## THE CHROMATIC INDEX OF CYCLIC STEINER 2-DESIGNS

## **CHARLES J. COLBOURN and MARLENE J. COLBOURN**

Department of Computational Science University of Saskatchewan Saskatoon, CANADA S7N 0W0

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<u>ABSTRACT</u>. The number of colours needed to colour the blocks of a cyclic Steiner 2design S(2, k, v) is at most v. <u>KEY WORDS AND PHRASES</u>. Block design, Steiner system, colouring, chromatic index. 1980 MATHEMATICS SUBJECT CLASSIFICATION CODES. 05B05, 05B10.

## 1. INTRODUCTION.

A <u>Steiner 2-design</u> S(2, k, v) is a pair (V, B); V is a v-set of <u>elements</u> and B is a collection of k-subsets of V called <u>blocks</u>. Each 2-subset of V appears in precisely one block. A <u>colour class</u> in a Steiner system is a set of pairwise disjoint blocks. A <u>k-block colouring</u> of (V, B) is a partitioning of B into k colour classes. The <u>chromatic index</u> of a Steiner system is the least k for which a k-block colouring exists.

Steiner systems with small chromatic index have been studied under the guise of resolvable or nearly resolvable designs (see [1,2] and references therein). Often Steiner and related systems are employed in the scheduling of tournaments or experiments; in these contexts, small chromatic index corresponds to few "rounds". A question of much concern here is: what is the largest possible number of rounds required for a specified Steiner 2-design S(2, k, v)? In other words, what is the upper bound on the chromatic index of a Steiner 2-design? One weak upper bound is immediate.

LEMMA 1: The chromatic index of a Steiner 2-design S(2, k, v) is less than kv/(k-1).

PROOF. Given a Steiner system S(2, k, v), construct its <u>block intersection</u> <u>graph</u> as follows. Each block is represented by a vertex; two vertices are adjacent exactly when the corresponding blocks intersect. The chromatic index of a Steiner 2-design is the chromatic number of its block intersection graph. The block intersection graph has maximum degree less than kv/(k-1). Hence, Brooks' theorem [3] guarantees that the chromatic number is at most kv/(k-1).

We suspect that lemma 1 is quite a weak bound; one reason is that a conjecture of Erdős, Faber, and Lovasz [4] would ensure an upper bound of v on the chromatic index. The purpose of this note is to show that the chromatic index of a cyclic Steiner system S(2,k,v) is at most v.

A Steiner system S(2,k,v) is <u>cyclic</u> if its element set is  $\{0,1,\ldots,v-1\}$  and the mapping  $i \rightarrow i+1 \pmod{v}$  is an automorphism. This automorphism partitions the blocks of the Steiner system into <u>orbits</u>. Each orbit contains v blocks when  $v \equiv 1$ (mod k(k-1)). When  $v \equiv k \pmod{k(k-1)}$ , each orbit except one contains v blocks. The exception, the short orbit, contains v/k blocks. The reader is referred to [5] for a detailed survey of cyclic Steiner 2-designs; the simple introduction here suffices to prove

THEOREM 2. A cyclic Steiner system S(2,k,v) has chromatic index at most v.

PROOF. If there is a short orbit of blocks, we use a single colour for all blocks in this orbit, since they are disjoint [5]. For each "full" orbit of blocks, we consider the subgraph of the block intersection graph induced on this orbit. This subgraph has degree k(k-1). Hence, Brooks' theorem guarantees that it can be coloured in k(k-1) colours, unless it is composed of (k(k-1)+1)-cliques. Observe that at most one orbit can induce such a graph, and this can only happen when k(k-1)+1 divides v. Thus, for  $v \equiv 1 \pmod{k(k-1)}$ , we need at most v colours, since we have (v-1)/(k(k-1)) full orbits. Similarly, for  $v \equiv k \pmod{k(k-1)}$ , we have one short orbit, and (v-k)/(k(k-1)) full orbits; hence, at most v-k+2 colours are needed, completing the proof.

Although cyclic systems comprise a very small fraction of all Steiner systems, we believe that the techniques used in theorem 2 are interesting and have general

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applicability. Future research might employ different decompositions of the block intersection graph into manageable pieces, such as the orbits used here, and the colouring of the system "piece by piece".

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