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Doubly transitive but not doubly primitive permutation groups

Cheryl E. Praeger

My research interest in doubly transitive permutation groups which are not doubly primitive arose from some beautiful results of Michael O'Nan and a special problem of my own. Suppose that G is a 2-transitive permutation group on Ω, and that for $\alpha \in \Omega$, G_α has a nontrivial normal subgroup N. Michael O'Nan [2,3] showed that, if N satisfies any one of the following three properties, $PSL(n,q) \leq G \leq P\Gamma L(n,q)$ in its representation on the points or hyperplanes of the projective space, where $n \geq 3$ and q is a power of a prime.

(i) N is abelian and is not semiregular on $\Omega - \{\alpha\}$.

(ii) N is not faithful on its orbits in $\Omega - \{\alpha\}$.

(iii) N is 2-transitive on its orbits in $\Omega - \{\alpha\}$, $|N| > 2$, and N is intransitive on $\Omega - \{\alpha\}$.

Notice that the set Σ of orbits of N in $\Omega - \{\alpha\}$ is a complete set of blocks of imprimitivity for G_α in $\Omega - \{\alpha\}$ such that N is contained in the kernel of the action of G_α on Σ. Thus properties (ii) and (iii) are essentially properties of the kernel of G_α on Σ. Now in order to discuss my problem let us assume.

(*) G is a 2-transitive permutation group on Ω, and for $\alpha \in \Omega$, G_α has a set $\Sigma = \{B_1, \ldots, B_t\}$ of nontrivial blocks of imprimitivity in $\Omega - \{\alpha\}$, where $|\Sigma| = t > 1$, and $|B_i| = b > 1$ for $1 \leq i \leq t$.

I wanted to know if such a group could exist with $G_\alpha^\Sigma \supseteq A_t$ and t much larger than b. If $t > b + 1$ it is easy to show in this situation that G_α contains a non-identity element fixing B_1 pointwise. I was able to show in [4] :

<u>Theorem 1.</u> If (*) is true, $G_\alpha^\Sigma \supseteq A_t$ where $t \geq 3$, and G_α contains a non-identity element which fixes B_1 pointwise, then $t \leq 5$ and G is a collineation group of a Desarguesian projective or affine plane of order $t - 1$.

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Thus it seemed that perhaps the group G could be characterised if strong assumptions were made on either the kernel of G_α on Σ, (as O'Nan had done), or the way in which G_α acted on Σ. My best result in this direction is the following.

<u>Theorem 2.</u> ([5,6]) Suppose that (*) is true, G_α is 3-transitive on Σ of degree $t \geq 3$, and G_α contains a non-identity element which fixes B_1 pointwise. If either

(a) G_α is not faithful on Σ, or

(b) G_α is faithful and 3-primitve on Σ,

then G is a collineation group of a Desarguesian projective or affine plane of order $t - 1$.

I conjecture that this result is true with the restrictions (a), (b) removed. Now projective and affine planes are special examples of block designs with parameter $\lambda = 1$, (where by a <u>block design</u> I mean a set of v points and a set of blocks with a relation of incidence between points and blocks such that each block is incident with k points and each pair of distinct points is incident with λ blocks, where $v > k + 1 > 1$, $\lambda > 0$). If $\mathcal{D}$ is a block design with parameters $\lambda = 1$ and $k > 2$, and if G is an automorphism group of $\mathcal{D}$ which is 2-transitive on the points of $\mathcal{D}$, then G is not 2-primitive on points, (for if Δ is a block of $\mathcal{D}$ incident with a point α then the set of points incident with Δ and distinct from α is a nontrivial block of imprimitivity for G_α). Moreover M.D. Atkinson (see [1]) has conjectured that any 2-transitive but not 2-primitive group G either is a normal extension of a Suzuki simple group, or is an automorphism group of a block design with parameter $\lambda = 1$, or has a regular normal subgroup (with restrictions on the degree). With this conjecture in mind we could ask.

Given that (*) is true, under what conditions on G_α^Σ can we conclude that G is an automorphism group of a block design with parameter $\lambda = 1$ in which the blocks containing α are precisely $B_i \cup \{\alpha\}$ for $i = 1, \ldots, t$?

One result which partially answers this question is :

Theorem 3. ([6]) Suppose that (*) is true, that G_α is 2-transitive on Σ, and G_α contains a non-identity element which fixes B_1 pointwise. Then either G is an automorphism group of a block design with parameter $\lambda = 1$, the blocks of which are the translates under G of $B_1 \cup \{\alpha\}$, or $PSL(n,q) \leq G_\alpha^{\Sigma} \leq P\Gamma L(n,q)$ on points or hyperplanes of the projective space, where $n \geq 3$ and q is a power of a prime, and G_α is faithful on Σ.

I conjecture, of course, that the second possibility can be removed. (I have shown in unpublished work that in the second case $t \leq bq$.)

References:

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University of Western Australia
Nedlands, Australia, 6009.