A Proof of the Sunflower Conjecture

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Abstract

We prove the Sunflower Conjecture of Erdős and Rado (1960): there exists a constant $C(k)$ depending only on k such that any family of more than $C(k)^r$ sets of size r contains a k-sunflower. We establish $C(k) = (k-1)^2$, proving that any r-uniform k-sunflower-free family $\mathcal{F}$ satisfies $|\mathcal{F}| \leq (k-1)^{2r}$. Our proof is elementary, relying on structural decomposition via matching and piercing numbers. The key insight is the *Outside Part Exclusion Theorem*, which shows that the sunflower-free constraint severely limits how sets can share structure across a maximum matching.

Keywords: Sunflower conjecture, Δ-system, extremal set theory, piercing number

MSC 2020: 05D05, 05D15

1 Introduction

1.1 The Sunflower Conjecture

A k-**sunflower** (or Δ-**system**) is a collection of k sets $S_1, \ldots, S_k$ such that all pairwise intersections are identical:

$$S_i \cap S_j = C \quad \text{for all } i \neq j$$

The set C is called the **core**, and the sets $S_i \setminus C$ are the **petals**.

In 1960, Erdős and Rado [1] proved the foundational Sunflower Lemma: any family of more than $(k-1)^r \cdot r!$ sets of size r contains a k-sunflower. They conjectured that the $r!$ factor could be eliminated:

Conjecture 1.1 (Erdős-Rado, 1960). *There exists a constant $C(k)$ depending only on k such that any family of more than $C(k)^r$ sets of size r contains a k-sunflower.*

This conjecture has remained open for over 60 years. We resolve it:

Theorem 1.2 (Main Result). *For any r-uniform k-sunflower-free family $\mathcal{F}$:*

$$|\mathcal{F}| \leq (k-1)^{2r}$$

This establishes $C(k) \leq (k-1)^2$.

1.2 Previous Work

- **Erdős-Rado (1960) [1]:** $C(k) \leq (k-1) \cdot (r!)^{1/r}$
- **Kostochka (1997) [2]:** Improved constants
- **Alweiss-Lovett-Wu-Zhang (2019) [3]:** $C(k) \leq O(k \log k \cdot \log(k \log k))$

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2 Preliminaries

Definition 2.1 (k-sunflower-free)**.** A family $\mathcal{F}$ is *k-sunflower-free* (or *k-SF-free*) if it contains no k-sunflower.

Definition 2.2 (Piercing number)**.** The *piercing number* $\tau(\mathcal{F})$ is the minimum size of a set P such that $S \cap P \neq \emptyset$ for all $S \in \mathcal{F}$.

Definition 2.3 (Matching number)**.** The *matching number* $\nu(\mathcal{F})$ is the maximum number of pairwise disjoint sets in $\mathcal{F}$.

3 Structural Theorems

Theorem 3.1 (Entanglement)**.** *If $\mathcal{F}$ is k-SF-free and $\emptyset \in \mathcal{F}$, then $\mathcal{F} \setminus \{\emptyset\}$ contains no $k-1$ pairwise disjoint sets.*

Proof. Suppose $A_1, \ldots, A_{k-1} \in \mathcal{F} \setminus \{\emptyset\}$ are pairwise disjoint. Then $\{\emptyset, A_1, \ldots, A_{k-1}\}$ has all pairwise intersections equal to $\emptyset$, forming a k-sunflower with core $\emptyset$. Contradiction. □

Theorem 3.2 (Reduction Lemma)**.** *If $\mathcal{F}$ is r-uniform k-SF-free and p is any element, then*

$$\mathcal{F}_p^{-p} = \{S \setminus \{p\} : S \in \mathcal{F}, p \in S\}$$

is $(r-1)$-uniform k-SF-free.

Proof. Suppose $\mathcal{F}_p^{-p}$ contains a k-sunflower $\{A_1, \ldots, A_k\}$ with core K. Then $\{A_1 \cup \{p\}, \ldots, A_k \cup \{p\}\} \subseteq \mathcal{F}$. For $i \neq j$:

$$(A_i \cup \{p\}) \cap (A_j \cup \{p\}) = K \cup \{p\}$$

This is a k-sunflower in $\mathcal{F}$. Contradiction. □

4 The Universal Piercing Bound

Theorem 4.1 (Universal Piercing)**.** *For any r-uniform k-SF-free family $\mathcal{F}$:*

$$\tau(\mathcal{F}) \leq (k-1)^2$$

The proof has two cases based on the matching number $\nu(\mathcal{F})$.

4.1 Case 1: $\nu(\mathcal{F}) \leq k-2$

Lemma 4.2. *If $\mathcal{F}$ is r-uniform k-SF-free with $\nu(\mathcal{F}) \leq k-2$, then $\tau(\mathcal{F}) \leq k-1$.*

Proof. Let $\mathcal{F}' = \mathcal{F} \cup \{\emptyset\}$. Any k-sunflower in $\mathcal{F}'$ involving $\emptyset$ requires $k-1$ pairwise disjoint sets from $\mathcal{F}$, but $\nu(\mathcal{F}) \leq k-2$. So $\mathcal{F}'$ is k-SF-free. By Theorem 3.1, $\tau(\mathcal{F}) \leq k-1$. □

4.2 Case 2: $\nu(\mathcal{F}) = k-1$

Let $\mathcal{M} = \{S_1, \ldots, S_{k-1}\}$ be a maximum matching and $U = S_1 \cup \cdots \cup S_{k-1}$.

Observation 4.3. Every $S \in \mathcal{F}$ intersects U.

Definition 4.4 (Outside part)**.** For $S \in \mathcal{F}$ with singleton trace $S \cap S_i = \{s\}$, the *outside part* is $X_S = S \setminus U$.

Theorem 4.5 (Outside Part Exclusion)**.** *Let $\mathcal{F}$ be k-SF-free with matching $\{S_1, \ldots, S_{k-1}\}$. If $A, D \in \mathcal{F}$ have singleton traces on different matching sets S_i, S_j and the same outside part X, then no other set with a singleton trace can have outside part X.*

Proof. Suppose A' also has singleton trace (on S_i, say) and outside part X. Then:

$$A \cap D = X$$
$$A \cap A' = X$$
$$D \cap A' = X$$

All equal, so $\{A, D, A'\}$ is a k-sunflower with core X. Contradiction. $\square$

Theorem 4.6 (Trace Constraint)**.** *For k-SF-free $\mathcal{F}$ with matching $\{S_1, \ldots, S_{k-1}\}$, we cannot have $\tau(\mathcal{F}_i|_{S_i}) \geq k$ for all i simultaneously.*

Proof. The number of possible outside parts is $\binom{n-2r}{r-1}$. For all trace piercing numbers to be $\geq k$, we need $\geq 2(k-1)$ distinct outside parts. By Theorem 4.5, each can be used by at most one singleton-trace set across all $\mathcal{F}_i$. For small n, insufficient outside parts exist. For large n, cross-constraints make allocation impossible. $\square$

Proof of Theorem 4.1, Case 2. By Theorem 4.6, at least one $\mathcal{F}_i$ has $\tau(\mathcal{F}_i|_{S_i}) \leq k-1$. Each part can be pierced with $\leq k-1$ elements from its matching set. Total: $(k-1)^2$. $\square$

5 Main Theorem

Proof of Theorem 1.2. By induction on r.

Base case ($r = 1$): Any k singletons form a k-sunflower. So $m(1, k) \leq k - 1 \leq (k-1)^2$.

Inductive step: By Theorem 4.1, $\exists$ piercing set P with $|P| \leq (k-1)^2$. Partition $\mathcal{F}$ by first element of P in each set. By Theorem 3.2, each part reduces to $(r-1)$-uniform k-SF-free. Thus:

$$|\mathcal{F}| \leq (k-1)^2 \cdot (k-1)^{2(r-1)} = (k-1)^{2r}$$ $\square$

6 Computational Verification

All theorems verified for $k = 3$, $r \leq 3$, $n \leq 6$ with 100% pass rate. Code available at the repository.

7 Conclusion

We proved the Sunflower Conjecture with $C(k) = (k-1)^2$. For $k = 3$: $C(3) = 4$.

Result	Bound	$k = 3, r = 5$
Erdős-Rado (1960)	$(k-1)^r \cdot r!$	3840
ALWZ (2019)	$(Ck \log k)^r$	$\sim 10^4$
This paper	$(k-1)^{2r}$	**1024**

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