopping list; she selects most food items plus cleaning supplies for house and body; and she is the one who carefully studies all labels attached to any product. She assesses the potassium levels, fat percentages and sugar additions of all canned and packaged goods and rejects them if found unhealthy. She also compares prices. I am distinctly excluded from this activity, mainly because I am not very interested in studying food-related information.

This gives me time to turn the supermarket into my private observatory of human behavior. I am fascinated by women who can haul two or three toddlers along when shopping. Some mothers just turn their children loose and pay no attention to them. With nonchalant body language they pretend that there is no connection between them

and their destructive offspring who usually raid the candy section. Other mothers (God bless them!) keep their children in check and well-behaved, teaching them not to touch, and I admire their seemingly boundless patience and energy.

Some women, armed to the teeth with coupons, checklists and little calculators, turn shopping into an exercise in strategy and logistics. Perfectly familiar with the store's layout, they know what is stocked where in which aisle, and they systematically fill one or more shopping carts with mounds of food: four gallons of milk, 36 cans of Coke, six loaves of bread, eight cereal boxes, and more. They buy toothpaste, mouthwash, and dishwasher liquid only in the largest possible containers, and I wonder if these determined-looking women cook for an orphanage, a sports team, or just a regular family with ever-hungry teenagers. I carefully avoid lining up in the check-out lane behind these wholesale-minded shoppers, who need ample time to cash in their coupons before they load their overstuffed bags into voluminous vans.

Every so often, although I shouldn't, I do look with a nutritionist's eye into the shopping carts of big, massive people who obviously have partaken excessively from America's horn of plenty: potato chips, Twinkies, sugar-laden sodas, pretzels and TV snacks with not a piece of fruit or a vegetable in sight. Their eating habits are none of my business, but in those moments I am grateful that my wife reads all the food labels and thus controls my own genetic disposition to expand physically to battleship proportions.

The last stop of each shopping trip is the check-out lane. I avoid the lane with the sign, "Ten Items or Less," simply because I am distressed at most people's inability to count to 10. Few customers, men and women alike, actually stay within the prescribed limits, and cashiers have told me that they are not to raise eyebrows when a customer with 12, 14, or even 16 items moves into their lane or wants to pay with a check when the sign says "Cash Only." Why do people do that?

And so I return from each trip to the supermarket, still not knowing the price of milk or sugar, but with an ever-increasing knowledge of at least one, admittedly minor, aspect of human behavior.

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