8
Seat Up or Down?

The bathroom is one of the key battlefields in the gender wars. Skirmishes may erupt over toothpaste-tube etiquette, soap fragrances, towel placement and general cleanliness, but the most enduring and heated conflict tends to focus on the toilet seat. In mixed-sex households disagreements often arise over whether the seat should always be left in the down position. Often the woman is angered that the man leaves the seat up after doing his business and sees this as evidence of selfishness, insensitivity and even sexism. Often the man cannot see what all the fuss is about, or why he should drop the seat for her if she does not raise it for him.

As conflicts between the sexes go, this one seems rather trivial and absurd. In one respect it involves moving a light object a small distance. In another respect it is quite basic. More than most other conflicts it derives fairly directly from the anatomical difference between the sexes: it is convenient for him to stand while urinating but not for her. Freud argued that the psychology of gender ultimately derives from this difference – that anatomy is destiny – but usually its link to gender differences in behaviour, taste and attitude is obscure or non-existent. But in this case, at least, the answer to Freud's eternal question – 'What do women want?' – is very clear. Put the seat down!

The psychology of toilet-seat behaviour turns out to be unexpectedly complex and revealing. In this chapter I develop an empirically based analysis of the rhythm of toilet use in an average mixed-sex bathroom and take it as a basis for investigating four alternative ways in which men and women might deal with the toilet-seat issue.

From this analysis I determine which strategy is the most rational, efficient and fair. The limitations of this analysis lead to an investigation of why an inquiry into this matter cannot be resolved in quasi-economic terms and why, instead, we need to consider psychological factors. The emotional resonance of the toilet-seat issue demands an analysis that goes beyond issues of efficiency and rationality narrowly conceived, and brings to the surface matters to do with basic human motives and desires.

Toilet-seat behaviour

To understand the rationality or otherwise of different toilet-seat regimes we first need an analysis of people's toileting habits. How often are men and women who share a toilet likely to avail themselves of it and how often are they likely to encounter its seat in particular configurations? Let's imagine the situation of an average heterosexual couple, Jack and Jill.

There is plenty of good excretory science on which to estimate our couple's toileting patterns. A survey of British adults, funded in part by the Kellogg Company, ascertained that the most common 'inter-defecatory interval' for both men and women was about 24 hours and the most common weekly defecation frequency was seven (Heaton et al., 1992). Although daily regularity is the most common pattern, more than 60 per cent of adults departed from it. But let our generic Jack and Jill be blessedly regular.

Number ones tend to be more common than number twos. Surveys of adults indicate that men between the ages of 20 and 70 tend to urinate seven times in a 24-hour period (rising from about six in their twenties to about eight in their sixties), whereas women's average is about eight (van Haarst et al., 2004). If we make the reasonable assumption that one of these urinations occurs during a defecation episode, Jack can be expected to visit the toilet seven times (six times for number 1 only) and Jill eight times. Nine of the 15 daily toilet visits will take place in a seated position.

The rhythm of toileting

We are now in a position to describe systematically the rhythm of toileting in a mixed-sex household: who does what and who follows.

Jack and Jill are unlikely to intersperse their toilet activities in a completely random sequence, nor are they likely to follow a strict alternating pattern. Jack and Jill will usually follow one another given the natural spacing of bowel and bladder voiding, but both will sometimes use the toilet twice in a row. Jill will also visit the bathroom slightly more often than Jack. So let's work out probabilities of different sequences of consecutive toilet episodes.

Let's start with Jack's urination-onlys, which we'll call $Jack_1$s. If Jack and Jill's toilet visits were randomly spaced there would be a 53 per cent chance of Jill using the toilet next and a 47 per cent chance of Jack (she goes eight times to his seven). Let's assume that having voided he's less likely to return in the near future. On this basis let's approximately halve his likelihood of being next to 20 per cent so that Jill's probability of being next is 80 per cent. If Jack defecates ($Jack_2$) on every seventh toilet visit, then the likelihood of a $Jack_2$ occurring after a $Jack_1$ is about one in six. So of the 20 per cent of occasions when Jack is the first person to use the toilet after one of his $Jack_1$s, about 3 per cent will be for $Jack_2$ and 17 per cent will be for another $Jack_1$.

What happens after $Jack_2$s? Again, let's say the likelihood of Jill paying the next visit is 80 per cent given that Jack is temporarily relieved of his burden. Jack is now highly unlikely to pay an immediate second visit for a $Jack_2$. In the absence of dodgy seafood these will rarely occur in quick succession, so let's downgrade the likelihood of one $Jack_2$ immediately following another to 2 per cent. The remaining option ($Jack_2$-$Jack_1$) takes up the remaining 18 per cent.

When Jill uses the toilet, she would have a 53 per cent likelihood of being the next user if our couple's toilet visits were distributed randomly. If we again approximately halve this likelihood to account for her temporary relief, the probability that Jill will succeed herself to the throne will be 30 per cent. Therefore Jack is likely to be the next user 70 per cent of the time. $Jack_1$s should be six times more probable than $Jack_2$s, so there is a 60 per cent chance that Jill's toilet use will be followed by a $Jack_1$ and 10 per cent by a $Jack_2$. Table 8.1 summarizes these calculations.

We now have a principled way of estimating what will transpire during an average day in Jack and Jill's bathroom. Table 8.2 presents the expected frequencies of each of the nine possible sequences of toilet use in an average day, based on the frequency of each use type by Jack and Jill and the probabilities that each particular use type

Table 8.1 Probability of second toilet-use types depending on first use type

First use type	Second use type		
	Pr(Jack$_1$)	**Pr(Jack$_2$)**	**Pr(Jill)**
Jack$_1$	0.17	0.03	0.80
Jack$_2$	0.18	0.02	0.80
Jill	0.60	0.10	0.30

Table 8.2 Expected frequencies of different toilet-use sequences in an average day

Use sequence	Frequency of first use	Conditional probability of second use	Expected frequency of sequence
Jack$_1$-Jack$_1$	6	0.17	1.02
Jack$_1$-Jack$_2$	6	0.03	0.18
Jack$_1$-Jill	6	0.80	4.80
Jack$_2$-Jack$_1$	1	0.18	0.18
Jack$_2$-Jack$_2$	1	0.02	0.02
Jack$_2$-Jill	1	0.80	0.80
Jill-Jack$_1$	8	0.60	4.80
Jill-Jack$_2$	8	0.10	0.80
Jill-Jill	8	0.30	2.40

will follow. As we can see, the most common sequences are Jill followed by Jack$_1$ and Jack$_1$ followed by Jill. These 9.6 gender-alternating sequences, in which the toilet-seat configuration has to change, are where the trouble all starts.

Strategies of toilet-seat positioning

Knowing the expected sequences of toilet use and their relative frequency we are now in a position to test several alternative ways in which the disposition of the toilet seat could be organized. Let me describe four possible strategies, the relative merits of which will be examined later. The implications of each strategy for the raising and lowering of the seat, for each of the nine toilet-use sequences, are presented in Table 8.3. These implications are confined to the first toilet user's seat movements after use and the second user's seat movements prior to use.

Table 8.3 Implications of the four strategies for each toilet-use sequence (seat movements required after 1st use and before 2nd use)

Use sequence	Self-reliance	Golden rule	Female-favouring	Male-favouring
$Jack_1$-$Jack_1$		↓↑	↓↑	
$Jack_1$-$Jack_2$	↓	↓	↓	↓
$Jack_1$-Jill	↓	↓	↓	↓
$Jack_2$-$Jack_1$	↑	↑	↑	↑
$Jack_2$-$Jack_2$				↑↓
$Jack_2$-Jill				↑↓
Jill-$Jack_1$	↑	↑	↑	↑
Jill-$Jack_2$		↑↓		↑↓
Jill-Jill		↑↓		↑↓
Jack's moves	5.16	8	12	2
Jill's moves	4.8	10.4	0	16
Total moves	9.96	18.4	12	18

Note: ↑ Jill lifts, ↓ Jill drops, ↑ Jack lifts, ↓ Jack drops

a) *Self-reliance*. The simplest strategy toilet users might take is to place the seat in the position they need and leave it there when they are finished. In short, this is a strategy of present-focused self-reliance, with no thought for who will next use the toilet. In five of our nine toilet-use sequences the second user finds the seat in the desired position and no action is necessary. However, after $Jack_1$s Jill will need to drop the seat, as will Jack if a $Jack_2$ comes next. Similarly, Jack will need to lift the seat if Jill or $Jack_2$ precedes his intended $Jack_1$.

b) *Golden rule*. A second strategy involves showing consideration for the next user by anticipating the seat position that he or she will desire. It follows the 'golden rule' of doing unto others as one would have them do unto oneself. After each use of the toilet the person guesses who is likely to use the toilet next and adjusts the seat position as appropriate. As Table 8.1 shows, the most likely user after Jack is Jill and the most likely user after Jill is Jack, who will tend to be planning a $Jack_1$. Thus, Jack should drop the seat after $Jack_1$s and leave it down after $Jack_2$s. Jill should raise the seat when she is done. This strategy will sometimes generate double-movements of the seat.

After urinating Jack will drop the seat but then have to raise it again if the next toilet use is another $Jack_1$. Similarly, Jill will raise the seat after using it but if the following toilet use is hers or a $Jack_2$ then the seat will need to be re-lowered.

c) *Female-favouring*. A third strategy involves taking the seat-down position as the default and requiring the person who lifts the seat to immediately restore it to its rightful position. After urinating, Jack will drop the seat and have to lift it again if a $Jack_1$ is the next toilet use. If a Jill or $Jack_2$ precedes a $Jack_1$ he will have to lift the seat. This strategy is female-favouring because all seat movements are carried out by Jack.

d) *Male-favouring*. Our fourth strategy is the mirror image of the third as it systematically advantages the male by taking his favoured seat-up position as the default. Jill must lift the seat after each use, as must Jack after his $Jack_2$s. Jack will have to drop the already lifted seat when he prepares for a $Jack_2$ and Jill will have to do the same. Double-movements – lift then drop – will be required whenever two $Jack_2$s or Jills occur consecutively, or when one is followed by the other.

Evaluating the strategies

So how do our four strategies compare and which is the most sensible to adopt? This not a straightforward question, as there are at least two criteria we might use to answer it. The most sensible strategy might be the one that is the most efficient, in the sense of requiring the fewest overall seat movements. These movements take effort, and contact with the seat may be mildly aversive to some people, so minimizing movements is a worthy goal. Alternatively, the most sensible strategy might be the one that is the most fair and equitable. Any strategy that places a disproportionate burden on Jack or Jill might be undesirable, regardless of its efficiency. If Jack and Jill are a modern couple, it is likely that they would endorse fairness and equality as guiding principles of their relationship.

The top of Table 8.3 tells us how many seat movements Jack and Jill make in each toilet-use sequence for each of the four strategies. If we combine this information with the expected frequency of each sequence, shown in Table 8.2, then we discover how many seat movements Jack and Jill are likely to make during the average day. The last three rows of Table 8.3 present these estimates for each strategy: Jack's moves, Jill's moves and their combined total. The most

efficient strategy is the one with the fewest total movements and the most equitable is the one in which Jack's and Jill's movements are most equal.

It is plain to see that the *Self-reliance* strategy is the most efficient. It requires only about ten seat movements in the average day (i.e., 2/3 of the time the toilet is used). The *Female-favouring* (seat-down default) strategy is only slightly less efficient. The least efficient are the *Golden rule* and *Male-favouring* strategies, both of which require almost twice as many seat movements as *Self-reliance*. These inefficient strategies both require frequent double-movements in which a first user's considerate anticipation of the next user's needs turns out to be inaccurate (*Golden rule*) or a rule-governed return to the seat-up default position by a first user must be reversed when the second user must also be seated (*Male-favouring*). The key advantage of the *Self-reliance* strategy is that unlike all other strategies it requires no seat movements to be made after the toilet has been used. All movements are made by the person who needs them at the time of their need.

But what about fairness? Is *Self-reliance* the most efficient but the least equitable, like turbo-capitalism? On the contrary, it is the most equitable of all, requiring Jack to make only slightly more toilet-seat movements than Jill. The *Golden rule* strategy is also quite equitable, requiring somewhat more work from women. The *Female-favouring* and *Male-favouring* strategies are, of course, the least equitable. The former allows Jill's hands to remain entirely unacquainted with the toilet seat. The latter requires Jack to sully himself only on the rare occasions when, in preparation for a $Jack_2$, he must drop the seat that had been raised for his benefit and when, in its aftermath, he must raise the seat in anticipation of a future $Jack_1$.

In sum, *Self-reliance* emerges as a rather unlikely winner among our four strategies, the most efficient and the most equitable of them all. The *Golden rule* and *Female-favouring* strategies compete for second place, the former equitable but highly inefficient and the latter efficient but highly inequitable. The *Male-favouring* strategy clearly comes last.

Is that all there is?

This analysis indicates that *Self-reliance* is clearly the best way to conduct toilet etiquette in mixed-sex households. Attending

myopically and selfishly to the immediate demands of one's own excretion is not only the most efficient approach – the least soiling of hands and taxing of toilet-seat hinges – but it also comes closest to gender equity. Being considerate by anticipating the seat-positioning needs of the next user, including one's future self in Jack's case, is markedly inefficient and less equitable, with the burden falling on women more than men. Strategies that impose default seat positions are less efficient than *Self-reliance* and dispense with any semblance of gender-neutrality.

Will people now cheerfully accept the wisdom of self-reliance where toilet-seat etiquette is concerned? My strong suspicion is that most will not. Many men will feel vindicated in 'doing what comes naturally'. Many women will feel that this is not an issue to be resolved by a quasi-economic analysis and that what is at stake is men doing what is right – what *should* be done – rather than what is rational, fair or equitable in some abstract or mathematical sense. Indeed, women tend to be less predisposed to economic thinking (Bansak & Starr, 2010) and less prone to reason about human affairs in terms of costs, benefits, utilities and optimization, perhaps a key reason why economics is by far the most male-dominated of the social sciences. For women who are bothered by the toilet-seat question and of course for many happily domesticated men as well, the issue is moral and qualitative – whether a rule of good bathroom conduct is obeyed or broken – not prudent and quantitative.

This really does seem to be the nub of the issue. The disposition of toilet seats is often seen in moral terms. The emotions generated by incorrect dispositions are moral emotions: the righteous anger of the accuser and the righteous indignation of the wrongly (he thinks) accused. The responses to failures to lower the seat – anecdotally ranging from harsh words to sex-strikes to poisoning fantasies– are clearly moral punishments. The clue that moral considerations swirl around the toilet seat is the apparent triviality of the transgression and the seriousness with which it is assessed. Indeed, it is the triviality of the required action – a gravity-assisted post-flush nudge by the man's index finger – that contributes to the perceived seriousness of the transgression.

If the disposition of the toilet seat is a moral issue, in what way is this so? Many moral issues implicate harm and rights, but it is questionable whether these are involved here. There is no obvious

right to have a toilet seat placed in a personally convenient position. There is also no obvious physical harm involved. What harm is being done to Jill when Jack leaves the toilet seat in the upward position in which he used it rather than lowering it in anticipation of her preference? Remember that there is a substantial likelihood that he will be the next toilet user and that he will again want the seat up if he is. The harm seems minimal. Jill incurs no pain or significant muscular or cognitive effort if she has to lower the seat. Having to touch the seat may induce some feelings of aversion, but if this is the case then protecting Jill from emotional harm by lowering the seat will inflict the same harm on Jack (i.e., robbing Peter to pay Pauline).

Seat positioning as a moral issue

So why does so much emotional heat and moral censure attach to the matter of the toilet seat? Or alternatively, what crucial additional factor does our analysis of the rhythms of toileting omit? Let's consider a few options:

1) *The trauma theory*. Anecdotal reports and cartoons tell of women who, making a nocturnal visit to the toilet, fall in because the previous user failed to lower the seat. Failure to protect the women by leaving this dangerous diameter would indeed be a matter of immoral carelessness. However, this possibility seems like a weak basis for imposing a seat-down prescription because it is likely to be rare and unlikely to be repeated and it does not seem entirely reasonable to hold Jack responsible for Jill's failure to check the seat's position. It is also possible for Jack to be the victim of his own failure to put the seat down, but men rarely if ever express fears of falling in or see the possibility as a reason to change their habit of leaving the seat up. In short, the trauma theory seems to be an attempt to rationalize a seat-down preference that has a less rational basis.

2) *The default position theory*. People tend to judge negatively actions that depart from a norm and believe that what is normal is also morally correct. The seat-down position is in some sense the norm, as it applies for 60 per cent of all toilet episodes in our hypothetical household. It is absolutely the norm for Jill, who never uses the seat-up position (except for a possible non-traditional toilet use), so she is likely to see the down position as the one where the seat 'belongs'. For Jack, of course, the seat-up position is the norm,

because he only puts the seat down for a minority of his toilet uses. This leaves a situation where Jack and Jill have different senses of what the norm is and thus a tendency to moralize departures from that norm. Jill has overall descriptive truth on her side, but also perhaps a greater tendency to see her non-preferred seat position as a deviation from the default position.

3) *The aesthetic preference theory*. Some women justify their preference for the seat-down position on aesthetic grounds: the seat simply looks better or more natural in that position. By leaving the seat up men are violating rules of good taste and therefore to be condemned. The grounds for this aesthetic preference are unclear, but may be supported by an unconscious recognition that the down position is more in accordance with gravity.

4) *The household labour theory*. A third account of the moral offence caused by men's leaving the seat up is that women still tend to do the bulk of the cleaning in most households. One study found that cleaning the toilet was seen as the third-most female-dominated household task out of 25 (Beckwith, 1992), at least in part because it shares many of the features that distinguish women's domestic tasks from men's: low status, frequent, not discretionary and indoors (Coltrane, 1989). If his urinary splatter becomes her sanitary problem then she has a legitimate hygienic grievance. It's a moral grievance too, because the splatter is under Jack's voluntary control, easily avoided by sitting down.

5) *The chivalric residue theory*. Another explanation, popular with some men, is that some women expect men to look after and protect them in a way that is not reciprocal. Just as Sir Walter Raleigh is said to have laid his cloak on a mud-puddle so that Queen Elizabeth I could walk over it without sullying her regal shoes, Jack should follow the *Female-favouring* strategy to protect Jill from the cloacal dirt of the toilet. According to this view, Jill takes Jack's failure to put the seat down as evidence of a lack of proper manly concern. A possible error of omission has become a definite sin of commission. Jill feels no obligation to show similar concern for Jack by lifting the seat to protect his finer feelings.

6) *The sexism theory*. One view of the toilet-seat issue is that leaving the seat up involves an in-your-face display of male privilege, a blatant insistence on male difference. According to this position, men should leave the seat down to express their equality with women,

making it an anti-sexist gesture, although it must be remembered that equality in seat placement means inequality in toilet-seat movements (i.e., the *Female-favouring* strategy). This view of gender toilet equality seems to underpin the development of a social norm of men sitting to urinate in Germany, where foreign visitors who leave the seat up are zealously corrected. The sexism theory does seem to have a measure of psychological reality, as some men do take standing urination as a valued male prerogative and disparage perceived femininity in other men by stating that they must sit (or squat) to pee.

7) *The disgust theory*. When Jack leaves the seat up, Jill often has to put it down. Touching the toilet evokes disgust for many people and is aversive for that reason. There is ample evidence that women tend to be more disgust-sensitive than men, including in the 'core disgust' domain of excretion (Haidt et al., 1994). One study found that fewer than 10 per cent of men were more disgust-prone than the average woman (Druschel & Sherman, 1999) and another found that women had much more negative attitudes to bodily elimination products (Templer et al., 1984). Women are therefore likely to have stronger aversions than men to anything connected with toilets, including touching their seats, and more likely to fear contamination by them. Our analysis of different strategies for toilet-seat placement, which proclaimed *Self-reliance* as the most efficient and equitable, assumed that each movement of the seat was equally unpleasant and effortful for Jack and Jill and aimed to minimize seat-touches. But what if moving the seat is more unpleasant on average for Jill? The analysis presented earlier implies that if each touch of the toilet seat is somewhat more aversive to Jill than Jack – at least 43 per cent to be precise – then the *Female-favouring* strategy is better than *Self-reliance* in minimizing the overall aversiveness of toilet-seat movement. Assuming a modestly greater female predisposition to find toilet-seat touching to be disgusting, a simple utilitarian analysis therefore suggests that men should put the seat down.

Conclusions

The definitive studies have yet to be conducted, but my guess is that the household labour, perceived sexism and disgust theories are the best accounts of why moral offence attaches to toilet-seat behaviour. They explain why leaving the seat up can be seen as immoral in three

ways: because it inflicts undeserved harm on women (if she cleans the bathroom), because it is perceived as violating a principle of gender equality, or because it evokes greater concerns about contamination and impurity among women. The role of disgust may be especially central. Not only does the gender difference in disgust sensitivity account for the greater aversiveness of touching the toilet seat for women, but it may also underlie some of the other theories. Women's fear of falling into the toilet may draw some of its intensity from their greater disgust at the thought of doing so. Their aesthetic preference for a more closed toilet may reflect a desire to reduce its perceived power to contaminate. Their unhappiness about cleaning the bathroom may stem not just from the inequity of a domestic arrangement and from not having caused the mess, but also from the disgustingness of what they are cleaning. Similarly, men's lack of interest in cleaning the bathroom may not only reveal their innate piggishness, but also their failure to see the stray droplets as disgusting to the same degree as women.

Overall, the burden of disgust falls on women more than men. They are held to a higher standard of purity and cleanliness, sanctioned and humiliated more for violating this standard and expected to distance themselves more from the products of their bodies or even to pretend that there are none. In the words of one woman interviewed in a sociological study of 'fecal matters', 'women are supposed to be non-poopers' (Weinberg & Williams, 2005, p. 327). A man in the same study stated that 'women in my mind are beautiful, perfect creatures that are the object of desire . . . I don't want that image of them tainted in my mind' (p. 327). In a study by Roberts and MacLane described by Goldenberg and Roberts (2004), a female experimenter who excused herself to use the bathroom was evaluated more negatively than one who excused herself to get some paperwork, but no such difference was found for a male experimenter. In addition to being judged more harshly in relation to disgust, women have also often had to do more disgusting work. They have historically borne the brunt of domestic hygiene, including cleaning up the filth of men and children. Sparing women unnecessary disgust should not be too much to ask of men.

So what is to be done? I think it's quite simple: men should put the seat down. Doing so is simple and probably minimizes the overall unpleasantness associated with touching the toilet seat in a

mixed-gender household. It eliminates any suspicion of sexism and displays concern for the other person. Men may still enjoy the male prerogative of standing to urinate if they wish, but if they do they should take the lead in cleaning up any resulting splatter. Men may console themselves that in an entirely rational world, in which disgust and contamination concerns were unknown, the self-reliant strategy that many of them prefer would be optimal in terms of efficiency and equity. But they would probably be well advised to console themselves privately or in the exclusive company of men.

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