

Lowering Toilet Seats: Why It Should Be the Norm

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Many people who stand to pee raise the toilet seat so that they have a larger target to aim at. However, if the seat is left in this position, any subsequent toilet user who defecates or pees sitting down will need to lower the seat. Some of us believe that this inconvenience should not be visited on those who pee sitting down, while others deny that there is anything wrong with leaving the toilet seat in the position that you used it. This article offers the first scholarly defense of the seat-down norm. In so doing, it shows that recent claims that this norm would be unfair and inefficient are unwarranted.

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The case against the seat-down norm

Male¹ bathroom users are generally better-equipped to pee from a standing position than their female counterparts. The reason for this is that the pointy shape of their genitalia makes it easier for them to form an orderly stream. Yet, despite helping to improve their accuracy, having a penis by no means guarantees that those who pee standing, whom I will refer to as *Stehpinkler*, will manage to deposit all of their urine within the toilet bowl. As almost everyone who either is a *Stehpinkler* or who has shared a toilet with one is able to attest, things sometimes goes wrong with potentially dire consequences for fellow toilet users.

To reduce this risk, many *Stehpinkler* raise the toilet seat of throne toilets (which is the type of toilet on which I focus in this article)² before peeing. This way, they have a larger toilet-bowl surface to aim at. However, if the seat is left upright after use, any subsequent toilet user who defecates or pees sitting down will need to *lower the seat* in order to go about her business. For many people (often but not exclusively women), this inconvenience should not be visited on those who pee sitting down, whom I will refer to as *Sitzpinkler*, which leads them to endorse what I call the ‘seat-down norm’, i.e. the norm that requires toilet users to lower the seat after use. An expression of this view can be found in the following blog post by a feminist author:

A man leaving the toilet seat up is like slapping the woman who comes into the bathroom after him in the face! There is nothing about my anatomy that would require me to touch a toilet seat, basically ever, and the fact that they’re making me touch it unnecessarily is not only gross, it’s wildly disrespectful.

This is the patriarchy in action! Maleness is assumed. Women's bodies and needs aren't considered. It makes me so mad! (Northrup, 2017).

Others, by contrast, deny that there is anything wrong with leaving the toilet seat in the position that you used it. One argument that is often marshalled in support of this claim is that for *Stehpinkler* to accommodate *Sitzpinkler* by lowering the toilet seat without the latter reciprocating by raising it is unfair as it requires one group of toilet users to make concessions but not the other (e.g. Choi, 2002, p. 303; Walker, 2019). Consider the following contribution to an online discussion:

A man goes into the bathroom and puts the seat up, then he puts it down before he leaves. A woman goes into the bathroom and doesn't put the seat up or down because the man already did it for her. I have never understood this. How is it fair? In my household, you (and only you) are responsible for making sure the toilet seat is in the correct position for YOU. My husband doesn't have to put the seat down for any more than I have to put it up for him (Walker, 2019).

Given that the large majority of *Stehpinkler* are men, this argument further suggests that the seat-down norm is sexist, which is why I will refer to it as the 'unfairness/sexism objection'.

Another argument that has been made against the seat-down norm might be labelled the 'inefficiency objection'. According to this objection, there are various contexts where this norm is inefficient in that it fails to minimize the number of times that the position of the toilet seat needs to be altered. For example, economists Jai Choi (2002), Hammad Siddiqi (2006), and Richard Harter (2005) have shown that in a two-member household with one *Stehpinkler* and one *Sitzpinkler*, the strategy whereby each toilet user leaves the toilet seat in the position in which they used it – call this the 'leave-the-seat-as-you-used-itnorm' – *dominates* the one where the seat is either always left down or always left up. This is because while there is no gain – but also no loss – in efficiency when the *Stehpinkler* and the *Sitzpinkler* strictly alternate their toilet visits, once there are consecutive peeing visits by the same toilet user, the number of times that the toilet seat needs to be adjusted is reduced (cf. Choi, 2002, p. 306). Likewise, in places where *Stehpinkler* outnumber *Sitzpinkler*, the seat-down norm is likely to be inefficient, because *unless* the *Sitzpinkler* urinate much more frequently than their standing counterparts, the probability of the next urinator being a *Stehpinkler* will be greater.

As plausible as the objections just mentioned might seem, the remainder of this article argues that they are unsuccessful. Specifically, I will contend that whenever *Stehpinkler* and *Sitzpinkler* share a toilet or, to be more precise, whenever there is a significant chance that a toilet will be used by *Sitzpinkler*,³ the seat-down norm ought to be observed. By 'ought to be observed', I here mean that *Stehpinkler* have decisive moral reason to lower the toilet seat after they finish urinating. In some cases, I will suggest that these reasons are strong enough to generate a duty to close the seat, the violation of which will render people liable to blame; however, I will not try to provide an exhaustive overview of cases where such duties exist, which remains an important task for future research.

Before moving on, I should stress that the toilet seat issue is by no means a trivial issue as some might think. Not only will we see that strong interests may be at stake in terms of people's safety, health, time, and subjective wellbeing, there is also ample anecdotal evidence that many individuals feel strongly about it (see, for instance,

the quotes at the outset) and that fights over the proper default position of the toilet seat are not uncommon (e.g. *Forcing Men to Put down the Toilet Seat Is Sexist*, 2018; *What's with All the Rage over Leaving the Toilet Seat Up?*, 2010; *Why Is It the Man's Responsibility to Put the Toilet Seat Down?*). Further evidence that this issue matters to a large share of people is provided by e.g.

- The numerous popular media articles, blog contributions and scholarly papers that have been devoted to it (e.g. Andresen, 2010; Choi, 2002; Harter, 2005; Lawton & Lawton, 2022; Marvasi, 2008; Moss, 2015; Northrup, 2017; Siddiqi, 2006; Stromberg, 2015).
- The fact that searching online with the phrase 'toilet seat up or down' yielded more than 36,000 results on Google's search engine as of early March 2022.
- The fact that in 2012 a local Swedish leftist party attempted to make it illegal for people to urinate standing in office bathrooms (The Local, 2012).
- The fact that the 'WC-Ghost' [*WC-Spuk*], which is a toilet clip-on that vocally reprimands those who attempt to raise the toilet seat, has had strong commercial success in Germany (Deutsche Welle, 2004).

The case for the seat-down norm

Having suggested that the toilet seat issue is worth our attention, my aim in this section is to offer three arguments for the seat-down norm. Together, these arguments will show that the unfairness/sexism objection and the inefficiency objection to this norm are both wanting and, following from this, that *Stehpinkler* have decisive moral reason to lower the toilet seat whenever there is a significant chance of the next toilet user being a *Sitzpinkler*.

The risks of not lowering the toilet seat

The first argument for the seat-down norm is that compliance with this norm eliminates the risk of toilet users falling into the toilet because they mistakenly believe the seat to be down. As it happens, I am unaware of statistics on the prevalence of this type of bathroom-related accident. While it is known that in 2008 alone (the latest year for which there is data), circa 235,000 people aged 15 and above visited emergency rooms in the United States after sustaining injuries in bathrooms and while almost 14 percent of these accidents were associated with people standing up from, sitting down on or using the toilet (Center for Disease Control and Prevention, 2011), there are no breakdowns that indicate how many of these individuals found themselves caught in the toilet bowl. That said, a lot of anecdotal evidence exists that some individuals are at significant risk of suffering this fate as they have fallen into the toilet more than once. Consider the following testimony by a woman to whom this applies:

I can go to bathroom with my eyes partially shut, use the toilet and back to bed without being totally awake. So, when my quiet little walk to bathroom ends, when I sit on toilet and my happy little butt hits water. First, I'm woke up, not a normal wake. A feel of falling, takes a little effort to get up. Then as I dry my butt, I'm cussing. Has been years, but I have a sign, that reads you will get bucket of water poured on your head if you leave lid up (Allen, 2017).

Or consider the following testimony by a different woman who reports having fallen into her toilet on several occasions, which she describes happened

...usually at night or in the morning when my contact lenses were out. At least once when I was six or seven months pregnant and had to wait for someone to walk past to hear me calling for help out of the toilet. Seriously, guys, it's gross, and uncomfortable to painful, and it's not hard to remember. I put the lid down every time I've used the toilet. If I can remember that, anyone can (Billy, 2017).

As these stories illustrate, falling into the toilet can be highly unpleasant and, as the second one suggests, potentially lead to serious injury. It is plausible to think, therefore, that insofar as there is a significant risk of fellow toilet users falling into the toilet, this imposes a moral duty on *Stehpinkler* to lower the seat after they finish urinating *even when* lowering the seat is somewhat inconvenient and fails to minimize the number of times that its position needs to be changed relative to a scenario where the leave-the-seat-as-you-used-it-norm is observed (see the previous section). In support of this view, one might notice that it is already widely accepted within other contexts that we should make small sacrifices to avoid endangering the health and safety of those around us. For example, although respecting speed limits may be inconvenient for those who want to get home as quickly as possible, most of us seem to accept that we have a moral duty – and not just a legal one – to do so given the risks that speeding presents to others. Likewise, many would concur, I suspect, that we should mop up any spills that we cause if the risk of others slipping on the wet surface is significant, at least when we are able to do so and when there is no one with a role-based obligation to do so on our behalf (as might be the case, for instance, when we have spilled coffee on the floor of a shop that we are visiting).

The risks of not closing the toilet lid

The second argument for the seat-down norm is also premised on the notion that it is morally incumbent on us to bear small costs if this is necessary to avoid imperiling others' health and safety. According to this argument, there are cases where health and safety considerations impose a moral duty on all toilet users to *close the toilet lid* after urinating or defecating. Since toilet lids can be closed *only if* the toilet seat is lowered, such duties entail a duty to lower the seat.

One important danger that can generate a duty to close the lid is that infants might fall into open-lid toilets and potentially drown or sustain brain damage as a result of their heads becoming submerged. In the United States, for instance, there have been 16 reports of under-five year olds drowning in toilets between 1996 and 1999 (Consumer Product Safety Commission, 2016). More recently, a widely reported incident took place in Phoenix, where a baby drowned in a toilet after her 16-year-old stepsister had lost sight of her (McCloskey, 2019). Another way in which upright lids might pose a health and safety hazard capable of generating such a duty stems from the fact that whenever a toilet is flushed with the lid open, a so-called 'toilet plume' or 'toilet aerosol' is formed, which is a spray of germs that can linger in the air for some time after a person is done using the bathroom. While toilet plumes do not normally harm bathroom users, a 2013 literature review found that they 'could play an important role in the transmission of infectious diseases for

which the pathogen is shed in feces or vomit' such as the norovirus, SARS and pandemic influenza (Best et al., 2012). Because of this risk, some health experts recommend flushing the toilet with the lid down in places that are frequented by individuals with weakened immune systems such as hospitals (Best et al., 2012).

Peeing standing as a socially expensive taste

It is important to observe at this point that health and safety-arguments for the seat-down norm do not settle the toilet-seat issue across the board. The reason for this is that there are cases of *Stehpinkler* and *Sitzpinkler* sharing a bathroom where there is *neither* a significant danger of people falling into the toilet *nor* a significant danger of them contracting health problems as a result of exposure to toilet plumes. This will be true, for instance, when all members of a given household have a normal immune system as well as a habit of carefully inspecting the toilet-seat position before sitting down. In such cases, the question arises as to whether the seat-down norm can still be justified.

Some may say that it can, based on the fact that, everything else being equal, *Stehpinkler* are at greater risk of defiling the bathroom than both *Sitzpinkler* and those who squat above the toilet bowl, given that the relatively large distance between their pee-hole and the toilet bowl comes with an elevated risk that their urine stream will miss the inside of the bowl, disperse before reaching it, or hit the inside of the bowl with such velocity as to cause considerable splashback (Morgan, 2013). To reduce these risks, it might be argued that urinals have a moral duty to adopt either a sedentary position or a (low enough) squatting position, which, if correct, would count in favour of the seat-down norm. To see why, it should be observed that one of these positions, namely the sedentary position, requires the toilet seat to be down to be adopted safely by many, if not most, people, whereas those who pee while squatting are normally able to do so in a safe and orderly fashion with the toilet seat down (indeed, lowering the seat reduces the risk of them falling into the toilet and thereby increases their safety).

While I think that this argument has merit in some cases, I do not want to put too much weight on it here. The reason for this is that even when *Stehpinkler* end up creating a mess, this will not be much of a problem if (i) they clean up after themselves and (ii) nobody has to postpone emptying their bladder or bowels in the meantime, perhaps because they have recently used the toilet or because there is another toilet that they can use. Rather than being justified by the elevated risk that *Stehpinkler* run of spreading their urine across the bathroom vis-à-vis *Sitzpinkler*, then, I believe that the seat-down norm is justified by *another difference* between these groups. This difference lies in the fact that whereas *Stehpinkler* are usually able to pee sitting down with no significantly greater difficulty (which is not to say that urinating must be easy for them; the claim here is simply a comparative one), many *Sitzpinkler* cannot pee standing or squatting without creating a mess or without endangering their safety. Reasons for this may include, but are not necessarily limited to:

- The fact that they have difficulties aiming their stream, which is especially challenging for (biological) women given that these individuals lack a penis, as well as for tall men due to the relatively large distance between their pee-hole and the toilet bowl.

- The fact that they have medical conditions that cause their urine stream to split, such as a urethral stricture; a blocking of the opening of the tip of the penis (Meatal Stenosis); or an overly tight foreskin (Phimosis) (Parekh, 2019).
- The fact that they are physically unable to stand or squat because of an injury or disability.

To support the claim that it is fitting to treat the sitting position as the default – and implied by this, to expect *Sitzpinkler* to lower the toilet seat after they finish urinating – by virtue of being the *only urination position* in which (almost) everyone can pee in an orderly and safe fashion, I want to make two observations. The first is that the principle of inclusivity justifying the seat-down norm seems to be widely accepted in other contexts, which provides reason to think that it carries force for our case as well. For example, in large parts of the non-Anglophone world, English tends to be used as the language of communication when at least some interlocutors do not know (sufficiently well) the local language and when there is no other language that can be used more easily for communication. Under these conditions, it is often regarded as respectful to use a language that everyone (more or less) knows *even if* some interlocutors prefer to use a different language, such as the local one (Van Parijs, 2011). Another example may be found in cases where some, but not all, participants of a workshop are principled vegans and where a choice has to be made by the organizers for ordering vegan, vegetarian, or carnivore lunches (suppose *arguendo* that offering a combination of these options is not possible as this would require the organizers to order from multiple vendors for which there is no budget). All else being equal, my sense is that many of us would say here that the proper thing to do is to opt for the vegan option *even if* some workshop participants prefer vegetarian or carnivore food, given that this is the only option to which nobody has conscientious objections (cf. BBC, 2020). Still another example may be found in the social norm that expects physically strong users of plate-loaded weight machines to set the pins of these machines at a relatively light weight after finishing their exercise. Undergirding this norm is an ideal of inclusion similar to the ones in the previous cases, according to which the appropriate way to respond to differences in people’s physical strength is to create conditions under which most, if not all, subsequent gym users are able to do a given exercise without having to make any adjustments.

The second observation supporting the seat-down norm is that in a world in which everyone urinated sitting, toilet seats would *never have to be raised for purposes of excretion*. The reason this matters is that the number of times we would be handling the toilet seat would be reduced dramatically compared to a scenario where either the leave-the-seat-as-you-used-it norm or the seat-up norm requiring the toilet seat to be left upright is universally observed, which has two major advantages. One is that a good portion of us would much less frequently experience the discomfort, if not outright disgust, that many *Stehpinkler* and *Sitzpinkler* alike experience when altering the toilet seat. Such feelings of discomfort and disgust can be explained in part by the fact that the toilet seat is widely yet wrongly believed to be one of the most unhygienic objects within the home. As Chuck Gerba, professor of microbiology at the University of Arizona, has found in his studies, the average toilet seat contains 50 bacteria per square inch, which is 400 times fewer than the average keyboard and 200,000 times fewer than the average kitchen sponge, making

it ‘one of the cleanest things you’ll run across in terms of micro-organisms’ (quoted in Pritchard, 2012). However, even if knowledge of the relatively cleanliness of toilet seats were more common, one would expect many individuals to continue to find the activity of altering the toilet seat position unpleasant because of the ways in which a large number of us have been socialized to associate toilets with dirtiness (cf. Molotch & Noren, 2010).

The other advantage of a world in which everyone urinated sitting is that all urinators would save a lot of time because of the reduced frequency with which they would be handling the toilet seat. For while changing the seat’s position only takes a few seconds, the fact that we urinate circa 6 or 7 times a day on average (Smith, 2016) means that, over the course of our lives, the amount of time saved can really add up. Consider a *Sitzpinkler* who is raised in a four-member household with one father and one older brother who are both *Stehpinkler* and who do not lower the toilet seat after they finish peeing. If we imagine that this person:

- learned to use the toilet by herself at the age of three;
- lowers the toilet seat on average twice a day (which seems a conservative estimate considering that half of the people she is living with are non-toilet-seat-lowering *Stehpinkler*); and
- spends an average of two seconds on this task,

then during the rest of her childhood, she will spend $365 \times 4 \times 15 = 21,900$ seconds changing the toilet seat position (excluding cases where the position is altered for cleaning purposes), which amounts to 365 hours or 15 days of her life. Were she later to live with housemates or romantic partners who are non-toilet-seat-lowering *Stehpinkler*, this figure will be considerably larger still, possibly multiple times. Similarly, in a world in which everyone urinated sitting, those who are currently *Stehpinkler* could easily save weeks, if not months, of their lives. This is because they would never again be raising the toilet seat to urinate or lowering it to defecate or to accommodate *Sitzpinkler*, which would free up a lot of time since most of us spend years, if not decades, living with *Sitzpinkler* who may include our mothers, sisters, girlfriends and wives, as well as possible male *Sitzpinkler*. Even when people feel (fairly) neutral about the act of lowering the toilet seat, perhaps because they are not easily disgusted or because their awareness of the relative cleanliness of toilet seats prevents them from experiencing disgust or other aversive mental states, these are noteworthy benefits given that this time will become available for other more enjoyable or meaningful activities. (Lest I be misunderstood, I am not claiming that this time can be spent all at once; its value lies instead in the fact that on thousands of occasions, people will be able to devote slightly more time to enjoyable or meaningful activities after they finish going to the bathroom.)

In response, a critic might deny that that the seat-down norm is vindicated by the observation that we would all save much time in a world in which everyone urinated from a sedentary position. Specifically, she might assert that because many people in our world will *continue to pee standing*, it remains true that *Stehpinkler* will spend substantially more time adjusting the toilet seat position than their sitting counterparts under the proposed norm but not under the leave-the-seat-as-you-used-it norm or the seat-up norm. Assuming that the time of *Stehpinkler* is as valuable as that of *Sitzpinkler*, this might suggest that the unfairness objection still stands in cases where lowering the toilet seat is not necessary for protecting people’s safety or health (see the previous subsections) and that the same is true of the

inefficiency objection in cases where eschewing the seat-down norm reduces the number of times that the toilet seat position needs to be altered in order to accommodate people's preferences (see the previous section).

The problem with this response is that it glosses over a relevant and previously discussed asymmetry: Whereas *Stehpinkler* are normally able to pee sitting down with no significantly greater difficulty, many *Sitzpinkler* can pee in a safe and orderly manner *only if* they adopt the sedentary position. What this means is that peeing standing is not something that *Stehpinkler must do* to be able to urinate or to do so in a safe and orderly fashion in the way that many *Sitzpinkler* can only urinate (in a safe and orderly fashion) when sitting down, but rather something that they *choose to do* because they find it somehow more enjoyable than peeing sitting. However, if this is true, then just as Ronald Dworkin has plausibly argued that societies should not give more resources (e.g. higher welfare benefits or pensions) to people who are only satisfied eating clover's eggs and drinking pre-phylloxera claret than to those who are satisfied consuming cheaper foods and beverages, including regular eggs and wine (Dworkin, 1981; for further discussion, see e.g. Cohen, 2008; Hansen & Midtgaard, 2011; Holtug, 2015), so it seems they should not bear the extra cost of some people's preferences for peeing standing as detailed above. Another way of making this point is to say that in both cases, accommodating people's expensive preferences – or 'expensive tastes' as they are usually called in the literature – looks unfair given that the holders of these tastes can easily achieve the same basic functionings, namely those of getting adequate nutrition and emptying their bladder, in ways that *are not expensive for the rest of society*, which in the toilet case involves peeing sitting.

If the foregoing is correct, then to defenders of the unfairness objection we can say that the seat-down norm is not only not unfair but actually *required* by principles of fairness. And to defenders of the inefficiency objection, we can say that the greater efficiency of the leave-the-seat-as-you-used-it norm within certain contexts is bought at an unacceptably high price when, and because, this norm creates situations where *Sitzpinkler* have to adjust the toilet seat position more frequently than they would in a world in which everyone urinated sitting, given that these are cases where *Stehpinkler* offload the higher costs of their preferred peeing habits onto them. Indeed, the fact that *Stehpinkler* refuse to assume the only peeing position that can be (almost) universally assumed, and that if (almost) universally assumed, would greatly reduce the number of times that the toilet seat needs to be handled by *Sitzpinkler* and current *Stehpinkler* alike (see my earlier comments this subsection) casts doubts on whether appeals to efficiency can have *any normative force* against the seat-down norm at all.

Conclusion

That concludes my defense of the seat-down norm in places where *Stehpinkler* and *Sitzpinkler* share a toilet or, to be more precise, ones where the chance is significant that the next toilet user will be a *Sitzpinkler*. As we are now in a position to see, the main reason why the seat-down norm should be observed in these contexts is that the preference to pee standing is an expensive taste, just like preferences for e.g. rare eggs and fancy wines are, and it would be wrong to make the rest of society pay for such tastes. However, if this is so, then while it will still sometimes be morally

permissible for people to pee standing in bathrooms that are likely to be used by *Sitzpinkler*, this prerogative is conditional on them being able and willing to internalize the actual and potential costs of such peeing, which means that the following requirements must be fulfilled:

- i. They should have the ability to clean up any mess that peeing standing might create without increasing waiting times.
- ii. If they end up creating such a mess, they should clean it up and do so fast enough to avoid increasing waiting times.
- iii. They should close the toilet seat after finishing peeing (in some cases together with the toilet lid for health or safety reasons).

If I am right about all this, then it appears that many *Stehpinkler* should start lowering the toilet seat more often than they currently do. My hope is that this contribution will help to bring about such a change.

Acknowledgements

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Notes

¹ I use the terms ‘male’ and ‘female’ here in a biological sense.

² Far from being a universal problem, it should be noted that the toilet seat issue arises only in places with this type of toilet, which have a toilet bowl with a O-shaped seat attached to it that can be raised by the user. Given that so-called ‘squat toilets’, which are the dominant type of toilet within large parts of Asia and Africa, and which essentially consist of a hole in the ground over which a urinator or defecator squats, lack toilet seats, they do not raise the issue of whether the toilet seat ought to be lowered after use.

³ For the purposes of this paper, it is not necessary for me to settle exactly how high this chance should be (readers can plug in their own view). Suffice it to say that a chance of 0.5 or even 0.3 would certainly seem high enough.

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