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THE PROBABILITY THAT A PAIR OF ELEMENTS OF A FINITE GROUP ARE CONJUGATE

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ABSTRACT. Let G be a finite group, and let $\kappa(G)$ be the probability that elements $g, h \in G$ are conjugate, when g and h are chosen independently and uniformly at random. The paper classifies those groups G such that $\kappa(G) \geq 1/4$, and shows that G is abelian whenever $\kappa(G)|G| < 7/4$. It is also shown that $\kappa(G)|G|$ depends only on the isoclinism class of G .

Specialising to the symmetric group S_n , the paper shows that $\kappa(S_n) \leq C/n^2$ for an explicitly determined constant C . This bound leads to an elementary proof of a result of Flajolet *et al*, that $\kappa(S_n) \sim A/n^2$ as $n \rightarrow \infty$ for some constant A . The same techniques provide analogous results for $\rho(S_n)$, the probability that two elements of the symmetric group have conjugates that commute.

1. INTRODUCTION

Let G be a finite group. We define $\kappa(G)$ to be the probability that two elements $g, h \in G$ are conjugate, when g and h are chosen independently and uniformly at random from G . Let g_1, g_2, \dots, g_k be a complete set of representatives for the conjugacy classes of G . It is easy to see that

$$(1) \quad \kappa(G) = \frac{1}{|G|^2} \sum_{i=1}^k |g_i^G|^2 = \sum_{i=1}^k \frac{1}{|C_G(g_i)|^2}$$

where $C_G(g)$ denotes the centralizer of an element $g \in G$.

This paper is divided into two parts. In the first part of the paper, we begin a study of $\kappa(G)$ by proving two ‘gap’ results which classify

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the groups for which $\kappa(G)$ is unusually small or large. We also show that $\kappa(G)|G|$ is an invariant of the isoclinism class of G . In the second part, we prove bounds and find the asymptotic behaviour of $\kappa(S_n)$ where S_n is the symmetric group of degree n . Our techniques allow us to prove similar results on the probability $\rho(S_n)$ that two elements of S_n , chosen independently and uniformly at random, have conjugates that commute. We end the paper with some further remarks and open problems on the behaviour of $\kappa(G)$ and $\rho(G)$ when G is an arbitrary finite group

We now describe our results in more detail.

1.1. Results on general finite groups. It is clear that $\kappa(G) \geq 1/|G|$ and that equality holds exactly when G is abelian. We prove the following ‘gap’ result.

Theorem 1.1. *Let G be a finite group. If $\kappa(G) < \frac{7}{4|G|}$ then G is abelian. Moreover, $\kappa(G) = \frac{7}{4|G|}$ if and only if the index of the centre $Z(G)$ in G is 4.*

This theorem is proved by an elementary counting argument. There are many groups whose centres have index 4, for example any group of the form $D_8 \times A$ where D_8 is the dihedral group of order 8 and A is abelian has this property. The observation that the groups with this property form a single isoclinism class motivates our second theorem.

Theorem 1.2. *If G and H are isoclinic finite groups then $\kappa(G)|G| = \kappa(H)|H|$.*

Theorem 1.2 implies that for each isoclinism class I there exists a constant b_I such that $\kappa(G) = b_I/|G|$ for all groups $G \in I$. We provide a definition of isoclinism and set up the relevant notation immediately before the proof of Theorem 1.2 in §5 below.

Our third main theorem classifies the groups G such that $\kappa(G)$ is large.

Theorem 1.3. *Let G be a non-trivial finite group. Then $\kappa(G) \geq 1/4$ if and only if one of the following holds:*

- (i) $|G| \leq 4$;
- (ii) $G \cong A_4, S_4, A_5$ or $C_7 \times C_3$;

(iii) $G \cong A \rtimes C_2$ where A is a non-trivial abelian group of odd order and the non-identity element of C_2 acts on A by inversion.

Here A_n denotes the alternating group of degree n , and $C_7 \rtimes C_3$ is the Frobenius group of order 21, which we may define by $C_7 \rtimes C_3 = \langle g, h : g^7 = h^3 = 1, g^h = g^2 \rangle$. Recall that an element g of a group G is said to be *self-centralising* if $C_G(g) = \langle g \rangle$. The infinite family of groups of the form $A \rtimes C_2$ appearing in the theorem consists precisely of those groups which contain a self-centralizing involution; we include a brief proof of this fact as part of the proof of Proposition 4.2. This proposition implies that if G is such a group then $\kappa(G) = 1/4 + 1/|G| - 1/|G|^2$. Thus one consequence of Theorem 1.3 is that for all $\alpha > 1/4$ there are only finitely many groups G with $\kappa(G) \geq \alpha$. Since this is not true when $\alpha \leq 1/4$, the threshold in Theorem 1.3 is a natural one.

The proof of Theorem 1.3 uses the theory of Frobenius groups, and a theorem of Feit and Thompson [9] on groups with a self-centralizing element of order 3.

Background. Though we are not aware of any prior work concerning $\kappa(G)$ for a general finite group G , there are related quantities that have been much studied. We give a brief overview as follows. Let $\text{cp}(G)$ be the commuting probability for G , that is, the probability that a pair of elements of G , chosen independently and uniformly at random, commute. Let $k(G)$ be the number of conjugacy class of G . It is a result of Erdős and Turán [8] that the number of pairs of commuting elements of G is $|G|k(G)$. From this it follows that $\text{cp}(G) = k(G)/|G|$.

In [21, Lemma 2.4], Lescot proved that if G and H are isoclinic finite groups, then $\text{cp}(G) = \text{cp}(H)$. Our Theorem 1.2 gives the analogous result for the conjugacy probability κ .

In [14] Gustafson showed that if G is non-abelian, then $\text{cp}(G) \leq 5/8$. This result is sharp, since the upper bound is realized by the dihedral group of order 8, and in fact, by any group G such that $Z(G)$ has index 4 in G . Heuristically one might expect that if G is a finite group for which $\text{cp}(G)$ is large then $\kappa(G)$ should be small, and *vice versa*. Indeed, by Theorem 1.1, the non-abelian groups for which $\text{cp}(G)$ is largest are precisely those for which $\kappa(G)|G|$ is smallest. However,

this heuristic can mislead. For example if G is a group with a self-centralizing involution then, by Proposition 4.2 below, $\kappa(G) \geq 1/4$ and $\text{cp}(G) \geq 1/4$.

It is easier to make a connection between $\kappa(G)$ and $k(G)$. It follows from (1) that $\kappa(G) \geq 1/k(G)$ with equality if and only if G is abelian. It was shown by Dixon [6] that if G is a non-abelian finite simple group then $k(G)/|G| \leq 1/12$; hence $\kappa(G) \geq 12/|G|$ for all non-abelian finite simple groups G .

Various lower bounds for $k(G)$ have been given in terms of $|G|$. We refer the reader to the survey article by Bertram [2] which contains a wealth of information about the history and current state of the problem. Of the general results known, the best asymptotically is

$$k(G) \geq \frac{c \log |G|}{(\log \log |G|)^7},$$

due to Keller [18]; it strengthens a result of Pyber [24] by improving the exponent in the denominator from 8 to 7.

We mentioned above that the proof of Theorem 1.3 uses a theorem of Feit and Thompson [9] on groups with a self-centralizing element of order 3. This result was the precursor to a number of other structural results on groups with a centralizer of small degree; for example, in [15, Corollary 4], Herzog built on work of Suzuki [26] to classify all finite simple groups with a centralizer of order at most 4. It would have been possible to base our proof of Theorem 1.3 on this classification.

We note that there has also been considerable work on the general subject of inferring structural information about groups from divisibility properties of centralizer sizes. We refer the reader to Camina and Camina [5] for a survey of this part of the literature.

Finally, we mention two other ‘gap’ results that are in a similar spirit to Theorem 1.3. C.T.C. Wall [28] has shown that the proportion of elements $x \in G$ satisfying $x^2 = 1$ is either 1 (in which case G is an elementary abelian 2-group) or it is at most $3/4$. Laffey [19, 20] has proved that if G is a finite group then either G has exponent 3, or the proportion of elements $x \in G$ satisfying $x^3 = 1$ is at most $7/9$. An important observation in Laffey’s proof is that if N is a normal subgroup of G then the proportion of elements $xN \in G/N$ such that $(xN)^3 = 1$ is at least as great as the corresponding proportion in G .

We prove the analogous result for κ in Lemma 3.1 below; in the final section of this paper we outline a common framework for these results.

G.E. Wall [29] has constructed a 5-group such that 24/25 of its elements have order dividing 5, so if an analogous result holds for the equation $x^5 = 1$, the ‘gap’ must be quite small.

1.2. Results on symmetric groups. Turning to the particular case of the symmetric groups S_n , we provide a uniform bound on $\kappa(S_n)$ in the following theorem.

Theorem 1.4. *For all positive integers n we have $\kappa(S_n) \leq C_\kappa/n^2$, where $C_\kappa = 13^2 \kappa(S_{13})$.*

It is clear that the bound in Theorem 1.4 is achieved when $n = 13$, and so the constant C_κ is the best possible. (Calculation shows that $C_\kappa \approx 5.48355$; for the exact value see Lemma 8.2.) Theorem 1.4 is proved by induction on n , using the inequality for $\kappa(S_n)$ established in Proposition 7.1. An interesting feature of our argument is that to make the induction go through, we require the exact values of $\kappa(S_n)$ for $n \leq 80$: the Haskell [23] source code used to compute these values is available from the third author’s website: <http://www.ma.rhul.ac.uk/~uvah099/>. Where feasible we have also verified these values using Mathematica [30].

Using Theorem 1.4 we are able to give an elementary proof of the following asymptotic result, first proved by Flajolet, Fusy, Gourdon, Panario and Pouyanne [10, §4.2] using methods from analytic combinatorics.

Theorem 1.5. *Let $A_\kappa = \sum_{n=1}^{\infty} \kappa(S_n)$. Then $\kappa(S_n) \sim A_\kappa/n^2$ as $n \rightarrow \infty$.*

That A_κ is well defined follows from Theorem 1.4. Flajolet *et al* give the value of A_κ to 15 decimal places as 4.26340 35141 52669.

We denote by $\rho(S_n)$ the probability that if two elements of S_n are chosen independently and uniformly at random, then they have conjugates that commute. The methods we use to prove Theorems 1.4 and 1.5 can be adapted to prove the analogous results for $\rho(S_n)$.

A useful general setting for this probability is given by the relation on a group G , defined by $g \sim h$ if g commutes with a conjugate of h . This relation naturally induces a relation on the conjugacy classes of G : classes C and D are said to *commute* if they contain elements

that commute. Some aspects of this relation have been described by the second and third authors in [3] and [4]; the latter paper describes commuting classes in the case where G is a general linear group.

We prove the following analogue of Theorem 1.4.

Theorem 1.6. *For all positive integers n we have $\rho(S_n) \leq C_\rho/n^2$, where $C_\rho = 10^2\rho(S_{10})$.*

Again it is clear that the bound in Theorem 1.6 is achieved when $n = 10$, and so the constant C_ρ is the best possible. (Calculation shows that $C_\rho \approx 11.42747$; for the exact value see Lemma 11.1.) To make the induction go through we require the exact values of $\rho(S_n)$ for $n \leq 35$; these were found using the necessary and sufficient condition given in [3, Proposition 4] for two conjugacy classes of the symmetric group to commute, and the software already mentioned.

Our asymptotic result on $\rho(S_n)$ is as follows.

Theorem 1.7. *Let $A_\rho = \sum_{n=1}^{\infty} \rho(S_n)$. Then $\rho(S_n) \sim A_\rho/n^2$ as $n \rightarrow \infty$.*

That A_ρ is well defined follows from Theorem 1.6. It follows from Theorem 1.6 and the exact value of $\sum_{m=0}^{30} \rho(S_m)$ given in Lemma 11.1 that $6.1 < A_\rho < 6.5$.

The striking similarity in the asymptotic behaviour of $\kappa(S_n)$ and $\rho(S_n)$ may be seen in the following corollary of Theorems 1.5 and 1.7 together with the numerical estimates for A_κ and A_ρ stated after these theorems.

Corollary 1.8. *Let σ and $\tau \in S_n$ be chosen independently and uniformly at random. If σ and τ have conjugates that commute, then, provided n is sufficiently large, the probability that σ and τ are conjugate is at least $42/65$.*

Background. The paper [10] by Flajolet *et al* contains the only prior work in this area of which the authors are aware. Besides their proof of Theorem 1.5, they also show in their Proposition 4 that $\kappa(S_n) = A_\kappa/n^2 + O((\log n)/n^3)$. This result of course implies our Theorem 1.4. Their proof does not, however, lead to explicit bounds on $\kappa(S_n)$; nor can their methods be applied to $\rho(S_n)$. It therefore appears to be difficult to give a more precise estimate for the constant A_ρ in Theorem 1.7. The integer sequence $n!^2\kappa(S_n)$ is A087132 in the On-line Encyclopedia of Integer Sequences [22]; the sequence $n!^2\rho(S_n)$ now appears as A192983.

The probabilities measured by $\kappa(S_n)$ and $\rho(S_n)$ depend only on the cycle types of σ and τ , and so these theorems may be regarded as statements about the cycle statistics of a random permutation. Rather than attempt to do justice to the enormous literature on these cycle statistics, we shall merely recall some earlier results relevant to our proofs.

It is critical to the success of our approach that if n is large compared with k , then almost all permutations in S_n contain a cycle of length at least k . The explicit bounds we require are given in §6 below. Somewhat weaker estimates can be deduced from a fundamental result, due to Goncharov [11], which states that if X_i is the number of i -cycles of a permutation in S_n chosen uniformly at random, then as n tends to infinity, the limiting distribution of the X_i is as independent Poisson random variables, with X_i having mean $1/i$.

It should also be noted that if L_n is the random variable whose value is the longest cycle of a permutation σ_n chosen uniformly at random from S_n , then, as shown in [12], the distribution of L_n/n tends to a limit. The moments of the limiting distribution of the r th longest cycle in σ_n were calculated by Shepp and Lloyd in [25], who also showed that the limit of $\mathbf{E}(L_n/n)$ as $n \rightarrow \infty$ is approximately 0.62433. The reader is referred to Lemma 5.7 and (1.36) in [1] for an interesting formulation of these results in terms of the Poisson–Dirichlet distribution.

1.3. Structure of the paper. The remainder of the paper is structured as follows. In §2 we prove Theorem 1.1. In §3 we prove the preliminary lemmas needed for Theorem 1.3; this theorem is then proved in §4. The isoclinism result in Theorem 1.2 is proved in §5.

The second half of the paper on symmetric groups begins with §6 where we give the bounds we require on the probability that a permutation of S_n , chosen uniformly at random, has only cycles of length strictly less than a fixed length k . In §7 we establish a recursive bound on $\kappa(S_n)$ that is critical to our approach; in §8 we use this bound to prove Theorem 1.4. The asymptotic result on $\kappa(S_n)$ in Theorem 1.5 is proved in §9. To prove the analogous results on $\rho(S_n)$ stated in Theorems 1.6 and 1.7 we need some further bounds, which we collect in §10. The proofs of these theorems are then given in §11.

Some final remarks and open problems are presented in §12.

2. PROOF OF THEOREM 1.1

Let G be a finite non-abelian group. The contribution of the central elements of G to the sum in (1) is $|Z(G)|/|G|^2$. If the non-central classes have sizes a_1, \dots, a_ℓ then they contribute $(a_1^2 + \dots + a_\ell^2)/|G|^2$. Ignoring any divisibility restrictions on the a_i for the moment, we see that since $(b+c)^2 > b^2 + c^2$ for all $b, c \in \mathbf{N}$, the sum $a_1^2 + \dots + a_\ell^2$ takes its minimum value when $a_i \leq 3$ for all i . Moreover, since $3^2 + 3^2 > 2^2 + 2^2 + 2^2$, we have $a_i = 3$ for at most one i at this minimum value. Therefore $a_1^2 + \dots + a_\ell^2 \geq 2^2(|G| - |Z(G)|)/2$, with equality exactly when $a_i = 2$ for all i . It follows that

$$\kappa(G) \geq \frac{|Z(G)|}{|G|^2} + \frac{2^2}{|G|^2} \left(\frac{|G| - |Z(G)|}{2} \right) = \frac{1}{|G|} \left(2 - \frac{|Z(G)|}{|G|} \right).$$

Since $G/Z(G)$ is non-cyclic, we have $|Z(G)| \leq |G|/4$. Hence $\kappa(G) \geq 7/4|G|$, and equality holds if and only if $Z(G)$ has index 4 in G and every non-central conjugacy class has size 2. However if G is any group such that $Z(G)$ has index 4 in G then, for any $g \in G \setminus Z(G)$, the subgroup $C_G(g) = \langle Z(G), g \rangle$ has index 2 in G . Hence the condition that $Z(G)$ has index 4 in G is both necessary and sufficient. This completes the proof of Theorem 1.1.

3. PRELIMINARIES FOR THE PROOF OF THEOREM 1.3

We begin the proof of Theorem 1.3 by collecting the three preliminary lemmas we need. Of these, Lemma 3.1 immediately below is key. We give a more general version of this lemma in §12 at the end of the paper.

Lemma 3.1. *Let G be a finite group. If N is a non-trivial normal subgroup of G then $\kappa(G) < \kappa(G/N)$.*

Proof. Writing \sim for the conjugacy relation, we have

$$\{(g, h) \in G \times G : g \sim h\} \subset \{(g, h) \in G \times G : gN \sim hN\}.$$

The inclusion is strict, because if g is a non-identity element of N then $(g, 1)$ lies in the right-hand set but not the left-hand set. The proportion of pairs $(g, h) \in G \times G$ lying in the smaller set is $\kappa(G)$. When $g, h \in G$ are chosen independently and uniformly at random, gN and hN are independently and uniformly distributed across the

elements of G/N . So the proportion of pairs $(g, h) \in G \times G$ lying in the larger set is $\kappa(G/N)$. Hence $\kappa(G) < \kappa(G/N)$. \square

We shall also need a straightforward result on the conjugacy probability in Frobenius groups. Recall that a transitive permutation group G acting faithfully on a finite set Ω is said to be a *Frobenius group* if each non-identity element of G has at most one fixed point. It is well known (see for example [13, Ch. 4, Theorem 5.1]) that if G is a Frobenius group with point stabiliser H then G has a regular normal subgroup K such that $G = KH$. The subgroup K is known as the *Frobenius kernel* of G . Any non-identity element of H acts without fixed points on K , and so by a famous theorem of Thompson (see [27, Theorem 1] or [13, Ch. 10, Theorem 2.1]), K is nilpotent.

Lemma 3.2. *If G is a Frobenius group with point stabiliser H and Frobenius kernel K then*

$$\kappa(G) = \frac{1}{|G|^2} + \frac{1}{|H|} \left(\kappa(K) - \frac{1}{|K|^2} \right) + \left(\kappa(H) - \frac{1}{|H|^2} \right).$$

Proof. It follows from standard properties of Frobenius groups, see for example [16, Lemma 7.3] that

$$(2) \quad G = K \cup \bigcup_{g \in K} (H^g \setminus \{1\})$$

where the union is disjoint. Every conjugacy class of G is either contained in K , or has a representative in H . Let $g_1, \dots, g_r \in K$ be representatives for the non-identity conjugacy classes contained in K , and let $h_1, \dots, h_s \in H$ be representatives for the remaining non-identity conjugacy classes of G . By (1) in §1 we have

$$(3) \quad \kappa(G) = \frac{1}{|G|^2} + \sum_{i=1}^r \frac{1}{|C_G(g_i)|^2} + \sum_{i=1}^s \frac{1}{|C_G(h_i)|^2}.$$

Since H acts without fixed points on K , no two non-identity elements of H and K can commute. Hence $C_G(g) = C_K(g)$ for each $g \in K$. Therefore, when the conjugacy action is restricted to K , each g_i^G splits into $|H|$ disjoint conjugacy classes of K . Moreover, (2) shows that any pair of conjugates of H by distinct elements of K intersect only in the identity. Hence $C_G(h) = C_H(h)$ for each $h \in H$ and the G -conjugacy

classes in $G \setminus K$ are in bijection with the H -conjugacy classes in H . We therefore have

$$\begin{aligned}\kappa(K) &= \frac{1}{|K|^2} + |H| \sum_{i=1}^r \frac{1}{|C_G(g_i)|^2}, \\ \kappa(H) &= \frac{1}{|H|^2} + \sum_{i=1}^s \frac{1}{|C_G(h_i)|^2}.\end{aligned}$$

The lemma now follows from (3) using these equations. \square

To state our final preliminary lemma we shall need the *majorization* (or dominance) order, denoted \succcurlyeq , which is defined on \mathbf{R}^k by setting

$$(x_1, x_2, \dots, x_k) \succcurlyeq (y_1, y_2, \dots, y_k)$$

if and only if $\sum_{i=1}^j x_i \geq \sum_{i=1}^j y_i$ for all j such that $1 \leq j \leq k$.

Lemma 3.3. *Let $x, y \in \mathbf{R}^k$ be decreasing k -tuples of real numbers such that $\sum_{i=1}^k x_i = \sum_{i=1}^k y_i = 1$. Suppose that $x \succcurlyeq y$. Then $\sum_{i=1}^k x_i^2 \geq \sum_{i=1}^k y_i^2$, and equality holds if and only if $x = y$.*

Proof. This follows from Karamata's inequality (see [17, page 148]) for the function $f(x) = x^2$. \square

For notational convenience, we may suppress a sequence of final zeros when writing elements of \mathbf{R}^k .

4. PROOF OF THEOREM 1.3

We prove Theorem 1.3 by using Lemma 3.3 to give a fairly strong restriction on the centralizer sizes in a finite group G such that $\kappa(G) \geq 1/4$. The groups falling into each case in Proposition 4.1 below are then classified using Lemmas 3.1 and 3.2. From case (i) we get the infinite family in Theorem 1.3, and from case (ii) we get A_4 and $C_3 \rtimes C_7$. The unique groups in cases (iii) and (iv) are S_4 and A_5 , respectively.

We shall denote by $c_i(G)$ the size of the i th smallest centralizer in a finite group G .

Proposition 4.1. *If G is a finite group such that $\kappa(G) \geq 1/4$ then either $|G| \leq 4$, or one of the following holds:*

- (i) $c_1(G) = 2$;
- (ii) $c_1(G) = c_2(G) = 3$;

- (iii) $c_1(G) = 3$ and $c_2(G) = c_3(G) = 4$;
- (iv) $c_1(G) = 3$, $c_2(G) = 4$ and $c_3(G) = c_4(G) = 5$.

Proof. Let k be the number of conjugacy classes of G and let

$$\mathbf{r}(G) = (1/c_1(G), 1/c_2(G), \dots, 1/c_k(G)).$$

Since the size of the i th largest conjugacy class of G is $|G|/c_i(G)$, we have $\sum_{i=1}^k 1/c_i(G) = 1$.

If $c_1(G) > 3$ then, using the notational convention established at the end of §3, we have $(\frac{1}{4}, \frac{1}{4}, \frac{1}{4}, \frac{1}{4}) \succcurlyeq \mathbf{r}(G)$. Hence either $|G| = 4$ or, by Lemma 3.3 and (1) we have

$$\kappa(G) = \sum_{i=1}^k \frac{1}{c_i(G)^2} < 1/4.$$

If $c_1(G) = 2$, then G lies in case (i). We may therefore assume that $c_1(G) = 3$. The remainder of the argument proceeds along similar lines: if $c_2(G) > 4$ then $(\frac{1}{3}, \frac{1}{5}, \frac{1}{5}, \frac{1}{5}, \frac{1}{15}) \succcurlyeq \mathbf{r}(G)$, and by Lemma 9 we have $\kappa(G) \leq 53/255 < 1/4$. Hence either G lies in case (ii) or $c_2(G) = 4$. Assume that $c_2(G) = 4$. If $c_3(G) > 5$ then $(\frac{1}{3}, \frac{1}{4}, \frac{1}{6}, \frac{1}{6}, \frac{1}{12}) \succcurlyeq \mathbf{r}(G)$ and we have $\kappa(G) \leq 17/72 < 1/4$. Therefore either $c_3(G) = 4$, and G lies in case (iii), or $c_3(G) = 5$. In this final case, if $c_4(G) > 5$ then $(\frac{1}{3}, \frac{1}{4}, \frac{1}{5}, \frac{1}{6}, \frac{1}{20}) \succcurlyeq \mathbf{r}(G)$ and we have $\kappa(G) \leq 439/1800 < 1/4$. Therefore $c_4(G) = 5$, and G lies in case (iv). \square

4.1. Self-centralizing involutions. If G lies in the first case of Proposition 4.1 then G contains an element t such that $|C_G(t)| = 2$. Since $\langle t \rangle \leq C_G(t)$ we see that t is a self-centralizing involution.

Proposition 4.2. *Suppose that G is a finite group and that $t \in G$ is a self-centralizing involution. Then $\kappa(G) = \frac{1}{4} + \frac{1}{|G|} - \frac{1}{|G|^2}$ and G has a normal abelian subgroup A of odd order such that $|G : A| = 2$ and t acts on A by mapping each element of A to its inverse.*

Proof. The action of G on the conjugacy class t^G makes G into a Frobenius group. Let A be the Frobenius kernel. Since t acts without fixed points on A , we see that A has odd order. Now, proceeding as in [13, Ch. 10, Lemma 1.1], we observe the map on A defined by $g \mapsto g^{-1}g^t$ is injective. Therefore every element in A is of the form $g^{-1}g^t$ for some $g \in A$, and hence t acts on A by mapping each element to its inverse. It is an easy exercise to show this implies that A is abelian.

We have therefore shown that G is a Frobenius group with abelian kernel A and complement isomorphic to C_2 . Since $\kappa(A) = 1/|A|$ it follows from Lemma 3.2 that

$$\kappa(G) = \frac{1}{|G|^2} + \frac{1}{2} \left(\frac{1}{|A|} - \frac{1}{|A|^2} \right) + \left(\frac{1}{2} - \frac{1}{4} \right) = \frac{1}{4} + \frac{1}{|G|} - \frac{1}{|G|^2}.$$

This completes the proof of the proposition. \square

4.2. Groups with a self-centralizing three-element. To deal with the remaining three cases of Proposition 4.1 we shall need the following straightforward lemmas.

Lemma 4.3. *Let K be a finite group and let $x : K \rightarrow K$ be a fixed-point-free automorphism of prime order p . Then $|K| \equiv 1 \pmod{p}$ and if L is an x -invariant subgroup of K then the induced action of x on K/L is fixed-point-free.*

Proof. The identity is the unique fixed point of x on K and so $K \setminus \{1\}$ is a union of orbits of x . Hence $|K| \equiv 1 \pmod{p}$. Suppose that Lg is a proper coset of L and that Lg is fixed by x . Then Lg is a union of orbits of x and so $|Lg|$ is divisible by p , a contradiction. \square

Lemma 4.4. *Let G be a finite group containing a self-centralizing element x of order 3. Then $\langle x \rangle$ is a self-centralizing Sylow 3-subgroup of G .*

Proof. Let P be a Sylow 3-subgroup of G containing x . Since x is centralized by $Z(P)$ we see that $x \in Z(P)$. But then $P \leq C_G(\langle x \rangle) = \langle x \rangle$. Hence $\langle x \rangle = P$. \square

Lemma 4.5. *Suppose that K is a non-trivial finite group and $x : K \rightarrow K$ is a fixed-point-free automorphism of order 3. If $|K/K'| \leq 12$ then either $K \cong C_2 \times C_2$ or $K \cong C_7$.*

Proof. Suppose first of all that K is abelian. Then, from Lemma 4.3 we see that $|K| = 4, 7$ or 10 . The latter case is impossible as $C_2 \times C_5$ does not admit an automorphism of order 3. Similarly C_4 is ruled out, leaving the groups in the lemma.

Now suppose that K is not abelian. By the theorem of Thompson mentioned before Lemma 3.2, K is nilpotent. The derived group K' is a characteristic subgroup of K , so x also acts on the non-trivial quotient K/K' . It follows from Lemma 4.3 that the action of x on

K/K' is fixed-point-free. Hence, by the previous paragraph, we either have $K/K' \cong C_2 \times C_2$, or $K/K' \cong C_7$. A nilpotent group with a cyclic abelianisation is cyclic, so the latter case is impossible.

In the former case, let $K/K' = \langle sK', tK' \rangle$ and let $L = [K, K']$ be the second term in the lower central series of K . Note that L is a $\langle x \rangle$ -invariant subgroup of K , so, by Lemma 4.3, x acts without fixed points on K/L , and also on $(K/L)'$. It is clear that $(K/L)'$ is generated by $[sL, tL]$, and so it is a non-trivial cyclic 2-group. But no such group admits a fixed-point-free automorphism of order 3, a contradiction. \square

Case (ii) of Proposition 4.1. In this case we have $c_1(G) = c_2(G) = 3$ and so there are two distinct conjugacy class of self-centralizing elements of order 3. Let x be contained in one of these classes. By Lemma 4.4, each element of order 3 is contained in some conjugate of $\langle x \rangle$, and so we see that x is not conjugate to x^{-1} . The subgroup $\langle x \rangle$ is therefore not only self-centralizing, but also self-normalizing. If $\langle x \rangle$ is the unique Sylow 3-subgroup of G then $G \cong C_3$. Otherwise it follows at once that the action of G on the conjugates of $\langle x \rangle$ makes G into a Frobenius group with complement $\langle x \rangle$. Let K be the Frobenius kernel of G .

By Lemma 4.3, x acts on K/K' as a fixed-point-free automorphism. Hence G/K' is a Frobenius group. Applying Lemmas 3.1 and 3.2 to G/K' , and using the fact that $\kappa(K/K') = 1/|K/K'|$, we get

$$\kappa(G) \leq \kappa(G/K') = \frac{1}{3^2|K/K'|^2} + \frac{1}{3} \left(\frac{1}{|K/K'|} - \frac{1}{|K/K'|^2} \right) + \left(\frac{1}{3} - \frac{1}{9} \right).$$

If $\kappa(G) \geq 1/4$, the previous inequality implies that

$$\frac{1}{36} \leq \frac{-2}{9|K/K'|^2} + \frac{1}{3|K/K'|}$$

and it follows that $|K/K'| \leq 11$. Since K is nilpotent, K/K' is non-trivial. By Lemma 4.5 we get that either $K \cong C_2 \times C_2$, in which case $G \cong (C_2 \times C_2) \rtimes C_3 \cong A_4$, or $K \cong C_7$, in which case $G \cong C_7 \rtimes C_3$.

Cases (iii) and (iv) of Proposition 4.1. Lemma 4.4 shows that the Sylow 3-groups of G are self-centralising and of order 3. By hypothesis, there is a unique conjugacy class of elements with centraliser of order 3, and so we see that all 3-elements of G are conjugate and are self-centralising.

We shall need the main theorem in [9]. We repeat the statement of this theorem below.

Theorem ([W. Feit and J. G. Thompson [9]]). *Let G be a finite group which contains a self-centralizing subgroup of order 3. Then one of the following statements is true.*

- (I) G contains a nilpotent normal subgroup N such that G/N is isomorphic to either A_3 or S_3 .
- (II) G contains a normal subgroup N which is a 2-group such that G/N is isomorphic to A_5 .
- (III) G is isomorphic to $\text{PSL}(2, 7)$.

The conjugacy classes of $\text{PSL}(2, 7)$ have centralizer sizes 3, 4, 7, 7, 8 and 168, and so $\text{PSL}(2, 7)$ does not fall into any of our cases. We may therefore ignore the third possibility in the Feit–Thompson theorem. (Explicit calculation shows that in fact $\kappa(\text{PSL}(2, 7)) = 3247/14112$.) Moreover, groups with a quotient isomorphic to A_3 contain at least two conjugacy classes of 3-elements, and so $G/N \cong S_3$ whenever possibility (I) occurs.

Suppose that our Case (iii) holds. Half of the elements of G lie in the two conjugacy classes with a centraliser of order 4, and in particular at least half the elements of G are non-trivial 2-elements. This means that possibility (II) of the Feit–Thompson theorem cannot occur: the number of 2-elements in A_5 is 16, and so the proportion of 2-elements in a group having A_5 as a quotient cannot exceed $16/60$. We may therefore assume that G has a nilpotent normal subgroup N such that G/N is isomorphic to S_3 . Note that N cannot be trivial, for then $c_1(G) = 2$.

Let H be the subgroup of index 2 in G containing N . The two conjugacy classes with centralizer of size 4 must form $G \setminus H$, and if $x \in G$ has centralizer size 3 then $x^G \subseteq H$. The class x^G splits into two when the conjugacy action is restricted to H , and so, as in Case (ii), we see that H is a Frobenius group. Let K be its kernel, and so $H = K \rtimes \langle x \rangle$ where x acts fixed-point-freely. Note that K is nilpotent, and since N is non-trivial, K is also non-trivial. The conjugacy classes of G not contained in K contribute $\frac{1}{4^2} + \frac{1}{4^2} + \frac{1}{3^2}$ to $\kappa(G)$, and so we have $\kappa(G) = \frac{17}{72} + c$ where c is the contribution from the G -conjugacy classes contained in K . Let $k \in K$ be a non-identity element. Either $C_G(k)$

meets $G \setminus H$, in which case k^G splits into 3 classes, each with centralizer size $|C_G(k)|/2$, when the conjugacy action is restricted to K , or $C_G(k) \leq K$, in which case k^G splits into 6 classes, each with centralizer size $|C_G(k)|$. Suppose that the former conjugacy classes of G have G -centralizer sizes x_1, \dots, x_r , and the latter have G -centralizer sizes y_1, \dots, y_s . By (1) we have

$$\kappa(G) = \frac{1}{|G|^2} + \frac{17}{72} + \sum_{i=1}^r \frac{1}{x_i^2} + \sum_{j=1}^s \frac{1}{y_j^2}$$

and

$$\kappa(K) = \frac{1}{|K|^2} + \sum_{i=1}^r \frac{3}{(x_i/2)^2} + \sum_{j=1}^s \frac{6}{y_i^2}.$$

Hence

$$\kappa(G) \leq \frac{17}{72} + \frac{\kappa(K)}{6}.$$

Thus, by Lemma 3.1,

$$\kappa(G) \leq \frac{17}{72} + \frac{\kappa(K/K')}{6} = \frac{17}{72} + \frac{1}{6|K/K'|}.$$

Suppose that $\kappa(G) \geq 1/4$. The above inequality implies that $|K/K'| \leq 12$ and hence, by Lemma 4.5, $K \cong C_2 \times C_2$ or $K \cong C_7$. The latter case cannot occur because then G has order 42 and so cannot contain a centralizer of order 4. Hence we must have $K \cong C_2 \times C_2$ and $H = A_4$, and so $G = S_4$. Therefore S_4 is the unique group lying in case (iii).

Finally, suppose Case (iv) holds. Possibility (I) of the Feit–Thompson theorem cannot occur. To see this, let N be a normal subgroup of G such that $G/N \cong S_3$, and let H be the subgroup of index 2 in G containing N . There are conjugacy classes of G with sizes $|G|/3$, $|G|/4$, $|G|/5$ and $|G|/5$. All other conjugacy classes of G have total size $|G|/60$. Either H or $G \setminus H$ must contain the class of size $|G|/3$, but no union of conjugacy classes of G has size $|G|/2 - |G|/3 = |G|/6$. So possibility (II) must occur: there exists a normal 2-subgroup N of G such that $G/N \cong A_5$.

Let $g \in G$ lie in the unique conjugacy class of G with a centraliser of order 4. Since any power of g lies in $C_G(g)$, we see that g is a 2-element. Let P be a Sylow 2-subgroup containing g . Note that $N \leq P$, and $|P| = 4|N|$. Since $N_G(P)/N = N_{A_5}(P/N)$, and there is a 3-element in the normaliser of a Sylow 2-subgroup of A_5 , there exists an element $x \in N_G(P)$ of order 3. Since $\langle x \rangle$ is a self-centralising Sylow 3-subgroup,

the action of $\langle x \rangle$ on P is fixed-point-free. In particular, since the action preserves $Z(P)$ we see that $|Z(P)| \neq 2$. Since $\langle g, Z(P) \rangle \subseteq C_G(g)$ and $|C_G(g)| = 4$, we must therefore have $|Z(P)| = 4$ and $g \in Z(P)$. But then $P \leq C_G(g)$ and so $|P| = 4$. This implies that $|N| = 1$ and so $G \cong A_5$, as required.

5. PROOF OF THEOREM 1.2

We begin by reminding the reader of the definition of isoclinism. Given a group G , we shall write \overline{G} for the quotient group $G/Z(G)$ and \overline{g} for the coset $gZ(G)$ containing $g \in G$. We define a map $f_G : \overline{G} \times \overline{G} \rightarrow G'$ by $f_G(g_1Z(G), g_2Z(G)) = [g_1, g_2]$, for $g_1, g_2 \in G$. (It is clear that this map is well-defined.) Two finite groups G and H are said to be *isoclinic* if there exist isomorphisms $\alpha : \overline{G} \rightarrow \overline{H}$ and $\beta : G' \rightarrow H'$, such that for all $g_1, g_2 \in G$,

$$f_G(g_1, g_2)^\beta = f_H(g_1^\alpha, g_2^\alpha).$$

Let G and H be isoclinic groups and let α, β, f_G and f_H be as in the definition of isoclinism. Since

$$|g^G| = |[g, G]| = |f_G(\overline{g}, \overline{G})|$$

for each $g \in G$, we have

$$|G|\kappa(G) = \frac{1}{|G|} \sum_{g \in G} |[g, G]| = \frac{|Z(G)|}{|G|} \sum_{x \in \overline{G}} |f_G(x, \overline{G})|.$$

Similarly,

$$|H|\kappa(H) = \frac{|Z(H)|}{|H|} \sum_{y \in \overline{H}} |f_H(y, \overline{H})|.$$

Now using the bijections α and β we get

$$\sum_{x \in \overline{G}} |f_G(x, \overline{G})| = \sum_{x \in \overline{G}} |f_G(x, \overline{G})^\beta| = \sum_{x \in \overline{G}} |f_H(x^\alpha, \overline{H})| = \sum_{y \in \overline{H}} |f_H(y, \overline{H})|.$$

Since \overline{G} and \overline{H} are isomorphic, $|G|/|Z(G)| = |H|/|Z(H)|$ and so

$$|G|\kappa(G) = |H|\kappa(H),$$

as required by Theorem 1.2.

6. PERMUTATIONS THAT HAVE ONLY SHORT CYCLES

We now turn to the proofs of our theorems on $\kappa(S_n)$ and $\rho(S_n)$. The reader is referred to §1.3 above for an outline of what follows.

For the remainder of the paper, we let $\Omega_n = \{1, 2, \dots, n\}$. Unless we indicate otherwise, we regard the symmetric group S_n as the set of permutations of Ω_n . Let $s_k(n)$ be the probability that a permutation of Ω_n , chosen uniformly at random, has only cycles of length strictly less than k .

In this section we establish bounds on $s_k(n)$. We begin with the following well known lemma.

Lemma 6.1. *Let $n \in \mathbf{N}$ and let $1 \leq \ell \leq n$. Let $X \subseteq \Omega_n$ be an ℓ -set. If σ is chosen uniformly at random from S_n then*

- (i) *the probability that σ acts as an ℓ -cycle on X is $\frac{1}{\ell} \binom{n}{\ell}^{-1}$;*
- (ii) *the expected number of ℓ -cycles in σ is $1/\ell$;*
- (iii) *the probability that 1 is contained in an ℓ -cycle of σ is $1/n$.*

Proof. There are exactly $(\ell - 1)!$ cycles of length ℓ in a symmetric group of degree ℓ . So the probability in (i) is $(\ell - 1)!(n - \ell)!/n! = \frac{1}{\ell} \binom{n}{\ell}^{-1}$. It follows that the expected number of ℓ -cycles in σ is $1/\ell$ and so (ii) is established.

Define a random variable X_i to be equal to 1 if i is contained in an ℓ -cycle, and 0 otherwise. The expected value of $\sum_{i=1}^n X_i$ is exactly ℓ times the expected number of ℓ -cycles in a permutation. From part (ii), we see that $\mathbf{E}(\sum_{i=1}^n X_i) = 1$. But $\mathbf{E}(X_i)$ does not depend on i , hence $\mathbf{E}(\sum_{i=1}^n X_i) = n\mathbf{E}(X_1)$ and so $\mathbf{E}(X_1) = 1/n$. Since $\mathbf{E}(X_1)$ is equal to the probability that 1 is contained in an ℓ -cycle, the last part of the lemma is established. \square

Proposition 6.2. *For all $n, k \in \mathbf{N}$ with $k \geq 2$ we have $s_k(n) \leq 1/t!$ where $t = \lfloor n/(k - 1) \rfloor$.*

Proof. Let σ be chosen uniformly at random from S_n . By conditioning on the length of the cycle containing 1, and using Lemma 6.1(iii), we obtain the recurrence

$$(4) \quad s_k(n) = \frac{1}{n} \sum_{j=1}^{k-1} s_k(n - j)$$

for $n \geq k - 1$. A simple calculation shows that

$$\begin{aligned} s_k(n) - s_k(n+1) &= \frac{1}{n(n+1)} \sum_{j=1}^{k-1} s_k(n-j) + \frac{s_k(n-(k-1))}{n} - \frac{s_k(n)}{n+1} \\ &\geq \frac{s_k(n-(k-1)) - s_k(n)}{n}. \end{aligned}$$

Hence, if

$$s_k(n-(k-1)) \geq \cdots \geq s_k(n-1) \geq s_k(n),$$

then $s_k(n) \geq s_k(n+1)$. It is clear that $s_k(n) = 1$ if $n \leq k-1$, and so it follows by induction on n that $s_k(n)$ is a decreasing function of n . Now, by (4) we have

$$(5) \quad s_k(n) \leq \frac{k-1}{n} s_k(n-(k-1))$$

for all $n \geq k-1$. Let $n = t(k-1) + r$ where $0 \leq r < k-1$. Repeated application of (5) gives

$$\begin{aligned} s_k(t(k-1) + r) &\leq \frac{k-1}{t(k-1) + r} \frac{k-1}{(t-1)(k-1) + r} \cdots \frac{k-1}{(k-1) + r} s_k(r) \\ &= \frac{1}{t + r/(k-1)} \frac{1}{(t-1) + r/(k-1)} \cdots \frac{1}{1 + r/(k-1)} \\ &\leq \frac{1}{t!} \end{aligned}$$

as required. \square

Using the elementary inequality

$$(6) \quad t! \geq \left(\frac{t}{e}\right)^t \quad \text{for } t \geq 1,$$

we derive the following corollary.

Corollary 6.3. *For all $n, k \in \mathbf{N}$ with $k \geq 2$ we have*

$$s_k(n) \leq \left(\frac{e}{t}\right)^t$$

where $t = \lfloor n/(k-1) \rfloor$. \square

The following proposition leads to bounds on $s_k(n)$ that are asymptotically poorer than Corollary 6.3, but are stronger when n is small; we use these bounds in the proofs of Theorem 1.4 and Theorem 1.6.

Proposition 6.4. *Let $k \in \mathbf{N}$ be such that $k \geq 2$. Suppose that there exists $n_0 \in \mathbf{N}$ such that*

$$ns_k(n) \geq (n+1)s_k(n+1) \text{ for } n \in \{n_0, n_0+1, \dots, n_0+k-2\}.$$

Then $ns_k(n) \geq (n+1)s_k(n+1)$ for all $n \geq n_0$.

Proof. Let $x \geq n_0 + k - 1$, and suppose, by way of an inductive hypothesis, that $ns_k(n) \geq (n+1)s_k(n+1)$ for $n \in \{n_0, n_0+1, \dots, x-1\}$. Then, by (4),

$$\begin{aligned} (x+1)s_k(x+1) &= \sum_{j=1}^{k-1} s_k(x+1-j) \\ &= \sum_{j=1}^{k-1} \frac{(x+1-j)s_k(x+1-j)}{x+1-j} \\ &\leq \sum_{j=1}^{k-1} \frac{(x-j)s_k(x-j)}{x+1-j} \\ &< \sum_{j=1}^{k-1} \frac{(x-j)s_k(x-j)}{x-j} \\ &= xs_k(x). \end{aligned}$$

Hence the proposition follows by induction. \square

In fact, it is always the case that $ns_k(n) \geq (n+1)s_k(n+1)$ for $n \geq k-1$. The authors have a combinatorial proof of this fact by means of explicitly defined bijections; because of the length of this proof we prefer the simpler approach adopted above.

7. AN INEQUALITY ON $\kappa(S_n)$

The bounds on $\kappa(S_n)$ in the following proposition are critical to the proofs of Theorems 1.4 and 1.5.

Proposition 7.1. *For all $n \in \mathbf{N}$ we have*

$$\kappa(S_n) \leq s_k(n)^2 + \sum_{\ell=k}^n \frac{\kappa(S_{n-\ell})}{\ell^2}.$$

Moreover, if k is such that $n/2 < k \leq n$, then

$$\kappa(S_n) \geq \sum_{\ell=k}^n \frac{\kappa(S_{n-\ell})}{\ell^2}.$$

Proof. Let σ and τ be permutations of Ω_n chosen independently and uniformly at random. Let $X, Y \subseteq \Omega_n$ be ℓ -sets, and write \overline{X} and \overline{Y} for the complements of X and Y in Ω_n , respectively. Let $E(X, Y)$ be the event that σ acts as an ℓ -cycle on X , τ acts as an ℓ -cycle on Y and the restrictions $\overline{\sigma}$ and $\overline{\tau}$ of σ and τ to \overline{X} and \overline{Y} respectively have the same cycle structure. By Lemma 6.1(i), the probability that σ acts as an ℓ -cycle on X and τ acts as an ℓ -cycle on Y is $\ell^{-2} \binom{n}{\ell}^{-2}$. Given that σ and τ act as ℓ -cycles on X and Y respectively, the permutations $\overline{\sigma}$ and $\overline{\tau}$ are independently and uniformly distributed over the symmetric groups on \overline{X} and \overline{Y} respectively. Hence the probability that $\overline{\sigma}$ and $\overline{\tau}$ have the same cycle structure is precisely $\kappa(S_{n-\ell})$. Thus

$$\mathbf{P}(E(X, Y)) = \binom{n}{\ell}^{-2} \frac{\kappa(S_{n-\ell})}{\ell^2}.$$

If σ and τ are conjugate, then either σ and τ both have cycles all of length strictly less than k , or there exist sets X and Y of cardinality $\ell \geq k$ on which σ and τ act as ℓ -cycles and such that the restrictions of σ to \overline{X} and τ to \overline{Y} have the same cycle structure. Therefore

$$\begin{aligned} \kappa(S_n) &\leq s_k(n)^2 + \sum_{\ell=k}^n \sum_{|X|=\ell} \sum_{|Y|=\ell} \mathbf{P}(E(X, Y)) \\ &= s_k(n)^2 + \sum_{\ell=k}^n \sum_{|X|=\ell} \sum_{|Y|=\ell} \binom{n}{\ell}^{-2} \frac{\kappa(S_{n-\ell})}{\ell^2} \\ &= s_k(n)^2 + \sum_{\ell=k}^n \frac{\kappa(S_{n-\ell})}{\ell^2}. \end{aligned}$$

This establishes the first inequality of the proposition.

When $k > n/2$ the events $E(X, Y)$ with $|X| = |Y| \geq k$ are disjoint, since a permutation can contain at most one cycle of length greater than $n/2$. Thus

$$\begin{aligned} \kappa(S_n) &\geq \sum_{\ell=k}^n \sum_{|X|=\ell} \sum_{|Y|=\ell} \mathbf{P}(E(X, Y)) \\ &= \sum_{\ell=k}^n \frac{\kappa(S_{n-\ell})}{\ell^2}, \end{aligned}$$

as required. □

8. A UNIFORM BOUND ON $\kappa(S_n)$

In this section, we prove Theorem 1.4. We shall require the following lemma.

Lemma 8.1. *Let $n \in \mathbf{N}$ and let $0 < k < n/2$. Then*

$$\sum_{\ell=\lceil n/2 \rceil}^{n-k-1} \frac{1}{\ell^2(n-\ell)^2} \leq \frac{1}{n^2k} + \frac{2 \log(n/k)}{n^3}.$$

Proof. We have

$$\begin{aligned} \sum_{\ell=\lceil n/2 \rceil}^{n-k-1} \frac{1}{\ell^2(n-\ell)^2} &\leq \int_{n/2}^{n-k} \frac{dy}{y^2(n-y)^2} \\ &= \frac{1}{n^3} \int_{1/2}^{1-k/n} \frac{dx}{x^2(1-x)^2} \\ &= \frac{1}{n^3} \int_{1/2}^{1-k/n} \left(\frac{1}{x^2} + \frac{1}{(1-x)^2} + \frac{2}{x} + \frac{2}{1-x} \right) dx \\ &= \frac{1}{n^3} \left(-\frac{1}{x} + \frac{1}{1-x} + 2 \log x - 2 \log(1-x) \right) \Big|_{1/2}^{1-k/n} \\ &= \frac{1}{n^3} \left(\frac{n}{k} - \frac{1}{1-k/n} + 2 \log(1-k/n) - 2 \log(k/n) \right) \\ &\leq \frac{1}{n^2k} + \frac{2 \log(n/k)}{n^3} \end{aligned}$$

as required. \square

We shall also need the computational results contained in Lemma 8.2 below. There is no particular significance to the choice of the parameters $n = 300$ and $k = 15$ in this lemma, except that these are convenient numbers to work with, and they bring the amount of computational work needed to verify the results close to a minimum. A similar remark applies to the use of $n = 60$ in parts (ii) and (iii). (The reader may be interested to know that the minimum n for which our proof strategy will work is $n = 242$; this requires the choice $k = 14$.)

Recall that we define $C_\kappa = 13^2 \kappa(S_{13})$. Whenever in this paper we state a bound as a number written in decimal notation, it is sharp to five decimal places.

Lemma 8.2. *We have*

- (i) $\kappa(S_n) \leq C_\kappa/n^2$ for all $n \leq 300$;
- (ii) $60s_{15}(60) = \frac{158929798034197186400893117108816122671}{833175235266670978029768442202788608000} < 0.19076$;

- (iii) $ns_{15}(n) \geq (n+1)s_{15}(n+1)$ for $14 \leq n \leq 60$;
- (iv) $\sum_{m=0}^{15} \kappa(S_m) = \frac{4675865182689145531283}{1187508508836249600000} < 3.93755$;
- (v) $C_\kappa = \frac{314540139254371141}{57360633200640000}$ and $5.48355 < C_\kappa < 5.48356$. \square

Proof. All of these results except (i) are routine computations; (ii) and (iii) follow from the recurrence in (4), and (iv) and (v) follow from (1) in the obvious way. For (i), we use (1) to compute the exact value of $\kappa(S_n)$ for $n \leq 80$. For larger n we use the bound in Proposition 7.1, applying it with whichever choice of k gave the strongest result. For example, when $n = 81$ the optimal choice of k is 13, and when $n = 300$ it is 39. The resulting upper bounds easily imply (i). All of these assertions may be verified using the computer software mentioned in the introduction to this paper. \square

Proof of Theorem 1.4. We prove the theorem by induction on n . By Lemma 8.2(i) the theorem holds if $n \leq 300$, and so we may assume that $n > 300$. By Proposition 7.1 in the case $k = 15$ we have

$$\kappa(S_n) \leq s_{15}(n)^2 + \sum_{\ell=15}^n \frac{\kappa(S_{n-\ell})}{\ell^2},$$

and so

$$(7) \quad n^2 \kappa(S_n) \leq n^2 s_{15}(n)^2 + n^2 \sum_{\ell=n-15}^n \frac{\kappa(S_{n-\ell})}{\ell^2} + n^2 \sum_{\ell=15}^{n-16} \frac{\kappa(S_{n-\ell})}{\ell^2}.$$

It follows from Proposition 6.4 and Lemma 8.2(iii) that $ns_{15}(n) \leq 60s_{15}(60)$. Hence, by Lemma 8.2(ii), we have $n^2 s_{15}(n)^2 \leq 0.03639$.

Using Lemma 8.2(iv) to bound the second summand in (7) we get

$$n^2 \sum_{\ell=n-15}^n \frac{\kappa(S_{n-\ell})}{\ell^2} \leq \left(\frac{n}{n-15}\right)^2 \sum_{m=0}^{15} \kappa(S_m) \leq \left(\frac{300}{285}\right)^2 \sum_{m=0}^{15} \kappa(S_m) \leq 4.36294.$$

For the third summand in (7), we use the inductive hypothesis to get

$$n^2 \sum_{\ell=15}^{n-16} \frac{\kappa(S_{n-\ell})}{\ell^2} \leq n^2 \sum_{\ell=15}^{n-16} \frac{C_\kappa}{\ell^2(n-\ell)^2}.$$

Using the symmetry in this sum, and then applying Lemma 8.1 in the case $k = 15$, we get

$$\begin{aligned} n^2 \sum_{\ell=15}^{n-16} \frac{1}{\ell^2(n-\ell)^2} &\leq 2n^2 \sum_{\ell=\lceil n/2 \rceil}^{n-16} \frac{1}{\ell^2(n-\ell)^2} + \frac{n^2}{15^2(n-15)^2} \\ &\leq 2 \left(\frac{1}{15} + \frac{2 \log(n/15)}{n} \right) + \frac{1}{15^2} \left(\frac{300}{285} \right)^2 \end{aligned}$$

Since $\log(n/15)/n$ is decreasing for $n > 40$, it follows from the upper bound for C_κ in Lemma 8.2(v) that

$$\begin{aligned} n^2 \sum_{\ell=15}^{n-16} \frac{\kappa(S_{n-\ell})}{\ell^2} &\leq C_\kappa \left(\frac{2}{15} + \frac{4 \log(300/15)}{300} + \frac{300^2}{15^2 \cdot 285^2} \right) \\ &\leq 0.97718 \end{aligned}$$

Hence

$$n^2 \kappa(S_n) \leq 0.03639 + 4.36294 + 0.97718 = 5.37651 < C_\kappa$$

and the theorem follows. \square

9. THE LIMITING BEHAVIOUR OF $\kappa(S_n)$

Recall that we set $A_\kappa = \sum_{n=1}^{\infty} \kappa(S_n)$. In this section, we prove Theorem 1.5 by establishing the two propositions below.

Proposition 9.1.

$$\liminf_{n \rightarrow \infty} n^2 \kappa(S_n) \geq A_\kappa.$$

Proof. It follows from the second part of Proposition 7.1 that, if $k > n/2$, then

$$n^2 \kappa(S_n) \geq \sum_{m=0}^{n-k} \kappa(S_m).$$

Hence taking $k = \lfloor 3n/4 \rfloor$ and letting $n \rightarrow \infty$ we see that

$$\liminf_{n \rightarrow \infty} n^2 \kappa(S_n) \geq \sum_{m=0}^{\infty} \kappa(S_m) = A_\kappa.$$

\square

Proposition 9.2.

$$\limsup_{n \rightarrow \infty} n^2 \kappa(S_n) \leq A_\kappa.$$

Proof. Let $k = \lfloor \frac{n}{\log n} \rfloor$. By Proposition 7.1 we have

$$\kappa(S_n) \leq s_k(n)^2 + \sum_{\ell=k}^n \frac{\kappa(S_{n-\ell})}{\ell^2}.$$

By Proposition 6.2 we have

$$s_k(n) < \left(\frac{e}{t}\right)^t$$

where $t = \lfloor \frac{n}{k-1} \rfloor$. Writing $k = n/\log n + O(1)$ we have $\lfloor \frac{n}{k-1} \rfloor = (\log n) \left(1 + O\left(\frac{\log n}{n}\right)\right)$, and so

$$\begin{aligned} \log(ns_k(n)) &< \log n + t(1 - \log t) \\ &= 2 \log n - \log n \log \log n + \log \left(1 + O\left(\frac{\log n}{n}\right)\right) \\ &\rightarrow -\infty \end{aligned}$$

as $n \rightarrow \infty$. Hence $ns_k(n) \rightarrow 0$ as $n \rightarrow \infty$.

We estimate the main sum in the same way as the proof of Theorem 1.4. This gives

$$\begin{aligned} \sum_{\ell=k}^n \frac{\kappa(S_{n-\ell})}{\ell^2} &\leq \sum_{\ell=n-k}^n \frac{\kappa(S_{n-\ell})}{\ell^2} + \sum_{\ell=k}^{n-k-1} \frac{\kappa(S_{n-\ell})}{\ell^2} \\ &\leq \sum_{m=0}^k \frac{\kappa(S_m)}{(n-m)^2} + \sum_{\ell=k}^{n-k-1} \frac{C_\kappa}{\ell^2(n-\ell)^2} \\ &\leq \sum_{m=0}^k \frac{\kappa(S_m)}{(n-m)^2} + \sum_{\ell=\lfloor n/2 \rfloor}^{n-k-1} \frac{2C_\kappa}{\ell^2(n-\ell)^2} + \frac{C_\kappa}{k^2(n-k)^2}. \end{aligned}$$

By Lemma 8.1, the second summand in the equation above is at most $2C_\kappa \log n/n^3$. It is easily seen from the identity

$$\frac{n}{k(n-k)} = \frac{1}{k} + \frac{1}{n-k}$$

that $n^2/k^2(n-k)^2 \rightarrow 0$ as $n \rightarrow \infty$. Moreover, given any $\epsilon \in \mathbf{R}$ such that $0 < \epsilon < 1$, we have

$$n^2 \sum_{m=0}^k \frac{\kappa(S_m)}{(n-m)^2} \leq \frac{1}{(1-\epsilon)^2} \sum_{m=0}^k \kappa(S_m)$$

for all n such that $1/\log n < \epsilon$. These remarks show that

$$\begin{aligned} \limsup_{n \rightarrow \infty} n^2 \kappa(S_n) &\leq \limsup_{n \rightarrow \infty} \left(\frac{1}{(1-\epsilon)^2} \sum_{m=0}^{\lfloor n/\log n \rfloor} \kappa(S_m) \right) \\ &\leq \frac{1}{(1-\epsilon)^2} \sum_{m=0}^{\infty} \kappa(S_m) \\ &= \frac{A_\kappa}{(1-\epsilon)^2}. \end{aligned}$$

Since ϵ was arbitrary, we conclude that $\limsup_{n \rightarrow \infty} n^2 \kappa(S_n) \leq A_\kappa$. \square

10. BOUNDS ON $\rho(\text{Sym}(\Omega_n))$

In this section we give the background results needed to prove the results on $\rho(S_n)$ stated in Theorems 1.6 and 1.7.

Recall that a permutation of a finite set is said to be *regular* if all its cycles have the same length; a permutation σ acts *regularly* on a subset X if $X\sigma = X$ and the restriction $\sigma|_X$ of σ to X is regular. We denote by $r(\ell)$ the probability that a permutation of Ω_ℓ , chosen uniformly at random, is regular. The following lemma and proposition are the analogue of Lemma 6.1 for regular permutations.

Lemma 10.1. *For all $\ell \in \mathbf{N}$ we have*

$$\frac{1}{\ell} \leq r(\ell) \leq \frac{1}{\ell} + \frac{2}{\ell^2} + \frac{c}{\ell^3}$$

where $c = e^3/(1 - e/3)$.

Proof. Since an ℓ -cycle acts regularly, it follows from Lemma 6.1(i) that $1/\ell \leq r(\ell)$. The centralizer of a permutation of Ω_ℓ of cycle type $((\ell/m)^m)$ has order $(\ell/m)^m m!$. Hence the probability that a permutation of Ω_ℓ , chosen uniformly at random, has cycle type $((\ell/m)^m)$ is $\frac{m^m}{\ell^m m!}$. Summing over all possible values of m we get

$$r(\ell) = \sum_{m|\ell} \frac{m^m}{\ell^m m!}.$$

To get the claimed upper bound on $r(\ell)$ we estimate the sum

$$T(\ell) = \sum_{\substack{m|\ell \\ m \geq 3}} \frac{m^m}{\ell^m m!}$$

using the bound $m! \geq m^m e^{-m}$ for $m \geq 1$, stated earlier in (6). This gives

$$T(\ell) \leq \sum_{m \geq 3} \frac{m^m}{\ell^m m!} \leq \sum_{m \geq 3} \left(\frac{e}{\ell}\right)^m = \frac{e^3}{\ell^3} \frac{1}{1 - e/\ell} \leq \frac{e^3}{1 - e/3} \frac{1}{\ell^3} = \frac{c}{\ell^3}$$

as required. \square

Proposition 10.2. *Let $n \in \mathbf{N}$ and let $L \subseteq \Omega$ be an ℓ -set. Let $\sigma \in S_n$ be chosen uniformly at random. The probability that σ acts regularly on L is $r(\ell) \binom{n}{\ell}^{-1}$.*

Proof. We count permutations $\sigma \in S_n$ that act regularly on L as follows: there are $r(\ell)\ell!$ choices for the restriction of σ to L , and $(n - \ell)!$ choices for the restriction of σ to the complement \bar{L} of L . Hence the probability that σ acts regularly on L is

$$\frac{r(\ell)\ell!(n - \ell)!}{n!} = r(\ell) \binom{n}{\ell}^{-1}$$

as required. \square

The connection between permutations that have conjugates that commute and regular permutations is elucidated in the next lemma. The following definition will reduce the amount of notation required: let U and V be finite sets of the same cardinality, and let $\pi : U \rightarrow V$ be a bijection. Let σ be a permutation of U and let τ be a permutation of V . We shall say that σ and τ *have conjugates that commute* if this is the case, in the ordinary sense, for the permutations σ and $\pi^{-1}\tau\pi$ of U .

Lemma 10.3. *Suppose that $\sigma, \tau \in S_n$ have conjugates that commute and that the longest cycle length of the cycles in σ and τ is m . Then there exists an integer ℓ with $m \leq \ell \leq n$ and ℓ -subsets $X \subseteq \Omega_n$ and $Y \subseteq \Omega_n$, such that*

- (i) σ acts regularly on X , and τ acts regularly on Y ;
- (ii) if \bar{X} and \bar{Y} are the complements of X and Y in Ω_n , then the restricted permutations $\sigma|_{\bar{X}}$ and $\tau|_{\bar{Y}}$ have conjugates that commute.

Proof. Without loss of generality, we may assume that σ contains a cycle of length m . Let $M \subseteq \Omega_n$ be the m -set of elements in this cycle.

Since σ and τ have conjugates that commute, there exists $\pi \in S_n$ such that σ and $\pi^{-1}\tau\pi$ commute. Let A be the abelian subgroup of S_n

generated by σ and $\pi^{-1}\tau\pi$, let X be the orbit of A containing M , and let $Y = X\pi^{-1}$. Since $\sigma \in A$ we have $X\sigma = X$, and since $\pi^{-1}\tau\pi \in A$, we have $X\pi^{-1}\tau\pi = X$, and so $Y\tau = Y$. Define $\ell = |X| = |Y|$, and note that since $M \subseteq X$ we have $m \leq \ell$.

Since A is abelian and acts transitively on X , the restriction of any element of A to X is regular. In particular, σ and $\pi^{-1}\tau\pi$ act regularly on X , and so τ acts regularly on Y .

The permutations σ and $\pi^{-1}\tau\pi$ commute, and so their restrictions $\sigma|_{\overline{X}}$ and $(\pi^{-1}\tau\pi)|_{\overline{X}}$ commute. Since $(\pi^{-1}\tau\pi)|_{\overline{X}} = \pi^{-1}(\tau|_{\overline{Y}})\pi$, we see that $\sigma|_{\overline{X}}$ and $\tau|_{\overline{Y}}$ have conjugates that commute. \square

Lemma 10.3 enables us to prove the following analogue of Proposition 7.1.

Proposition 10.4. *For all $n \in \mathbf{N}$*

$$\rho(S_n) \leq s_k(n)^2 + \sum_{\ell=k}^n r(\ell)^2 \rho(S_{n-\ell}).$$

Moreover, if k such that $n/2 < k \leq n$, we have

$$\rho(S_n) \geq \sum_{\ell=k}^n \frac{\rho(S_{n-\ell})}{\ell^2}.$$

Proof. The proof follows the same pattern as the proof of Proposition 7.1, and so we shall give it only in outline. Given permutations $\sigma, \tau \in S_n$ and subsets $X, Y \subseteq \Omega_n$ of the same cardinality ℓ , let $E(X, Y)$ be the event that σ acts regularly on X , τ acts regularly on Y and $\sigma|_{\overline{X}}$ and $\tau|_{\overline{Y}}$ have conjugates that commute. If $E(X, Y)$ holds then the permutations $\sigma|_{\overline{X}}$ and $\tau|_{\overline{Y}}$ are uniformly distributed over the symmetric groups on \overline{X} and \overline{Y} respectively. Hence it follows from Proposition 10.2 that

$$\mathbf{P}(E(X, Y)) = \binom{n}{\ell}^{-2} r(\ell)^2 \rho(S_{n-\ell}).$$

Lemma 10.3 implies that if $\sigma, \tau \in S_n$ have conjugates that commute then either all of the cycles in σ and τ have length strictly less than k , or at least one of σ and τ has a cycle of length at least k and there exist sets X and Y of cardinality $\ell \geq k$ on which X and Y both act

regularly. (These events are not mutually exclusive.) Thus

$$\begin{aligned}\rho(S_n) &\leq s_k(n)^2 + \sum_{\ell=k}^n \sum_{|X|=\ell} \sum_{|Y|=\ell} \mathbf{P}(E(X, Y)) \\ &\leq s_k(n)^2 + \sum_{\ell=k}^n r(\ell)^2 \rho(S_{n-\ell}),\end{aligned}$$

as required by the first part of the Proposition.

The events $E(X, Y)$ cannot be used to establish the lower bound of the proposition, since they are not disjoint, even when $\ell > n/2$. Instead, we define $F(X, Y)$ to be the event that σ acts as an ℓ -cycle on X , τ acts as an ℓ -cycle on Y and $\sigma|_{\bar{X}}$ and $\tau|_{\bar{Y}}$ have conjugates that commute. A similar argument to that used for $E(X, Y)$, using Proposition 10.2 in place of Lemma 6.1(i), shows that

$$\mathbf{P}(F(X, Y)) = \binom{n}{\ell}^{-2} \ell^{-2} \rho(S_{n-\ell}).$$

The events $F(X, Y)$ with $|X| = |Y| > n/2$ are disjoint since a permutation can contain at most one cycle of length strictly greater than $n/2$. Moreover, if an event $F(X, Y)$ occurs, then σ and τ have conjugates that commute. It follows that whenever $k > n/2$,

$$\begin{aligned}\rho(S_n) &\geq \sum_{\ell=k}^n \sum_{|X|=\ell} \sum_{|Y|=\ell} \mathbf{P}(F(X, Y)) \\ &= \sum_{\ell=k}^n \frac{\rho(S_{n-\ell})}{\ell^2}\end{aligned}$$

as required. □

11. PROOFS OF THEOREMS 1.6 AND 1.7

We need the following computational lemma, to which remarks similar to those made before Lemma 8.2 apply.

Lemma 11.1. *We have*

- (i) $\rho(S_n) \leq C_\rho/n^2$ for all $n \leq 180$;
- (ii) $180s_{30}(180) < 0.00247$;
- (iii) $ns_{30}(n) \geq (n+1)s_{30}(n+1)$ for $29 \leq n \leq 180$;
- (iv) $\sum_{m=0}^{30} \rho(S_m) < 6.11806$;
- (v) $C_\rho = \frac{5805523}{508032}$ and $11.42747 < C_\rho < 11.42748$.

Proof. For (i) we compute the exact value of $\rho(S_n)$ when $n \leq 35$. For $n \geq 36$ the result follows from the bound in Proposition 10.4, again using whichever choice of k gives the strongest result. Parts (ii), (iii), (iv) and (v) are proved by the same methods used in Lemma 8.2. \square

Proof of Theorem 1.6. The proof proceeds along the same lines as the proof of Theorem 1.4. By Lemma 11.1 the theorem holds if $n \leq 180$, and so we may assume, inductively, that $n \geq 180$. Proposition 10.4 implies that

$$(8) \quad n^2 \rho(S_n) \leq n^2 s_{30}(n)^2 + n^2 \sum_{\ell=n-30}^n r(\ell)^2 \rho(S_{n-\ell}) + n^2 \sum_{\ell=30}^{n-31} r(\ell)^2 \rho(S_{n-\ell}).$$

By Proposition 6.4 and Lemma 11.1(ii) and (iii) we have $n s_{30}(n) \leq 180 s_{30}(180) \leq 0.00247$ for all $n \geq 180$. Hence $n^2 s_{30}(n)^2 \leq 0.00001$. To deal with the other two summands, it will be useful to introduce the function $R(\ell) = 1 + 2/\ell + c/\ell^2$. Note that, by Lemma 10.1, we have $r(\ell) < R(\ell)/\ell$ for all $\ell \in \mathbf{N}$. For the second summand, we have

$$\begin{aligned} n^2 \sum_{\ell=n-30}^n r(\ell)^2 \rho(S_{n-\ell}) &\leq \left(\frac{n}{n-30}\right)^2 R(n-30)^2 \sum_{m=0}^{30} \rho(S_m) \\ &\leq \left(\frac{180}{150}\right)^2 R(150)^2 \sum_{m=0}^{30} \rho(S_m) \\ &\leq 9.21704 \end{aligned}$$

where we have used Lemma 11.1(iv) and the obvious fact that $R(\ell)$ is a decreasing function of ℓ . For the third summand, we use the inductive hypothesis to obtain

$$n^2 \sum_{\ell=30}^{n-36} r(\ell)^2 \rho(S_{n-\ell}) \leq R(30)^2 \sum_{\ell=30}^{n-31} \frac{n^2 C_\rho}{\ell^2 (n-\ell)^2}.$$

Arguing as in the proof of Theorem 1.4 we find that

$$\begin{aligned} n^2 \sum_{\ell=30}^{n-36} r(\ell)^2 \rho(S_{n-\ell}) &\leq R(30)^2 C_\rho \left(\frac{2}{30} + \frac{4 \log(180/30)}{180} + \frac{180^2}{30^2 \cdot 150^2} \right) \\ &\leq 2.10126. \end{aligned}$$

Hence

$$n^2 \rho(S_n) \leq 0.00001 + 9.21704 + 2.10126 = 11.31831 \leq C_\rho$$

and the theorem follows. \square

Proof of Theorem 1.7. One may prove that

$$\liminf_{n \rightarrow \infty} n^2 \rho(S_n) \geq A_\rho$$

by using the lower bound in Proposition 10.4 and the same method as Proposition 9.1. For the upper limit, it follows from Proposition 10.4, by the same arguments used in Proposition 9.2 that

$$\limsup_{n \rightarrow \infty} n^2 \rho(S_n) = \limsup_{n \rightarrow \infty} n^2 \sum_{\ell=\lfloor n/\log n \rfloor}^n r(\ell)^2 \rho(S_{n-\ell}).$$

Let $\epsilon \in \mathbf{R}$ be given with $0 < \epsilon < 1$. Lemma 10.1 shows that $r(\ell) \leq (1 + \epsilon)/\ell$ for all sufficiently large ℓ . So provided n is sufficiently large, we have

$$\sum_{\ell=\lfloor n/\log n \rfloor}^n r(\ell)^2 \rho(S_{n-\ell}) \leq (1 + \epsilon)^2 \sum_{\ell=\lfloor n/\log n \rfloor}^n \frac{\rho(S_{n-\ell})}{\ell^2}.$$

It now follows, as in the proof of Proposition 9.2, that

$$n^2 \sum_{\ell=\lfloor n/\log n \rfloor}^n \frac{\rho(S_{n-\ell})}{\ell^2} \leq \frac{A_\rho}{(1 - \epsilon)^2}$$

whenever n is sufficiently large, and so

$$\limsup_{n \rightarrow \infty} n^2 \rho(S_n) \leq A_\rho \frac{(1 + \epsilon)^2}{(1 - \epsilon)^2}.$$

The theorem follows. \square

12. FINAL REMARKS AND OPEN PROBLEMS

Remarks on $\kappa(G)$. There are a number of interesting open problems that concern the spectrum of values taken by $\kappa(G)$ as G varies over all finite groups. It is clear that if G and H are finite groups then $\kappa(G \times H) = \kappa(G) \times \kappa(H)$, and so the spectrum is closed under multiplication. Moreover, generalizing part of Theorem 1.3, it is not hard to prove that if there exists a Frobenius group with point stabiliser H and Frobenius kernel K then the spectrum has a limit point at $\kappa(H) - \frac{1}{|H|^2}$. Indeed, if G is such a group then, by Lemma 3.2,

$$\kappa(G) = \frac{1}{|G|^2} + \frac{1}{|H|} \left(\kappa(K) - \frac{1}{|K|^2} \right) + \left(\kappa(H) - \frac{1}{|H|^2} \right).$$

We may construct Frobenius groups of arbitrarily large cardinality, each with point stabiliser H , by making H act in the obvious way on

the direct product K^m for $m \in \mathbf{N}$. Since $\kappa(K^m) = \kappa(K)^m \rightarrow 0$ as $m \rightarrow \infty$, this family gives the claimed limit point.

It is natural to ask whether every limit point of $\kappa(G)$ is explained by a family of Frobenius groups. If this is false, one might still ask whether there are irrational limit points.

We may also ask whether we can say anything about the value of $\kappa(G)$ for a typical group G . A framework for this question is as follows: for a fixed $\alpha \in [0, 1]$, let $f_\alpha(n)$ be the number of isomorphism classes of groups G of order n with $\kappa(G) \geq \alpha$. What can be said about the growth of this function?

Remarks on $\rho(G)$. It was shown at the end of [3] that if G is a finite group and $g \in G$, then $g \in Z(G)$ if and only if, for each $h \in G$, there is a conjugate of g which commutes with h . It follows that $\rho(G) = 1$ if and only if G is abelian.

It is not hard to see that can be no ‘upper gap’ result on $\rho(G)$ analogous to Theorem 1.3. Indeed, if G is a Frobenius group with abelian point stabiliser H and Frobenius kernel K then, by (2) in the proof of Lemma 3.2, any two elements in $G \setminus K$ have conjugates that commute. Hence

$$\rho(G) > \left(1 - \frac{1}{|H|}\right)^2.$$

It follows on considering the Frobenius groups of order $p(p-1)$ for large primes p , that the set of values of $\rho(G)$ has a limit point at 1.

It is obvious that if G is any finite group then $\rho(G) \geq \kappa(G)$, and so the ‘lower gap’ result in Theorem 1.1 also applies to ρ . We leave it to the reader to check that $\rho(G) = \kappa(G)$ if and only if G satisfies the second Engel identity $[x, [x, g]] = 1$ for all $x, g \in G$. Such groups are necessarily nilpotent, by an important theorem of Zorn [31].

More mysteriously, we note that with surprising frequency, $|G|\rho(G)$ is an integer. For instance, this is the case for all groups of order < 54 .

Finally, we remark that all of the algorithms we know of which check whether two given permutations are conjugate to commuting elements are inefficient in the worst case (though we know of algorithms that are efficient for most pairs of permutations in practice). Does an efficient algorithm for this problem exist?

A unified framework. In [7, §1.2], Dixon considers the probability that a particular instance of a law will be found to hold in a finite group. For example, the probability that the law $xy = yx$ holds in a finite group G is the commuting probability $\text{cp}(G)$. If we generalize the idea of a law to allow existential quantifiers then we obtain a unified framework for our results on κ and ρ ; the relevant formulae in the first order language of groups are $\exists g x^g = y$ and $\exists g x^g y = yx^g$, respectively. If N is a normal subgroup of G and a probability is defined in this way, then the probability associated with G/N is bounded below by the corresponding probability associated with G . Thus a slightly weaker version of Lemma 3.1 holds in much greater generality.

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