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# Leisure Reflections

Robert A. Stebbins



Professor Robert A. Stebbins pioneered the ideas of “serious leisure,” “casual leisure,” and “optimal leisure lifestyle” and has spent 30 years studying all three. He is currently Faculty Professor in the Department of Sociology at the University of Calgary. Author of 26 books and monographs in several areas of social science, his most important works bearing on these three ideas include: *Amateurs, Professionals, and Serious Leisure* (McGill-Queen’s University Press, 1992); *After Work: The Search for an Optimal Leisure Lifestyle* (Detselig, 1998); *The Urban Francophone Volunteer: Searching for Personal Meaning and Community Growth in a Linguistic Minority* (University of Washington, Canadian Studies Centre, 1998); and *New Directions in the Theory and Research of Serious Leisure* (Edwin Mellen, 2001). He is presently conducting a study of leisure activities: *Rocky Mountain hobbyists in kayaking, snowboarding, and mountain climbing* (funded by the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada), and working on a grant proposal for research on grassroots associations in the lives of their amateur, hobbyist, and volunteer members and participants. Stebbins is currently awaiting release of a book in the latter area entitled *The Organizational Basis of Leisure Participation: A Motivational Exploration* (Venture, 2002). He was elected Fellow of the Academy of Leisure Sciences in 1996 and, in 1999, elected Fellow of the Royal Society of Canada; and has been a member of LSA since 1995.

Stebbins’s main leisure interests lie in amateur music, where he is a jazz and classical double bassist, and in various outdoor hobbyist pursuits, notably cross-country skiing, snowshoeing, and hiking and mountain scrambling (hiking to mountain tops). He is also an active volunteer in the Calgary French community, primarily as President of the Société d’accueil francophone (an organization that helps French-speaking immigrants settle in Calgary). And, to be sure, casual leisure counts as well. For Stebbins it consists mainly of evening conversations with friends and family and dining out in Calgary’s restaurants.

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## Shopping as Leisure and Obligation

The following line from one of Arthur Miller’s plays says a lot about modern-day shopping:

Years ago a person, he was unhappy, didn’t know what to do with himself — he’d go to church, start a revolution — *something*. Today you’re unhappy? Can’t figure it out? What is the salvation? Go shopping.  
(from: *The Price*, Act 1)

For most people in Western society going shopping is, some of the time, a way of meeting necessity. The family needs food on the table, the breadwinner needs a new suit, the children need supplies for school. But this was not the sort of shopping that Miller had in mind, for shopping out of need is unlikely to assuage unhappiness. Indeed, it seems quite capable of causing it.

Prus and Dawson (1991) dubbed this kind of consumer activity ‘shopping as work’, a locution I will replace here with *shopping as obligation*. For obligations that are in some way disagreeable also abound outside the sphere of work as a livelihood, and some of them can force people into the marketplace in order to meet them (e.g., shopping for drugs, food, petrol). Shopping as obligation was described by Prus and Dawson’s Canadian interviewees as ‘laborious’, a sentiment that arises from having to make purchasing decisions the latter found difficult, frustrating, monotonous, or unavoidable.

Conversely, shopping tends to be viewed as a more laborious activity when one experiences a confused, constrained, and irrelevant sense of self in shopping situations. When people face undesired ambiguity and frustration, there is a sense of the *incompetence of self*. When they experience closure and disenchantment, *the loss of self-direction* becomes more pronounced. And when people encounter boredom, there is an emptiness or *meaninglessness of self* (Prus and Dawson, 1991, p. 160).

Rachel Bowlby (1997, p. 102) points out that obligatory shopping (she calls it 'doing the shopping') is routine, involves mostly shopping for food, and is generally regarded as a chore.

Prus and Dawson and Bowlby contrasted shopping as obligation with 'shopping as recreation' or 'going shopping', which in keeping with leisure studies usage, I will substitute with the broader phrase of *shopping as leisure*. For Prus and Dawson (1991, p. 149) such commercial activity is distinguished by "the overall sense of enjoyment one obtains while shopping", where a positive sense of self is always present. This is shopping as Arthur Miller saw it, the contemporary mode of salvation. Seemingly working in parallel with Prus and Dawson, Falk and Campbell (1997, see also certain of their earlier papers listed in their bibliographic appendix) have covered the same ground, setting out the same two-fold typology and underscoring for both forms their impact on self.

Be that as it may, shopping to fill an obligation, however unpleasant, proceeds at times from a basis of considerable knowledge about the product sought and the commercial circumstances in which it is sold. Of course, this is not true in any fundamental sense of buying a chocolate bar or a tank of petrol, for example. But it is definitely true of sophisticated (as opposed to naïve) buying of, say, a house, automobile, home sound system, or set of banking services. Consumers' organizations that analyze popular products and services and publish their findings so the public may be better informed exemplify the high level of product and market knowledge that shoppers need if they are to make the most informed purchases possible.

Mica Nava (1991, p. 74) recognizes this acquired knowledge as a special attribute of the modern woman, who typically has more time for shopping and more reason to do it than the typical modern man whose work requires him to stay put outside the marketplace in establishments like offices and factories. Both men and women may well be proud of their knowledge, which for instance, helps them avoid long lines in the supermarket, overpriced drugs in the pharmacy, or inferior products at the hardware store. Notwithstanding such expertise, Colin Campbell's (1997) study of male and female shoppers in Leeds revealed that women were much more likely to prefer 'going shopping' to other forms of leisure such as going to the cinema or to a restaurant. In contrast, men more often reported that they 'hated' or 'disliked' shopping.

My principal interest here lies in shopping as leisure, shopping that people like to do. Window-shopping is the best-known expression of this form. Here the shopper enters the marketplace for the enjoyment of seeing displays, looking at different creations and packaging of consumer items, fantasizing perhaps on how these might fit in the person's life, and so on, all without direct intention of buying the item of interest. This is casual leisure of the sensory stimulation type, in which curiosity plays a central role (Stebbins, 1997). True, window-shoppers may buy something they have seen, perhaps because they have discovered a need for it, because it has decorative value for home or office, or they have been looking for the item for some time and now, unexpectedly, have finally found it, even though they had not set out that day with such an intention.

Window-shopping is now a main part of modern urban tourism the world over. As Martin and Mason (1987, p. 96) have observed: "shopping is becoming more significant to tourism, both as an area of spending and as an incentive for traveling". Today, no tourist guidebook of a world city would be without a section on shopping, running from high-end clothing and gadgetry shops to low-end flea markets and bargain stalls. Moreover, small communities, even villages, when sufficiently interesting in themselves and constituting part of a larger tourist area, tend to be bristling with tourist-oriented shops, several purveying local arts and crafts.

The basic leisure motive for window-shopping begins to blur when shoppers mix purpose with curiosity. For example, tourists, in particular, may also want to buy a souvenir of the place visited or bring home a gift for someone. So while window-shopping these people are also on the watch for items that will fill one requirement or the other. Indeed, if toward the end of the trip they have not yet found what they want, shopping may become more exclusively purposive, perhaps even obligatory, as its leisure character begins to fade in the face of necessity.

Another type of shopping as leisure is that done in service of a serious leisure interest. Amateurs and hobbyists, in particular, must occasionally buy goods the purchase of which is most pleasant. The horn player sets out to find a new and better horn, the coin collector goes shopping for missing parts of his collection, the kayaker patronizes a local dealer to buy a new, lighter, and more streamlined boat. The immediate outcome is the prospect of better and

more fulfilling execution of the hobby or amateur activity. Furthermore, the process of purchase itself commonly proceeds from a background of considerable knowledge and experience in the field, relative to the best products and their strengths and weaknesses. This is an important element in the positive sense of self that is felt in some kinds of shopping done for leisure.

Still, there are times when serious leisure enthusiasts must also engage in some obligatory shopping of their own, such as making the occasional trip to the store that sells art supplies to buy paint or brushes or to the string instrument shop to arrange for repairs to a violin. The main purpose of such shopping is likely no more pleasant than routine grocery shopping, though mercifully, it occurs much less often. Moreover, the tedium of such errands may be alleviated, in part, by doing some window-shopping while in the store. Thus the painter can browse the easels or the selection of frames. The violinist can look over the violins that are for sale and consider various musical accessories such as metronomes and music stands.

Discussion to this point has centered on people who do their looking and buying at stores. Yet there are two other types of shopping as leisure that are essentially window-shopping, even though they are conducted at some distance from the 'shop' itself. Thus, for decades, in many countries, consumers have also had, in certain sectors of the economy, one or more opportunities to shop by mail-order catalogue. And for some people, especially those living in rural areas, perusing catalogues has long been a substitute for viewing real displays of merchandise, which are most extensively available in faraway cities. Today, at least in North America, some firms still publish regularly catalogues portraying in appealing detail much of what they sell in their stores, even if only a fraction of these enterprises still offer mail-order service. Rather their marketers hope that window-shopping by catalogue will kindle a desire to buy something, thereby triggering a trip to a near-by outlet to appease the desire. Nevertheless, as my informal observations suggest, these catalogues are valued by many people primarily for the window-shopping that the catalogues offer; years may pass before they purchase something displayed there. In the meantime, the catalogues make for interesting, casual leisure reading.

These days, however, shopping appears at least as likely to be done by computer as by catalogue, as effected by telephone or postal service. The World

Wide Web now offers a huge range of shopping possibilities. Apart from the sites that offer a vast selection of items for purchase online, are those sites that offer information on products that would-be consumers will have to acquire at a nearby store. As on the street and in the catalogues, pure window-shopping can also occur on the Web, exemplified by browsing sites that present what the automobile makers or the computer manufacturers are selling. As elsewhere the intention here is to satisfy curiosity; it is casual leisure.

Up to now we have been considering the shopping experience, felt either as obligation or as leisure. Attention has been on the core activity of shopping in its various forms and types. But shopping takes place in a larger social and physical context, which may affect how it is defined by the shopper, as pleasant or not. Part of that context, at least in North American supermarkets, is the snack bar, a relatively new addition to such places. And it would be interesting to know whether it works as intended: to reduce the sense of laboriousness, which is so widely felt in this shopping experience. In other words, how many shoppers take time out for coffee or a snack while nonetheless trying to put this chore behind them. While the snack bar can be defined as an attempt to inject a few moments of leisure into one of life's routine obligations, most of the social and physical context in places like supermarkets and department stores seems, for the most part, to be designed only to reduce their unpleasantness, while stopping short of transforming into leisure this kind of shopping. Thus a sufficient number of checkout counters (properly staffed) helps reduce the frustration that comes with queuing up for long periods of time. Accessible merchandise with prices clearly marked can accomplish the same thing, as can the layout of aisles that facilitates easy movement of customers.

Arthur Miller published *The Price* in 1969. It seems that even in those days consumerist shopping was looked on as leisure-based salvation from unhappiness. Today the tendency to go shopping as leisure activity appears to be still more pronounced, even while the obligatory form still haunts many of us. Of note here is the fact that *Merriam Webster's New Collegiate Dictionary* (11<sup>th</sup> ed.) traces origin of the word 'shopaholic', defined as one who is extremely or excessively fond of shopping, to 1983. The *New Shorter Oxford Dictionary* (5<sup>th</sup> ed.) adds that shopaholics are compulsive shoppers. But when shopping becomes

compulsive, the leisure quality of such activity vanishes, subtly but inexorably overridden by psychological necessity. Now the behavior is coerced.

For most people most of the time, leisure-oriented shopping is casual and within their control. It is also active and reasonably social compared with many other casual leisure activities. A fitting pastime in contemporary capitalist society, you might say.

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# NEWS FROM ILAM

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### Welcome to the fourth instalment of News from ILAM

The proposed merger between ILAM, ISRM and the National Association for Sports Development (NASD) is, at last, now a topic of public discussion. All three organisations have agreed to prepare detailed proposals on how they might join together to form one new professional body. There seems to be very little disagreement that this is the way forward, and as is usually the case in situations such as this, the devil is in the detail of how exactly the merger is to be achieved. If the proposed merger should become a reality, leisure practitioners will have one overarching professional organisation which will, at least in theory, command a higher profile in the eyes of government than the existing three separate bodies. More on this in due course.

Readers may find ILAM's recently re-designed website of value for its publication of news and current awareness features related to the leisure industries. In addition to the news items the site features a gateway to other leisure organisations and a forum for the debate of leisure issues. Also available through the site is the ILAM Directory of Leisure Courses — a comprehensive list of leisure courses available at universities and colleges in the United Kingdom. Check it out at [www.ilam.co.uk](http://www.ilam.co.uk).

**Bob Snape**