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The complexity of the weight problem for permutation and matrix groups

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ABSTRACT

Given a metric d on a permutation group G, the corresponding weight problem is to decide whether there exists an element $\pi \in G$ such that $d(\pi, e) = k$, for some given value k. Here we show that this problem is **NP**-complete for many well-known metrics. An analogous problem in matrix groups, eigenvalue-free problem, and two related problems in permutation groups, the maximum and minimum weight problems, are also investigated in this paper.

1. Introduction

Given a metric d on S_n, the *weight* of $\pi \in S_n$ is defined to be $w_d(\pi) = d(\pi, e)$, where e is the identity. Now we are interested in the following weight problems:

Problem 1 (*d Weight Problem*).
Instance: Generators for G in the form of products of cycles, and k in the range of d.
Question: Whether there is an element $\pi \in G$ such that $w_d(\pi) = k$.

Problem 2 (*d Maximum Weight Problem*).
Instance: Generators for G in the form of products of cycles, and k in the range of d.
Question: Whether $\max_{\pi \in G} w_d(\pi) \geq k$.

Problem 3 (*d Minimum Weight Problem*).
Instance: Generators for G in the form of products of cycles, and k in the range of d.
Question: Whether $\min_{\pi \in G \setminus \{e\}} w_d(\pi) \leq k$.

Often the permutation group G is given by a set of generating permutations $\{g_1, g_2, \ldots, g_m\}$ where each g_i is presented as the product of cycles. From such input much information, such as $|G|$ and a membership test, can be obtained by the Schreier–Sims algorithm in polynomial time [5]. There are also many other polynomial algorithms obtained for different properties of G. For further information, [16] is a good resource.

For the metrics studied in this paper (see Section 2), which include many well-known metrics, the weight of a given permutation can be calculated in polynomial time. Therefore the above three weight problems for them are in **NP**. In this paper, we will investigate the computational complexity of these problems.

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As we will see in Section 3, the weight problems for permutation groups are closely linked with the weight problems in coding theory. In [1], Berlekamp et al. proved that the weight problem for linear binary codes is **NP**-complete. Later, Vardy showed that the minimum weight problem is also **NP**-complete for linear binary codes in [18].

For the Hamming metric, the **NP**-completeness of the weight problem was discovered by Buchheim and Jünger in [3]. In permutation groups, the weight problem is also related to the subgroup distance problem, where one asks whether $\min_{\tau\in H} d(\pi,\tau) \leq K$ for a given $\pi \in S_n$, a set of generators of a subgroup H of S_n, and an integer K. The complexity of this problem was studied by Pinch for the Cayley metric in [14], and later generalised to other cases by Buchheim et al. in [2].

In this paper, we give a simple reduction from the permutation group problem to the coding problem and prove that, the weight problem and the minimum weight problem of many well-known metrics (Section 2) are **NP**-complete. For the maximum weight problem, we show that it is **NP**-complete for these metrics by a reduction from a well-known **NP**-complete problem **NAESAT** [13]. The case l_∞ is a bit different, since the maximum weight problem is in **P**; the other two problems are shown to be **NP**-complete by a different reduction. We also prove the **NP**-completeness of a problem, the Eigenvalue-Free problem (Section 7), for matrix groups over finite field. Let us remark here that an extended abstract, including some of these results, has appeared in [7].

The remainder of this paper is organized as follows. After surveying some metrics on a permutation group in Section 2, we investigate the connection between the weight problems of permutation groups and codes in Section 3. The maximum weight problem for Hamming metric is studied in Section 4 and the other cases are investigated in Section 5 with one exception, the l_∞, which is studied in Section 6. The problem in matrix groups is discussed in Section 7 and we study some further topics with open problems in Section 8.

2. Some metrics on permutation groups

A metric d on S_n is called *right-invariant* if $d(\pi,\sigma) = d(\pi\tau,\sigma\tau)$ for any $\pi,\sigma,\tau \in S_n$. If d is right-invariant, then $d(\pi,\sigma) = d(\pi\sigma^{-1}, e) = w_d(\pi\sigma^{-1})$. Conversely, if w is any function from S_n to the non-negative real numbers satisfying

- $w(\pi) = 0$ if and only if $\pi = e$,
- $w(\pi\sigma) \leq w(\pi) + w(\sigma)$ for any $\pi,\sigma \in S_n$,

then w is the norm derived from a right-invariant metric on S_n.

A metric d is *left-invariant* if $d(\pi,\sigma) = d(\tau\pi,\tau\sigma)$ for any $\pi,\sigma,\tau \in S_n$. If w_d is the norm derived from a right-invariant metric d, then d is left-invariant if and only if w_d is *conjugation-invariant*, that is, $w(\sigma\pi\sigma^{-1}) = w(\pi)$ for all $\pi,\sigma \in S_n$. This holds if and only if the metric d does not depend on the ordering of the set $\{1,\ldots,n\}$ on which S_n acts.

In this section we will survey some well-known right-invariant metrics on S_n. For more detailed discussion, we recommend [8,9].

- *Hamming Distance*: $H(\pi,\sigma) = |\{i|\pi(i) \neq \sigma(i)\}|$.
- *Cayley Distance*: $T(\pi,\sigma)$ is the minimum number of transpositions taking π to σ.
- *Movement*: The movement of a permutation π (see [15]) is defined as

$$M(\pi) = \max_{A\subseteq\{1,\ldots,n\}} |\pi(A) \setminus A|.$$

This is easily seen to be a norm, and so the corresponding metric given by $d_M(\pi,\sigma) = M(\sigma\pi^{-1})$ is right-invariant.

- *Footrule*: $l_1(\pi,\sigma) = \sum_{i=1}^n |\pi(i) - \sigma(i)|$.
- *Spearman's rank correlation*: $l_2(\pi,\sigma) = \sqrt{\sum_{i=1}^n (\pi(i) - \sigma(i))^2}$.
- l_p $(1 \leq p < \infty)$: $l_p(\pi,\sigma) = \sqrt[p]{\sum_{i=1}^n |\pi(i) - \sigma(i)|^p}$.
- $l_\infty(\pi,\sigma) = \max_{1\leq i\leq n} |\pi(i) - \sigma(i)|$.
- *Lee Distance*: $L(\pi,\sigma) = \sum_{i=1}^n \min(|\pi(i) - \sigma(i)|, n - |\pi(i) - \sigma(i)|)$.
- *Kendall's tau*: $I(\pi,\sigma) =$ the minimum number of pairwise adjacent transpositions needed to obtain σ from π, i.e,

$$I(\pi,\sigma) = |\{(i,j)|1 \leq i,j \leq n, \pi(i) < \pi(j), \sigma(i) > \sigma(j)\}|.$$

- *Ulam's Distance*: $U(\pi,\sigma) = n - k$, where k is the length of the longest increasing subsequence in $(\sigma\pi^{-1}(1),\ldots,\sigma\pi^{-1}(n))$.

For a taste of the above metrics, we give the following table to show the weight of elements in Klein four-group $G = \langle(1,2)(3,4)\ (1,3)(2,4)\rangle$.

π	cycles	H	M	T	l_1	l_2	l_p	l_∞	L	I	U
[1, 2, 3, 4]	(1)(2)(3)(4)	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
[2, 1, 4, 3]	(1, 2)(3, 4)	4	2	2	4	2	$\sqrt[p]{4}$	1	4	2	2
[3, 4, 1, 2]	(1, 3)(2, 4)	4	2	2	8	4	$2\sqrt[p]{4}$	2	8	4	2
[4, 3, 2, 1]	(1, 4)(2, 3)	4	2	2	8	$\sqrt{20}$	$\sqrt[p]{2(1+3^p)}$	3	4	6	3

The Hamming, Cayley and movement metrics are left-invariant; the others are not.

We note that the minimum Hamming weight of a permutation group G is usually called the *minimal degree* of G; this parameter was extensively studied in the classical literature of permutation groups.

3. A connection with coding theory

In this section, we will prove that the weight problem and minimum weight problem for all the metrics given in Section 2 except for l_∞ are **NP**-complete by using a reduction from some problems in coding theory.

Recall that the Hamming weight $w(c)$ of a binary word c of length n is defined to be the number of non-zero coordinates of c. A linear binary code C is a subspace of $\mathbb{F}_2^n$, given by a set of words forming a basis E for C. The Hamming weight and maximum and minimum weight problems for linear codes are defined as in the permutation group case.

Berlekamp et al. [1] proved that the weight problem for linear binary codes is **NP**-complete, and their method was adapted by Vardy [18] to show that the minimum weight problem for linear codes is also **NP**-complete. Now we summarize their results as the following theorem.

Theorem 4. *The weight problem and the minimum weight problem for linear binary codes are both* **NP***-complete.*

Strictly speaking, the input linear code in their papers is given by a matrix A such that the code $C = \{x : xA = 0\}$, but we can use Gaussian elimination to get a basis E for the code.

Given a linear binary code C of length n, we can construct a permutation group $G(C) \leq S_{2n}$, isomorphic to the additive group of C, as follows: to each codeword $c \in E$, the basis for C, we associate a permutation π_c which interchanges $2i-1$ and $2i$ if $c_i = 1$, and fixes these two points if $c_i = 0$. In other words, $\{\pi_c \mid c \in E\}$ provides a set of generators for the permutation group G. Since $\pi_{c_1}\pi_{c_2} = \pi_{c_1+c_2}$, we know that π is well defined for each code word in C as well. The following example shows how this process works.

Example. Consider the code C given by its basis $E = \{c_1, c_2\}$ with $c_1 = 0100$ and $c_2 = 0101$. Then $G = \langle \pi_{c_1}, \pi_{c_2} \rangle$ is a permutation group acting on $\{1, 2, \ldots, 8\}$ with the following two generators:

$$\pi_{c_1} = (3, 4) \quad \text{and} \quad \pi_{c_2} = (3, 4)(7, 8).$$

Now the Hamming weight of π_c is twice the Hamming weight $w(c)$ of c. Moreover, since $|\pi_c(i) - i| \leq 1$ for all i, the weights defined by all our metrics except l_∞ are monotonic functions of the Hamming weight of c: we have

- $w_T(\pi_c) = w_M(\pi_c) = w_I(\pi_c) = w_U(\pi_c) = w(c)$;
- $w_H(\pi_c) = w_L(\pi_c) = 2w(c)$;
- $w_{l_p}(\pi_c) = (2w(c))^{1/p}$.

It follows that the weight problem and minimum weight problem for all the metrics given in Section 2 except for l_∞ are **NP**-complete:

Theorem 5. *The weight problem and the minimum weight problem for the Hamming, Cayley, movement, l_p (for $1 \leq p < \infty$), Kendall's tau, Lee and Ulam metrics are all* **NP***-complete.*

The weight and minimum weight problems for l_∞ require separate treatment, as does the maximum weight problem for all metrics.

4. Maximum Hamming weight problem and the FPF problem

The largest possible weight for a linear code C of length n is n; this is attained only if C contains the all-1 vector. Given a basis for C, this can be checked in polynomial time. So we need a different argument for the maximum weight problem.

Elements $g \in G$ with Hamming weight n (also called *fixed-point-free* elements or *derangements*) are of special interest in many applications. Formally, we have

$$w_H(g) = n \Leftrightarrow \mathrm{fix}_\Omega(g) = \{\alpha \in \Omega | \alpha g = \alpha\} = \emptyset.$$

All such elements form a subset of G, denoted by:

$$\mathrm{FPF}(G) = \{g | w_H(g) = n\} = \{g \in G | (\forall \alpha \in \Omega) \alpha g \neq \alpha\}.$$

In short, we will call G *fixed-point-free* (**FPF**) if $\mathrm{FPF}(G) \neq \emptyset$. Notice that $w_H(g) \leq n$ holds for any element $g \in G \leq S_n$. Therefore, the problem of deciding whether there is an element $g \in G$ with Hamming weight n is the same as the following problem:

Problem 6 (*Fixed-Point-Free (**FPF**)*).

Instance: Generators for G in the form of product cycles.

Question: Whether G is **FPF**.

Since we can verify whether $g \in \mathrm{FPF}(G)$ in polynomial time by checking the action of g on each point of Ω, **FPF** belongs to **NP**. Now we will prove the NP-completeness of the maximum Hamming weight problem by showing that **FPF** is NP-complete. To this end, we construct a polynomial-time reduction from **NAESAT**, an **NP**-complete problem [13] defined as:

Problem 7 (***NAESAT***).

Instance: Collection $C = \{c_1, c_2, \ldots, c_m\}$ of clauses on a finite set U of boolean variables such that $|c_i| = 3$ for $1 \leq i \leq m$.

Question: Is there a truth assignment for U such that in no clause are all three literals equal in truth value (neither all true nor all false)?

Given an arbitrary instance of **NAESAT** (U, C), that is, a set of n variables $U = \{x_1, \ldots, x_n\}$ and a set of m clauses $C = \{c_1, c_2, \ldots, c_m\}$, each with length 3, we will construct a permutation group G such that G is **FPF** if and only if there exists a truth assignment of (U, C) such that no clause from C has all literals true, or all literals false.

To this end we construct a domain $\Omega = \{1, 2, \ldots, 2n + 4m\}$ and a permutation group G acting on it. Here $G = \langle g_i, g_i' \mid i = 1, \ldots, n\rangle$ and the cycle structure of each generator is given as follows.

Step 1: For each x_i in U, we have the variable gadget $(2i - 1, 2i)$ and associate it with generators g_i and g_i'.

Step 2: For each clause $c_j = c_{j,1} \vee c_{j,2} \vee c_{j,3}$, we have the clause gadgets

$$h_{j,1} = (p + 1, p + 2)(p + 3, p + 4)$$
$$h_{j,2} = (p + 1, p + 3)(p + 2, p + 4)$$
$$h_{j,3} = (p + 1, p + 4)(p + 2, p + 3)$$

where $p = 2n + 4(j - 1)$.
Furthermore, each clause gadget is associated with a generator via the following way:

- If $c_{j,k} = x_t$, then $h_{j,k}$ is associated with generator g_t.
- If $c_{j,k} = \bar{x}_t$, then $h_{j,k}$ is associated with generator g_t'.

To show how the above transformation works, we give an example:

Example. The transformation from **NAESAT** to **FPF**.

We are given an instance of **NAESAT** (U, C) as follows: $U = \{x_1, x_2, x_3\}$, and $C = \{c_1, c_2, c_3, c_4\}$, where

$$c_1 = x_1 \vee x_2 \vee x_3,$$
$$c_2 = \bar{x}_1 \vee \bar{x}_2 \vee \bar{x}_3,$$
$$c_3 = x_1 \vee x_2 \vee \bar{x}_3,$$
$$c_4 = \bar{x}_1 \vee x_2 \vee x_3.$$

Then $\{t(x_1) = \mathrm{T}, t(x_2) = \mathrm{F}, t(x_3) = \mathrm{T}\}$ is a satisfying truth assignment such that all clauses take diverse values.

By the above transformation process, we have $G = \langle g_1, g_1', g_2, g_2', g_3, g_3'\rangle$, which acts on the domain $\Omega = \{1, 2, \ldots, 22\}$.

- $g_1 = (1, 2)h_{1,1}h_{3,1} = (1, 2)(7, 8)(9, 10)(15, 16)(17, 18)$;
- $g_1' = (1, 2)h_{2,1}h_{4,1} = (1, 2)(11, 12)(13, 14)(19, 20)(21, 22)$;
- $g_2 = (3, 4)h_{1,2}h_{3,2}h_{4,2} = (3, 4)(7, 9)(8, 10)(15, 17)(16, 18)(19, 21)(20, 22)$;
- $g_2' = (3, 4)h_{2,2} = (3, 4)(11, 13)(12, 14)$;
- $g_3 = (5, 6)h_{1,3}h_{4,3} = (5, 6)(7, 10)(8, 9)(19, 22)(20, 21)$;
- $g_3' = (5, 6)h_{2,3}h_{3,3} = (5, 6)(11, 14)(12, 13)(15, 18)(16, 17)$.

It is straightforward to show that $g = g_1g_2'g_3 \in \mathrm{FPF}(G)$, corresponding to the truth assignment.

Because each instance of **NAESAT** with n variables and m clauses will be transformed to a group G with $2n$ generators acting on a domain Ω of size $2n + 4m$, such a procedure can be completed in polynomial time. Now we claim:

Lemma 8. *For the group G constructed as above,* $\mathrm{FPF}(G) \neq \emptyset$ *if and only if* (U, C) *has a truth assignment such that each clause has diverse values.*

Proof. Let $t : U \to \{\mathrm{F}, \mathrm{T}\}$ be a truth assignment of (U, C) such that each clause of C has diverse values. Consider the element, $g = g_1^{y_1}{g_1'}^{1-y_1} \ldots g_n^{y_n}{g_n'}^{1-y_n}$, where $y_j = 0$ if $t(x_j) = \mathrm{F}$ and $y_j = 1$ otherwise. In other words,

$$g = \prod_{t(u_i)=\mathrm{T}} g_i \prod_{t(u_j)=\mathrm{F}} g_j'.$$

Recall that G is acting on the domain $\Omega = \{1, 2, \ldots, 2n + 4m\}$. Now we will show that $g \in \mathrm{FPF}(G)$, i.e., $\alpha g \neq g$ for each point $\alpha \in \Omega$, by considering the following two cases:

- $\alpha \leq 2n$. This implies $\alpha \in [2k - 1, 2k]$ for an integer $k \in [1, n]$. From the construction of the generators, $\alpha g_i = \alpha g_i' = g$ for $i \neq k$. Therefore $\alpha g = \alpha g_k^{y_k} g_k'^{1-y_k} = \alpha(2k - 1, 2k)^{y_k+1-y_k} = \alpha(2k - 1, 2k) \neq \alpha$.
- $\alpha > 2n$. In this case, $\alpha \in [p + 1, p + 4]$ for some $p = 2n + 4(j - 1)$, $1 \leq j \leq m$. Without loss of generality, assume that $\alpha = 2n + 1$ and $c_1 = x_1 \vee x_2 \vee x_3$. Then

  $$\alpha g = \alpha g_1^{y_1} g_2^{y_2} g_3^{y_3} = \alpha h_{1,1}^{y_1} h_{1,2}^{y_2} h_{1,3}^{y_3} \neq \alpha$$

  because $v = (y_1, y_2, y_3) \neq (0, 0, 0)$ and $v \neq (1, 1, 1)$, from the fact that c_1 has diverse values.

In the other direction, as $\mathrm{FPF}(G) \neq \emptyset$, let $g \in \mathrm{FPF}(G)$ for some $g \in G$. Since each generator of G has order 2, $g = g_1^{y_1} g_1'^{z_1} \ldots g_n^{y_n} g_n'^{z_n}$ with $y_i, z_i \in \{0, 1\}$ for $1 \leq i \leq n$. Now we claim that $z_i = 1 - y_i$ for each i. Otherwise for some $k \in [1, n]$, we have $z_k + y_k \equiv 0 \pmod 2$, which implies $\alpha g = \alpha(2k - 1, 2k)^{z_k+y_k} = \alpha$ for $\alpha \in \{2k - 1, 2k\}$, a contradiction to the fact that $g \in \mathrm{FPF}(G)$. Consider the following truth assignment $t : U \to \{T, F\}$:

$$t(x_i) = F \quad \text{if } y_i = 0, \text{ and } t(x_i) = T, \text{ otherwise.}$$

Now we claim that each clause $c_j (1 \leq j \leq m)$ from C has diverse values under this assignment. By contradiction, assume without loss of generality that $c_k = x_1 \vee x_2 \vee x_3$ has the same values. That means, $(y_1, y_2, y_3) = (0, 0, 0)$ or $(y_1, y_2, y_3) = (1, 1, 1)$. In both cases, we have

$$\alpha g = \alpha g_1^{y_1} g_2^{y_2} g_3^{y_3} = \alpha h_{1,1}^{y_1} h_{1,2}^{y_2} h_{1,3}^{y_3} = \alpha,$$

for any $\alpha \in [p + 1, p + 4]$, where $p = 2n + 4(j - 1)$. This contradiction completes the proof of this lemma. □

Furthermore, the above lemma implies:

Theorem 9. **FPF** *is* **NP***-complete.*

The following corollary is an easy consequence of our construction.

Corollary 10. ***FPF*** *is* ***NP****-complete even when G is an elementary abelian* 2*-group and each orbit has size at most* 4*.*

Because **FPF** is a special case of the maximum Hamming weight problem, now we obtain the following theorem:

Theorem 11. *The maximum Hamming weight problem is* **NP***-complete, even when G is an elementary abelian* 2*-group and each orbit has size at most* 4*.*

We remark that the **NP**-completeness of **FPF** can be proved by a reduction from **3SAT**, as was done in [3], but the argument given here allows smaller groups to be used. This will be important for similar arguments in Section 7.

5. The maximum weight problem for other metrics

In this section we will consider the maximum weight problems corresponding to the metrics defined in Section 2, with the exception of l_∞.

5.1. Cayley metric and movement

Lemma 12. *For an elementary abelian 2-group G, we have*

$$w_H(g) = M(g) = 2 \cdot w_T(g) \quad \textit{for all } g \in G.$$

Proof. Because G is an elementary abelian 2-group, we know that each $g \in G$ has only 1-cycles and 2-cycles. And any 1-cycle contributes 0 to Hamming and Cayley weights and movement, while 2-cycles contribute 2 to the Hamming weight and 1 to the Cayley weight and movement. □

The above lemma implies that the Cayley weight problem and the movement weight problem can be reduced to the Hamming weight problem. In other words, it leads directly to the following theorem.

Theorem 13. *The maximum movement and Cayley weight problems are* **NP***-complete, even when G is an elementary abelian* 2*-group and each orbit has size at most* 4*.*

5.2. l_p metric

We define the *span* of an orbit O to be $\max(O) - \min(O)$.

Similar to the transformation process in Section 4, this problem can be reduced from **NAESAT**. For any instance of **NAESAT** with n variables and m clauses, the domain is $\Omega = \{1, 2, \ldots, 2n + 12m\}$ and the permutation group G is given by $2n$ generators, which are constructed by variable gadgets and clause gadgets. Now the variable gadgets are the same as that in

Section 4 but the clause gadgets need to be modified a bit: for each clause $c_j = c_{j,1} \vee c_{j,2} \vee c_{j,3}$, the clause gadgets act on a block $[q, q+12]$, where $q = 2n + 12(j-1)$, as follows.

$$h'_{j,1} = (q+1, q+2)(q+3, q+4)(q+5, q+7)(q+6)(q+8)(q+9, q+12)(q+10, q+11)$$
$$h'_{j,2} = (q+1, q+3)(q+2, q+4)(q+5, q+8)(q+6, q+7)(q+9, q+10)(q+11, q+12)$$
$$h'_{j,3} = (q+1, q+4)(q+2, q+3)(q+5, q+6)(q+7, q+8)(q+9, q+11)(q+10, q+12).$$

Calculation shows that $w_{l_p}(h'_{j,1}) = w_{l_p}(h'_{j,2}) = w_{l_p}(h'_{j,3}) = \sqrt[p]{6 + 4 \cdot 2^p + 2 \cdot 3^p}$ for $1 \leq p < \infty$. On the other hand, $w_{l_p}(2i-1, 2i) = \sqrt[p]{2}$ for $i \in [1, n]$. Let

$$K = n\sqrt[p]{2} + m\sqrt[p]{6 + 4 \cdot 2^p + 2 \cdot 3^p}.$$

Since $h'_{j,1} = h'_{j,2}h'_{j,3}, h'_{j,2} = h'_{j,1}h'_{j,3}$ and $h'_{j,3} = h'_{j,1}h'_{j,2}$, we know that $w_{l_p}(g) \leq K$ holds for any $g \in G$. Furthermore, $g \in \mathrm{FPF}(G)$ if and only if $w_{l_p}(g) = K$. Therefore an argument similar to that in Section 4 leads to the following theorem:

Theorem 14. *For $1 \leq p < \infty$, the maximum l_p weight problem is* **NP***-complete, even when G is an elementary abelian 2-group and each orbit has span at most 12.*

5.3. Lee metric

The maximum Lee weight problem is similar to the l_1 weight problem. More precisely, if G is a permutation group on a domain $\{1, \ldots, n\}$ which fixes all points $i > n/2$, then the Lee weight and the l_1 weight coincide on G. This implies the following theorem:

Theorem 15. *The maximum Lee weight problem is* **NP***-complete, even when G is an elementary abelian 2-group and each orbit has span at most 12.*

5.4. Kendall's tau and Ulam metrics

We use the same construction as that for l_p weight problem in Section 5.2. Now $w_l(h'_{j,1}) = w_l(h'_{j,2}) = w_l(h'_{j,3}) = 12$ and $w_U(h'_{j,1}) = w_U(h'_{j,2}) = w_U(h'_{j,3}) = 7$, which imply the following theorem:

Theorem 16. *The maximum Kendall's tau and Ulam weight problems are* **NP***-complete, even when G is an elementary abelian 2-group.*

6. The l_∞ weight problems

The proof that the l_∞ weight problem is **NP**-complete is similar but a bit more complicated. Part of the reason for this is the following result:

Theorem 17. *The l_∞ maximum weight problem is in* **P**.

Proof. The l_∞ norm of any permutation in G is bounded above by the maximum span of an orbit of G. Moreover, this bound is attained, since there exists $\pi \in G$ with $\pi(\min(O)) = \max(O)$ for any orbit O. Now the result follows since the orbits can be calculated in polynomial time (they are the connected components of the union of the functional digraphs corresponding to the generators of G). □

However, the following holds:

Theorem 18. *The l_∞ weight problem and the l_∞ minimum weight problem for G are both* **NP***-complete, even when G is an elementary abelian group and each orbit has span 7.*

Proof. We use the usual strategy, reduction from **NAESAT**, with an extra trick. The clause gadgets are a bit more complicated. Define permutations h_1, h_2, h_3 by

$$h_1 = (1, 3)(2, 4)(5, 7)(6, 8)(9, 13)(10, 14)(11, 15)(12, 16)(17, 23)(18, 24)(19, 21)(20, 22)$$
$$h_2 = (1, 5)(2, 6)(3, 7)(4, 8)(9, 15)(10, 16)(11, 13)(12, 14)(17, 19)(18, 20)(21, 23)(22, 24)$$
$$h_3 = (1, 7)(2, 8)(3, 5)(4, 6)(9, 11)(10, 12)(13, 15)(14, 16)(17, 21)(18, 22)(19, 23)(20, 24).$$

Note that each of these has l_∞ weight 6. We also take a permutation

$$g = (1, 8)(2, 7)(3, 6)(4, 5)(9, 16)(10, 15)(11, 14)(12, 13)(17, 24)(18, 23)(19, 22)(20, 21).$$

Note that g has weight 7 but gh_i has weight 5 for $i = 1, 2, 3$. We can translate each of these permutations to act on the block $[p+1, p+24]$ in the obvious way without changing the l_∞ weight. In other words, for an instance of **NAESAT** with n variables and m clauses, we will construct a domain $\Omega = \{1, 2, \ldots, 2n + 24m\}$.

For a variable gadget we can simply take one of the permutations h_i, and the same permutation g.

Now let H be the group produced as in Section 3, and G be generated by H and the element which acts as g on every gadget. Consider the question: does G have an element of norm 5? Such an element must be of the form gh, where h is non-identity on each block; so norm 5 is realised if and only if the group in Section 3 has a FPF element, which we have shown is **NP**-complete.

Since the minimum l_∞-norm of elements of G is either 5 or 6, the **NP**-completeness for minimum norm is also established. □

7. The weight problem for matrix groups

In linear groups over finite fields, eigenvalue-free matrices (that is, matrices having no eigenvalues) play a similar role to fixed-point-free matrices in permutation groups. See, for example, the enumeration results for classical groups in [12].

So we want to consider the following problem in matrix groups corresponding to the **FPF** problem in permutation groups:

Problem 19 (*Eigenvalue-Free (**EF**)*).
Instance: Generators for a matrix group M.
Question: Whether M contains an Eigenvalue-Free matrix.

Now we have the following theorem:

Theorem 20. *The Eigenvalue-Free problem* (**EF**) *is* **NP***-complete.*

Proof. We follow the proof for **FPF**, using matrices rather than permutations as our variable and clause gadgets.

A matrix is eigenvalue-free if and only if it acts fixed-point-freely on the projective space. Now the projective line over $\mathbb{F}_3$ contains four points, and admits a Klein four-group, induced by the quaternion subgroup $H = \{\pm I, \pm a_1, \pm a_2, \pm a_3\}$ of $\mathrm{GL}(2, \mathbb{F}_3)$, where

$$a_1 = \begin{pmatrix} 0 & 1 \\ -1 & 0 \end{pmatrix}, \qquad a_2 = \begin{pmatrix} 1 & 1 \\ 1 & -1 \end{pmatrix}, \qquad a_3 = \begin{pmatrix} 1 & -1 \\ -1 & -1 \end{pmatrix}.$$

We have $a_1^2 = a_2^2 = a_3^2 = a_1a_2a_3 = -I$.

Let $\bar{a}$ denote the image of a in $\mathrm{PGL}(2, \mathbb{F}_3)$, and $\bar{H} = \{\bar{a} : a \in H\} = H/\mathbb{F}_3^*$. Then $\bar{H}$ is isomorphic to the Klein group $\mathbb{Z}_2 \times \mathbb{Z}_2$, as is the subgroup formed by the clause gadgets in Section 4.

Now it is easy to check that a_1, a_2 and a_3 are eigenvalue-free. Take one of them, say a_1, as the variable gadget. Similar to the proof in Section 4, we construct a matrix group $M = \langle M_1, M_1', \ldots, M_n, M_n' \rangle$ with each M_t of size $(2n+2m) \times (2n+2m)$ for an arbitrary instance (U, C) of **NAESAT** with $|U| = n$ and $|C| = m$. The matrix M_t has the following block structure:

$$M_t = \mathrm{diag}\{A_1, A_2, \ldots, A_n, B_1, \ldots, B_m\},$$

where A_t is the variable gadget a_1 and all other A_i $(i \neq t)$ are I, and B_l is a_j for some $1 \leq j \leq 3$ if and only if x_t appears in the jth position of clause c_l and the others are I. The same method is used to construct M_t' while we should notice that B_l is a_j if and only if $\bar{x_t}$ appears in the jth position of clause c_l.

The proof that (U, C) has a satisfying assignment for **NAESAT** if and only if M contains an eigenvalue-free matrix which is similar to that in Section 4 and we will leave it as an exercise to the reader. □

8. Further topics and open problems

In this section, we discuss further topics and open problems related to weight problems.

8.1. Fixed-point-free elements in transitive groups

Although **FPF** is **NP**-complete in arbitrary permutation groups, it is trivial in transitive groups, because of an old result of Jordan [11,17]: for $n > 1$, the answer is always "Yes"; that is, every transitive group of degree $n > 1$ contains a FPF element. It is further known [6] that a proportion at least $1/n$ of the elements of such a group are FPF. We could modify the problem to ask: *How hard is it to find a FPF element*?

There is a very simple randomized algorithm to find a FPF element. If we choose kn elements of G at random, then the probability that we do not find a FPF element is at most

$$\left(1 - \frac{1}{n}\right)^{kn} < \mathrm{e}^{-k},$$

that is, exponentially small.

We conjecture that there is a deterministic polynomial-time algorithm to find a FPF element in a transitive group. The algorithm (based on a proof in [10]) would run as follows:

Step 1: Since blocks of imprimitivity can be found in polynomial time, and since an element of g which fixes no block of imprimitivity must be FPF on points as well, we can reduce to the case where the group G is primitive.
Step 2: Now a minimal normal subgroup N of G is transitive, and is a product of isomorphic simple groups. If N is regular, then any of its elements except e is FPF. Otherwise, one more iteration of Steps 1 and 2 gives a group which is primitive and non-abelian simple.
Step 3: Now we identify the simple group and its action (using the Classification of Finite Simple Groups), and from this knowledge, find a FPF element directly.

For example, suppose that the simple group G is an alternating group A_m, (with its "natural" action on the set $\{1, \ldots, m\}$), and let H be the stabiliser of a point in the given action on $\{1, \ldots, n\}$. Then H is a maximal subgroup of G. If H contains a 3-cycle (in the natural action), then H is the stabiliser of a subset or a partition of $\{1, \ldots, m\}$, and in either case we can choose an element of A_m lying in no conjugate of H. Otherwise, a 3-cycle (in the natural action) is FPF (in the given action).

It seems likely, but is not entirely clear, that Steps 2 and 3 can be done in polynomial time. Certainly the algorithm is by no means simple!

In [10], it is shown that a transitive permutation group of degree greater than 1 contains a FPF element whose order is a power of a prime. The proof of this theorem, unlike Jordan's, requires the Classification of Finite Simple Groups. What is the complexity of finding such an element? The algorithm outlined above may work for this question as well.

We have been unable to decide the complexity of the weight problems for the other metrics considered in this paper restricted to transitive groups.

Another open question is to decide the complexity of **#FPF**, the counting problem of **FPF**, for a transitive group G. For general groups, this problem is **#P** complete since our transformation from **NAESAT** is parsimonious. (See Welsh [19] for background.) However, when G is transitive, the **FPF** problem is trivial but the complexity of **#FPF** remains unknown though the approximation is easy via a conclusion in [6].

8.2. Other metrics

If Σ is any set of generators of S_n satisfying $\Sigma = \Sigma^{-1}$, the *Cayley graph* $\mathrm{Cay}(S_n, \Sigma)$ has vertex set S_n and an edge from π to $\sigma\pi$ for any $\pi \in S_n$. The distance function in the Cayley graph is a right-invariant metric. It is left-invariant if and only if Σ is a *normal subset* of S_n, that is, $\pi\Sigma\pi^{-1} = \Sigma$ for all $\pi \in S_n$.

The Cayley metric and Kendall's tau arise in this way, taking Σ to be the set of all transpositions and the set of all adjacent transpositions respectively.

Given a set Σ which can be specified with a polynomial amount of information (for example, Σ of polynomial size or consisting of elements with one of a list of polynomial size of cycle types), we can ask about the Weight Problem for the metric defined by the Cayley graph $\mathrm{Cay}(S_n, \Sigma)$.

Metrics on S_n which are not right-invariant have also been studied. In this case, in the place of the weight problem as stated earlier, we ask whether a particular value of the metric is attained as the distance between two elements of the given subgroup G.

For example, the *commutation distance* on S_n is the distance in the *commutation graph*, whose vertex set is $S_n \setminus \{e\}$, with an edge between π and σ if and only if $\pi\sigma = \sigma\pi$. (Since e commutes with every element, extending this metric to all of S_n in the obvious way would make the commutation distance trivial!) Our techniques are of no help in the problem of deciding which values of this distance occur on $G \setminus \{e\}$ for a given group G. This metric is neither right- nor left-invariant but it is conjugation-invariant.

For the metrics mentioned in Section 2, there is a dichotomy for their weight problems: each is either in **P** or **NP**-complete. Is there a general dichotomy theorem for problems of this type? If not, can we construct some metrics whose weight problems are between these two categories?

8.3. Complex linear groups

Our questions about Hamming distance for permutation groups can be generalised to linear groups, if we do not require that the "norm function" is derived from a metric. The *character* of a complex linear representation of a group G is the function χ, where $\chi(g)$ is the trace of the matrix representing g, for $g \in G$. Note that any permutation group has a natural matrix representation (by permutation matrices); the character of this representation is given by $\chi(g) = \mathrm{fix}(G)$, the number of fixed points.

So the analogue of the Weight Problem is: Given matrices generating a group G (over the complex numbers) and a complex number c, is there an element $g \in G$ with $\chi(g) = c$? This problem is **NP**-complete since it includes the Hamming weight problem for permutation groups.

There is also an analogue to the material in Section 8.1. A theorem of Burnside [4, p.319] shows that, if the complex representation of G with degree greater than 1 is irreducible, then there is an element $g \in G$ with $\chi(g) = 0$. (This is analogous to Jordan's result, but is not a generalisation since the representation of a transitive permutation group by permutation matrices is not irreducible.) So we can ask the question: what is the complexity of finding such an element?

8.4. Other properties

We conclude this section with a general observation. For some cycle structures, deciding whether a permutation group given by a set of generators contains a permutation with such structure is **NP**-complete. For example, in Section 4, we showed that **FPF** is **NP**-complete, and in our example, a FPF element is necessarily a product of 2-cycles. On the other hand, the total number of cycles of a permutation π, including fixed points, is $n - w_T(\pi)$. Therefore from Section 5.1, to decide whether G contains an element with a specified number of cycles is **NP**-complete.

Similarly we can "translate" problems concerning metrics into related properties. For Ulam's metric, we can define an associate sequence s of a permutation π to be a longest increasing subsequence in $(\pi^{-1}(1), \ldots, \pi^{-1}(n))$. Then to decide whether G contains a permutation with associate sequence with given length is hard. The same approach can be used to find hard problems for other metrics.

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