

# THE CATALAN CASE OF ARMSTRONG'S CONJECTURE ON SIMULTANEOUS CORE PARTITIONS

RICHARD P. STANLEY AND FABRIZIO ZANELLO

ABSTRACT. A beautiful recent conjecture of D. Armstrong predicts the average size of a partition that is simultaneously an  $s$ - and a  $t$ -core, where  $s$  and  $t$  are coprime. Our goal in this note is to prove this conjecture when  $t = s + 1$ . These cores, which are enumerated by Catalan numbers, have average size  $\binom{s+1}{3}/2$ .

## 1. INTRODUCTION AND SOME SIMPLE CASES

Let  $\lambda = (\lambda_1, \lambda_2, \dots, \lambda_m)$  be a *partition of size  $n$* , i.e., the  $\lambda_i$  are weakly decreasing positive integers summing to  $n$ . We can represent  $\lambda$  by means of its *Young* (or *Ferrers*) *diagram*, which consists of a collection of left-justified rows where row  $i$  contains  $\lambda_i$  cells. To each of these cells  $B$  one associates its *hook length*, that is, the number of cells in the Young diagram of  $\lambda$  that are directly to the right or below  $B$  (including  $B$  itself). Figure 1 represents the Young diagram of the partition  $\lambda = (5, 3, 3, 2)$  of size 13; the numbers inside each cell represent the hook lengths.

Let  $s$  be a positive integer. We say that  $\lambda$  is an  $s$ -*core* if  $\lambda$  has no hook of length equal to  $s$  (or equivalently, equal to a multiple of  $s$ ). For instance, from Figure 1 we can see that  $\lambda = (5, 3, 3, 2)$  is an  $s$ -core for  $s = 6$  and for all  $s \geq 9$ . Finally,  $\lambda$  is an  $(s, t)$ -*core* if it is simultaneously an  $s$ - and a  $t$ -core.

The theory of  $(s, t)$ -cores has been the focus of much interesting research in recent years (see [3, 4, 5] for some of the main results). In particular, when  $s$  and  $t$  are coprime, there exists only a finite number of  $(s, t)$ -core partitions. In fact, there are exactly  $\binom{s+t}{s}/(s+t)$  such cores (see [5]), the largest of which has size  $(s^2 - 1)(t^2 - 1)/24$  [3]. More generally, a nice result of J. Anderson [3] provides a bijective correspondence between  $(s, t)$ -cores and order ideals of the poset, say  $P_{(s,t)}$ , of the positive integers that are not contained in the numerical semigroup generated by  $s$  and  $t$ . (Our poset terminology follows [6, Chap. 3].) The partial order on  $P_{(s,t)}$  is determined by specifying that  $a$  covers  $b$  whenever  $a - b$  equals either  $s$  or  $t$ .

For instance, let  $s = 3$  and  $t = 5$ . Then  $P_{(3,5)} = \{1, 2, 4, 7\}$ , where  $7 > 4 > 1$  and  $7 > 2$ . Thus the order ideals of  $P_{(3,5)}$  are the following  $\frac{1}{3+5}\binom{3+5}{3} = 7$  subsets:  $\emptyset, \{1\}, \{2\}, \{2, 1\}, \{4, 1\}, \{4, 2, 1\}$ , and  $\{7, 4, 2, 1\}$ . Figure 2 represents the Hasse diagram of the poset  $P_{(3,5)}$ ,

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8	7	5	2	1
5	4	2		
4	3	1		
2	1			

FIGURE 1. The Young diagram of  $\lambda = (5, 3, 3, 2)$ . The numbers inside each box indicate the hook lengths.

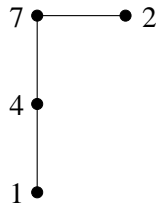


FIGURE 2. The Hasse diagram of the poset  $P_{(3,5)}$ .

rotated  $45^\circ$  counterclockwise from the usual convention. Notice that from this diagram it is clear that if an element  $a$  of  $P_{(3,5)}$  belongs to a given order ideal  $I$ , then all elements immediately to the right or below  $a$  also belong to  $I$ .

Anderson's result then gives that  $(s, t)$ -cores correspond bijectively to the order ideals of  $P_{(s,t)}$  by associating the ideal  $\{a_1, \dots, a_j\}$ , where  $a_1 > \dots > a_j$ , to the  $(s, t)$ -core partition  $(a_1 - (j - 1), a_2 - (j - 2), \dots, a_{j-1} - 1, a_j)$ . For instance, the  $(3, 5)$ -cores are the following seven partitions:  $\emptyset$  (corresponding to the order ideal  $\emptyset$  of  $P_{(3,5)}$ ),  $(1)$  (corresponding to  $\{1\}$ ),  $(2)$  (corresponding to  $\{2\}$ ),  $(1, 1)$  (corresponding to  $\{2, 1\}$ ),  $(3, 1)$  (corresponding to  $\{4, 1\}$ ),  $(2, 1, 1)$  (corresponding to  $\{4, 2, 1\}$ ), and  $(4, 2, 1, 1)$  (corresponding to  $\{7, 4, 2, 1\}$ ).

The following conjecture of D. Armstrong, informally stated sometime in year 2011 and then recently published in [4], predicts, for any  $s$  and  $t$  coprime, a surprisingly simple formula for the average size of an  $(s, t)$ -core.

**Conjecture 1.1.** *For any coprime positive integers  $s$  and  $t$ , the average size of an  $(s, t)$ -core is  $(s + t + 1)(s - 1)(t - 1)/24$ . Equivalently, the sum of the sizes of all  $(s, t)$ -cores is*

$$\frac{(s + t + 1)(s - 1)(t - 1)}{24(s + t)} \binom{s + t}{s}.$$

For instance, the seven  $(3, 5)$ -cores computed above are of size 0, 1, 2, 2, 4, 4, and 8, which have average 3, as predicted by Armstrong's conjecture.

One of the interesting aspects of this conjecture, besides the partition-theoretic result that it predicts, is the deep combinatorial information that it would imply on numerical semigroups generated by two elements. In fact, even though one would generally expect

these semigroups to be very well understood, Armstrong's conjecture had until now resisted all attempts to a significant progress.

The main goal of this paper is to show the conjecture in what is probably its most interesting case, namely that of  $(s, s + 1)$ -cores. The number of these cores is the *Catalan number*  $C_s := \frac{1}{s+1} \binom{2s}{s}$ , and the corresponding posets  $P_{(s,s+1)}$  present a particularly nice structure, which will allow us to use induction in the proof.

We now wrap up this first section by briefly discussing Armstrong's conjecture in a few initial cases. For any given  $s$ , in principle the conjecture can be verified computationally for all  $(s, t)$ -cores, given how explicitly one can determine these cores by means of Anderson's bijection. In fact, the authors of [4] indicate that C. Hanusa has verified the conjecture for small values of  $s$ , though they provide no details. Here, we will just present a short proof of the case  $s = 3$  (the case  $s = 2$  being trivial), which also gives us the opportunity to state a simple but useful fact on arbitrary  $(s, t)$ -cores that seems to have not yet been recorded in the literature. We will provide this lemma without proof, since the argument is analogous to the classical proof that if  $\lambda$  is an  $s$ -core, then it is also an  $ms$ -core, for all  $m \geq 1$  (see e.g. the first author's [7], Exercise 7.60 and its solution on pp. 518–519). In principle, the use of this lemma would considerably simplify a “brute-force” proof for any given  $s$ , and indeed the case  $s = 4$  is still relatively quick to prove along the same lines; nonetheless, for higher values of  $s$  the computations remain extremely unpleasant.

**Lemma 1.2.** *If a partition  $\lambda$  is an  $(s, t)$ -core, then it is also an  $(s, s + t)$ -core.*

**Proposition 1.3.** *Armstrong's conjecture holds for all  $(3, t)$ -cores.*

*Proof.* We will show the result for  $t = 3n - 2$ , the case  $t = 3n - 1$  being entirely similar. Notice that by Lemma 1.2 all  $(3, 3n - 2)$ -cores are  $(3, 3n + 1)$ -cores. Thus by induction, proving the result is now equivalent to showing that the sum of the sizes of the  $(3, 3n + 1)$ -cores that are *not* also  $(3, 3n - 2)$ -cores is the difference between the two total sums predicted by Armstrong's conjecture, namely

$$\Delta(n) = \frac{(3n + 5) \cdot 2 \cdot 3n}{24(3n + 4)} \binom{3n + 4}{3} - \frac{(3n + 2) \cdot 2 \cdot (3n - 3)}{24(3n + 1)} \binom{3n + 1}{3} = \binom{3n + 2}{3}.$$

Figure 3 represents the Hasse diagrams of  $P_{(3,10)}$  and  $P_{(3,13)}$ . From these diagrams, it is easy to see that the order ideals of  $P_{(3,13)}$  that are not also in  $P_{(3,10)}$  are exactly the six principal ideals generated by 11, 14, 17, 20, 23, and 10, plus the seven ideals generated by  $\{2, 10\}$ ,  $\{5, 10\}$ ,  $\{8, 10\}$ ,  $\{11, 10\}$ ,  $\{14, 10\}$ ,  $\{17, 10\}$ , and  $\{20, 10\}$ .

In a similar fashion, it can be seen that the order ideals of  $P_{(3,3n+1)}$  but not of  $P_{(3,3n-2)}$  are exactly the  $n + 2$  principal ideals generated by  $3n - 1$ ,  $3n + 2$ , ...,  $6n - 1$ , and  $3n - 2$ , and the  $2n - 1$  ideals generated by  $\{2, 3n - 2\}$ ,  $\{5, 3n - 2\}$ , ...,  $\{6n - 4, 3n - 2\}$ .

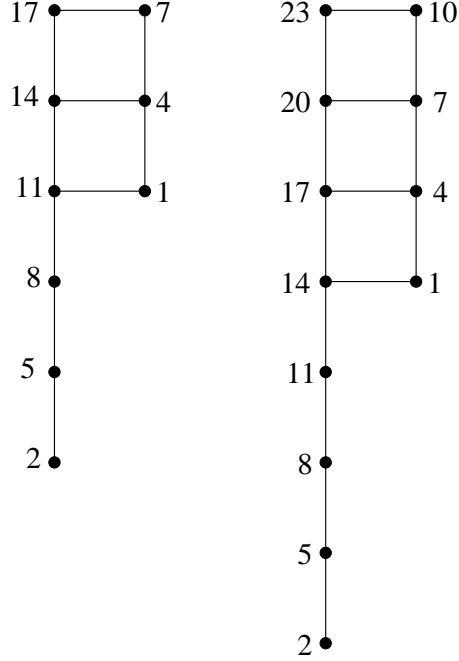


FIGURE 3. The Hasse diagrams of  $P_{(3,10)}$  (on the left) and  $P_{(3,13)}$ .

A standard computation now gives that  $\Delta(n)$ , i.e., the sum of the elements of the above order ideals  $I$  minus  $\binom{\#I}{2}$ , where  $\#I$  denotes the cardinality of  $I$ , is given by

$$\begin{aligned} \Delta(n) = & (2 + 5 + \cdots + (3n - 1)) + \sum_{i=n}^{2n-1} [(2 + 5 + \cdots + (3i + 2)) + (1 + 4 + \cdots + 3(i - n) + 1)] \\ & + 2n(1 + 4 + \cdots + (3n - 2)) + \sum_{i=0}^{2n-2} (2 + 5 + \cdots + (3i + 2)) \\ & - \left[ \binom{n}{2} + \sum_{i=n}^{2n-1} \binom{2i - n + 2}{2} + \sum_{i=0}^{2n-1} \binom{n + i}{2} \right]. \end{aligned}$$

Showing now that the right-hand-side is equal to  $\binom{3n+2}{3}$  is a routine task that we omit. This completes the proof.  $\square$

We only remark here that using Lemma 1.2, Armstrong's conjecture can also be verified relatively quickly for  $s = 4$ , i.e., for all  $(4, 2n + 1)$ -cores (though the computations are of course already much more tedious than for  $s = 3$ ). In fact, in this case one has to show that the sum of the sizes of all  $(4, 2n + 1)$ -cores equals  $S(n) := (4n + 6)\binom{n+3}{4}$ . It is easy to check (see also [1]) that, for all  $n \geq 7$ , the sequence  $S(n)$  satisfies the following curious recursive relation:

$$\sum_{i=0}^6 (-1)^{i+1} \binom{6}{i} S(n - i) = 0.$$

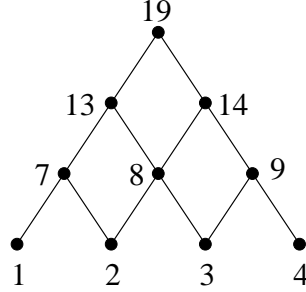


FIGURE 4. The Hasse diagram of  $T_5$ .

It would be very interesting to combinatorially explain this identity in the context of  $(4, 2n + 1)$ -cores, and thus give an elegant proof of Armstrong's conjecture for  $s = 4$ .

## 2. THE CATALAN CASE

The goal of this section is to show Armstrong's conjecture for  $(s, s + 1)$ -cores. We denote by  $T_s := P_{(s, s+1)}$  the corresponding poset according to Anderson's bijection [3]. For simplicity, we will draw the Hasse diagram of  $T_s$  from top to bottom; thus, each element of  $T_s$  covers the two elements immediately below, and the elements increase by  $s$  at each step up and to the left, and by  $s + 1$  at each step up and to the right. (See Figure 4 for the Hasse diagram of  $T_5$ .)

Let us define the functions

$$g_j := \frac{j(j-1)}{12} \binom{2j}{j}$$

$$f_j := \frac{j^2 + 5j + 2}{8j + 4} \binom{2j + 2}{j + 1} - 4^j$$

$$h_j := 2^{2j-1} - \binom{2j + 1}{j} + \binom{2j - 1}{j - 1},$$

where by convention we set  $h_0 := 0$ . We need the following two identities. We thank Henry Cohn for verifying them for us on Maple.

**Lemma 2.1.**

$$f_s = \sum_{i=1}^s C_{s-i} (2f_{i-1} + h_{i-1}).$$

*Proof.* This is the Maple code that verifies the identity (it gives 0 as output):

```
g := j -> binomial(2*j,j)*j*(j-1)/12;
f := j -> binomial(2*j+2,j+1)*(j^2+5*j+2)/(8*j+4)-4^j;
h := j -> 2^(2*j-1)-binomial(2*j+1,j)+binomial(2*j-1,j-1);
C := j -> binomial(2*j,j)/(j+1);
simplify(sum(C(s-i)*(2*f(i-1)+h(i-1)),i=2..s)-f(s));
```

□

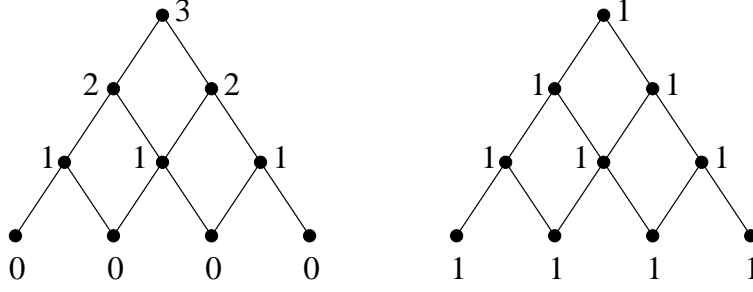


FIGURE 5. The poset  $T_5$  with weights  $\rho(a)$  on the left and  $\tau(a)$  on the right.

**Lemma 2.2.**

$$g_s = \sum_{i=1}^s 2C_{s-i}g_{i-1} + 2(s-i+1)C_{s-i}f_{i-1} + (s-i+3)C_{s-i}h_{i-1} + (i-1)C_{s-i}C_{i-1} - h_{s-i}h_{i-1}.$$

*Proof.* This is the Maple code that verifies the identity (it gives 0 as output):

```

g := j -> binomial(2*j,j)*j*(j-1)/12;
f := j -> binomial(2*j+2,j+1)*(j^2+5*j+2)/(8*j+4)-4*j;
h := j -> 2^(2*j-1)-binomial(2*j+1,j)+binomial(2*j-1,j-1);
C := j -> binomial(2*j,j)/(j+1);
simplify(sum(2*C(s-i)*g(i-1)+2*(s-i+1)*C(s-i)*f(i-1)+(s-i+3)*C(s-i)*h(i-1) + (i-1)*C(s-i)*C(i-1)-h(s-i)*h(i-1),i=2..s-1) + 2*C(0)*g(s-1)+2*(1)*C(0)*f(s-1)+(3)*C(0)*h(s-1) + (s-1)*C(0)*C(s-1) - g(s));

```

□

**Theorem 2.3.** *Armstrong's conjecture holds for all  $(s, s+1)$ -cores.*

*Proof.* For any given  $s$ , and for any weight function  $w : T_s \rightarrow \mathbb{Z}$ , define the two functions

$$f_s(w) := \sum_{I \in J(T_s)} \sum_{a \in I} w(a),$$

$$g_s(w) := \sum_{I \in J(T_s)} \left( \sum_{a \in I} w(a) - \binom{\#I}{2} \right) = f_s(w) - \sum_{I \in J(T_s)} \binom{\#I}{2},$$

where as usual  $J(P)$  denotes the set of order ideals of a poset  $P$ .

We consider three weight functions on  $T_s$ . The weight  $\sigma$  is the “standard weight” that associates, to each element of  $T_s$ , itself as a weight; i.e.,  $\sigma(a) = a$ , for all  $a \in T_s$ . The weight  $\tau$  is identically 1; i.e.,  $\tau(a) = 1$ , for all  $a \in T_s$ . Finally,  $\rho$  records the ranks of the elements of  $T_s$ , when we see this latter as a ranked poset whose minimal elements have rank 0. Figure 5 represents the Hasse diagrams of  $T_5$ , where the elements are being weighted according to  $\tau$  and  $\rho$ .

A straightforward computation gives that showing the theorem is tantamount to proving that

$$g_s(\sigma) = g_s = \frac{s(s-1)}{12} \binom{2s}{s}.$$

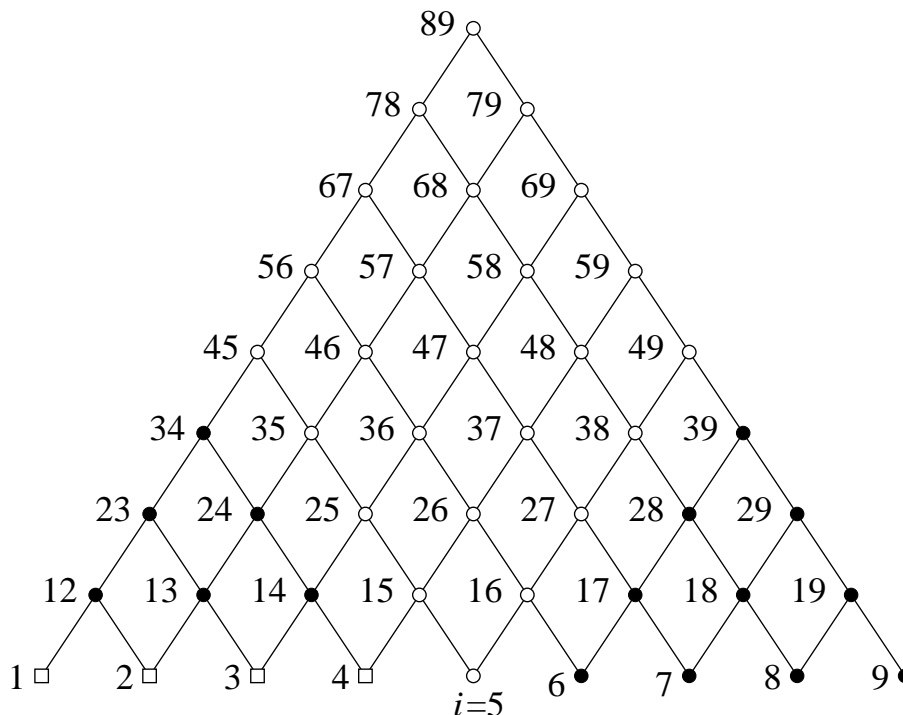


FIGURE 6. The possible elements of the order ideals  $I \in J_5(T_{10})$ . Elements that must appear in  $I$  are indicated by squares, that cannot appear by open circles, and that may or may not appear by solid circles.

Notice that the elements of rank 0 of  $T_s$  are  $1, 2, \dots, s - 1$ . We can partition  $J(T_s)$  as  $J(T_s) = \bigcup_i J_i(T_s)$ , where  $J_i(T_s)$  is the set of those order ideals of  $T_s$  whose least element that they do *not* contain is  $i$ . Notice that either  $1 \leq i \leq s - 1$ , or we are considering order ideals whose least missing element  $i$  (if any) has positive rank. With some abuse of notation, in this latter case we set by convention  $i := s$ , so that we can write

$$J(T_s) = \bigcup_{i=1}^s J_i(T_s).$$

Notice that, given  $i$ , the elements  $I$  of  $J_i(T_s)$  *must* contain all of  $1, 2, \dots, i - 1$ , *cannot* contain any element covering  $i$  (this is an empty condition for  $i = s$ ), and *may or may not* contain any other element. Figure 6 gives the Hasse diagram of  $T_{10}$ ; for  $i = 5$ , it indicates by squares the elements of  $T_{10}$  that must belong to any given order ideal  $I \in J_5(T_{10})$ , by open circles the elements that cannot be in  $I$ , and by solid circles the elements that may or may not be in  $I$ .

It easily follows that any given order ideal  $I \in J_i(T_s)$  can be partitioned into the disjoint union of two order ideals, say  $I_1$  and  $I_2$ , plus the elements  $1, 2, \dots, i - 1$ . Notice that, in the Hasse diagram of  $T_s$ ,  $I_1$  belongs to a poset that is isomorphic to  $T_{i-1}$  and sits to the left of  $i$  (starting in rank one), and similarly for  $I_2$ , which belongs to a copy of  $T_{s-i}$  and sits to the

right of  $i$ . Of course, the posets  $T_1$  and  $T_0$ , corresponding respectively to  $i = s - 1$  and  $i = s$ , are empty. (See again Figure 6 for the case  $n = 10$  and  $i = 5$ .)

Given this, it is a simple exercise to show that the sum of the elements of  $T_s$  that belong to a given order ideal  $I = I_1 \cup I_2 \cup \{1, 2, \dots, i - 1\} \in J(T_s)$  is given by:

$$\sum_{a \in I_1} w(a) + \sum_{a \in I_2} w(a) + \binom{i}{2},$$

where the weight function  $w$  is defined as

$$w := \sigma + (s + 1)\tau + (s + 1 - i)\rho$$

over  $I_1$ , and by

$$w := \sigma + i\tau + i\rho$$

over  $I_2$ . Further, notice that, given  $i$ , we can clearly choose the order ideals  $I_1 \in J(T_{i-1})$  and  $I_2 \in J(T_{s-i})$  independently. Therefore, the elements  $a \in I_1$  will appear a total of  $C_{s-i}$  times in the order ideals  $I$  of  $T_s$ , and similarly, the elements  $a \in I_2$  will appear a total of  $C_{i-1}$  times in the order ideals  $I$  of  $T_s$ .

It is therefore now easy to see that the contribution of any given  $i$  to the desired function  $g_s(\sigma)$  is given by

$$\begin{aligned} & \sum_{I_1 \in J(T_{i-1})} C_{s-i} \left( \sum_{a \in I_1} w(a) + \binom{i}{2} \right) + \sum_{I_2 \in J(T_{s-i})} C_{i-1} \sum_{a \in I_2} w(a) \\ & - \sum_{I_1 \in J(T_{i-1}), I_2 \in J(T_{s-i})} \binom{\#I_1 + \#I_2 + i - 1}{2} \\ & = C_{s-i}(f_{i-1}(\sigma) + (s + 1)f_{i-1}(\tau) + (s - i + 1)f_{i-1}(\rho)) + C_{s-i}C_{i-1} \binom{i}{2} \\ & + C_{i-1}(f_{s-i}(\sigma) + if_{s-i}(\tau) + if_{s-i}(\rho)) - \sum_{I_1 \in J(T_{i-1}), I_2 \in J(T_{s-i})} \binom{\#I_1 + \#I_2 + i - 1}{2}. \end{aligned}$$

Let us now consider, always for a fixed  $i$ , the sum  $\sum_{I_1 \in J(T_{i-1}), I_2 \in J(T_{s-i})} \binom{\#I_1 + \#I_2 + i - 1}{2}$ . It is clear that

$$\binom{\#I_1 + \#I_2 + i - 1}{2} = \binom{\#I_1}{2} + \binom{\#I_2}{2} + (i - 1)\#I_1 + (i - 1)\#I_2 + (\#I_1)(\#I_2) + \binom{i - 1}{2}.$$

Thus, once we sum over all  $I_1$  and  $I_2$ , similar considerations to the above on the number of such order ideals easily give us that

$$\sum_{I_1 \in J(T_{i-1}), I_2 \in J(T_{s-i})} \binom{\#I_1 + \#I_2 + i - 1}{2} = \sum_{I_1 \in J(T_{i-1})} C_{s-i} \left( \binom{\#I_1}{2} + (i - 1)\#I_1 \right)$$



$$+ \sum_{I_2 \in J(T_{s-i})} C_{i-1} \left( \binom{\#I_2}{2} + (i-1)\#I_2 \right) + \left( \sum_{I_1 \in J(T_{i-1})} \#I_1 \right) \left( \sum_{I_2 \in J(T_{s-i})} \#I_2 \right) + C_{s-i} C_{i-1} \binom{i-1}{2}.$$

Notice that, essentially by definition,  $\sum_{I_1 \in J(T_{i-1})} \#I_1 = f_{i-1}(\tau)$ , and likewise,  $\sum_{I_2 \in J(T_{s-i})} \#I_2 = f_{s-i}(\tau)$ . It is a known fact (see e.g. [2]) that

$$f_j(\tau) = 2^{2j-1} - \binom{2j+1}{j} + \binom{2j-1}{j-1}.$$

As for determining  $f_j(\rho)$ , by employing the above decomposition of the order ideals  $I$  and summing over all  $i$ , with a similar argument we can see that:

$$f_s(\rho) = \sum_{i=1}^s C_{s-i} (f_{i-1}(\rho) + f_{i-1}(\tau)) + C_{i-1} f_{s-i}(\rho),$$

which, by rearranging the indices, easily yields:

$$f_s(\rho) = \sum_{i=1}^s C_{s-i} (2f_{i-1}(\rho) + f_{i-1}(\tau)).$$

Therefore, by induction, if we apply Lemma 2.1 with  $f_j = f_j(\rho)$  and  $h_j = f_j(\tau)$ , we promptly get the following formula for  $f_j(\rho)$ :

$$f_j(\rho) = \frac{j^2 + 5j + 2}{8j + 4} \binom{2j+2}{j+1} - 4^j.$$

Recall now that  $g_{i-1}(\sigma) = f_{i-1}(\sigma) - \sum_{I_1 \in J(T_{i-1})} \binom{\#I_1}{2}$ , and similarly for  $g_{s-i}(\sigma)$ . Using this, and summing over  $i = 1, 2, \dots, s$ , after some tedious but routine computations (that include rearranging the indices where necessary), from the above formula for the  $i$ th term of  $g_s(\sigma)$  we finally obtain:

$$\begin{aligned} g_s(\sigma) &= \sum_{i=1}^s [2C_{s-i}g_{i-1}(\sigma) + 2(s-i+1)C_{s-i}f_{i-1}(\rho) \\ &\quad + (s-i+3)C_{s-i}f_{i-1}(\tau) + (i-1)C_{s-i}C_{i-1} - f_{i-1}(\tau)f_{s-i}(\tau)]. \end{aligned}$$

The theorem now follows by induction on  $s$ , if we apply Lemma 2.2 with  $f_j = f_j(\rho)$ ,  $g_j = g_j(\sigma)$ , and  $h_j = f_j(\tau)$ .  $\square$

### 3. ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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DEPARTMENT OF MATHEMATICS, MIT, CAMBRIDGE, MA 02139-4307

*E-mail address:* [rstan@math.mit.edu](mailto:rstan@math.mit.edu)

DEPARTMENT OF MATHEMATICS, MIT, CAMBRIDGE, MA 02139-4307 AND DEPARTMENT OF MATHEMATICAL SCIENCES, MICHIGAN TECH, HOUGHTON, MI 49931-1295

*E-mail address:* [zanello@math.mit.edu](mailto:zanello@math.mit.edu), [zanello@mtu.edu](mailto:zanello@mtu.edu)