Pairwise Intersections and Forbidden Configurations

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Let $f_m(a,b,c,d)$ denote the maximum size of a family $\mathcal{F}$ of subsets of an m-element set for which there is no pair of subsets $A,B \in \mathcal{F}$ with

$$|A \cap B| \geq a, \quad |\bar{A} \cap B| \geq b, \quad |A \cap \bar{B}| \geq c, \quad \text{and} \quad |\bar{A} \cap \bar{B}| \geq d.$$

By symmetry we can assume $a \geq d$ and $b \geq c$. We show that $f_m(a,b,c,d)$ is $\Theta(m^{a+b-1})$ if either $b > c$ or $a,b \geq 1$. We also show that $f_m(0,b,b,0)$ is $\Theta(m^b)$ and $f_m(a,0,0,d)$ is $\Theta(m^a)$. This can be viewed as a result concerning forbidden configurations and is further evidence for a conjecture of Anstee and Sali. Our key tool is a strong stability version of the Complete Intersection Theorem of Ahlswede and Khachatrian, which is of independent interest.

Keywords: forbidden configurations, extremal set theory, intersecting set systems, uniform set systems, (0,1)-matrices

Let $f_m(a,b,c,d)$ denote the maximum size of a family $\mathcal{F}$ of subsets of an m-element set for which there is no pair of subsets $A,B \in \mathcal{F}$ with

$$|A \cap B| \geq a, \quad |\bar{A} \cap B| \geq b, \quad |A \cap \bar{B}| \geq c, \quad \text{and} \quad |\bar{A} \cap \bar{B}| \geq d.$$

By symmetry we can assume $a \geq d$ and $b \geq c$.

Theorem 1 *Suppose $a \geq d$ and $b \geq c$. Then $f_m(a,b,c,d)$ is $\Theta(m^{a+b-1})$ if either $b > c$ or $a,b \geq 1$. Also $f_m(a,0,0,d)$ is $\Theta(m^a)$ and $f_m(0,b,b,0)$ is $\Theta(m^b)$.*

Some motivation for studying this function comes from the forbidden configuration problem for matrices popularised by the first author. We can identify a family $\mathcal{A} = \{A_1, \cdots, A_n\}$ of subsets of $[m]$ with an $m \times n$ $(0,1)$-matrix A determined by incidence, i.e. A_{ij} is 1 if $i \in A_j$, otherwise 0. Such a matrix is *simple*, by which we mean it has no repeated columns. Let F be a $(0,1)$-matrix (not necessarily simple). We define forb(m,F) to be the largest n for which there is a simple $m \times n$ $(0,1)$-matrix A that does not contain an F configuration, i.e. a submatrix which is a row and column permutation of F. If we interpret

†Research is supported in part by NSERC
‡Research was done partly while visiting the first author with the support of the first author's NSERC grant

A, F as incidence matrices of systems $\mathcal{A}, \mathcal{F}$ (the latter possibly having sets with multiplicity) then A has an F configuration exactly when $\mathcal{A}$ has $\mathcal{F}$ as a *trace*, i.e. $\mathcal{F} \subset \{A \cap X : A \in \mathcal{A}\}$ for some $X \subset [m]$.

The first forbidden configuration result was obtained independently by Sauer [6], Perles, Shelah [7], Vapnik and Chervonenkis [8]. When F is the $k \times 2^k$ $(0,1)$-matrix with all possible distinct columns they showed that $\text{forb}(m, F) = \sum_{i=0}^{k-1} \binom{m}{i}$. For a general k-row matrix F, Füredi obtained an $O(m^k)$ upper bound on $\text{forb}(m, F)$, but it seems hard to determine the order of magnitude of $\text{forb}(m, F)$ for each F. This was achieved when F has 2 rows by Anstee, Griggs and Sali [2] and for 3 rows by Anstee and Sali [3], but is open in general.

It is not hard to see that if F consists of a single column with s 0's and t 1's then $\text{forb}(m, F)$ is $\Theta(m^{\max\{s-1,t-1\}})$. In this paper we solve the problem when F has two columns. Let F_{abcd} be the $(a+b+c+d) \times 2$ $(0,1)$-matrix which has a rows of [11], b rows of [10], c rows of [01], d rows of [00]. Then $\text{forb}(m, F_{abcd}) = f_m(a,b,c,d)$ as defined above.

In [3] a conjecture was made for the asymptotic behaviour of $\text{forb}(m, F)$ as a function of m and F. In particular, a restricted set of constructions of simple matrices were described in [3] that were conjectured to predict the asymptotics of $\text{forb}(m, F)$. These were used in this paper to predict the asymptotics in Theorem 1 as well as to provide construction. This is further evidence for the conjecture in [3].

Our key tool is a strong stability version of the Complete Intersection Theorem of Ahlswede and Khachatrian [1], which is of independent interest. Strong stability results have been employed with success by the second author, for example in [4],[5]. First we recall some notation. Let numbers k, r_1, r_2 be given and suppose G and H are disjoint sets with $|G| = k - r_1 + r_2$. We define $\mathcal{I}^k_{r_1,r_2}$ on the pair (H, G) to be the family consisting of all sets of size k in $G \cup H$ that intersect G in at least $k - r_1 = |G| - r_2$ points. Note that any two sets in $\mathcal{I}^k_{r_1,r_2}$ have at least $|G| - 2r_2 = k - r_1 - r_2$ points in common, i.e. $\mathcal{I}^k_{r_1,r_2}$ is $(k-r)$-intersecting, where $r = r_1 + r_2$.

We also define $\mathcal{F}^k_{r_1,r_2}$ on the pair (H, G) to be the family consisting of all sets of size k in $G \cup H$ that intersect G in exactly $k - r_1 = |G| - r_2$ points. Clearly this is a subsystem of $\mathcal{I}^k_{r_1,r_2}$ and $|\mathcal{I}^k_{r_1,r_2} \backslash \mathcal{F}^k_{r_1,r_2}|$ is of a lower order of magnitude than $|\mathcal{I}^k_{r_1,r_2}|$ and $|\mathcal{F}^k_{r_1,r_2}|$. In particular, if the systems are defined on the ground set $[m]$ with $k = \Theta(m)$ then $|\mathcal{I}^k_{r_1,r_2}|$ and $|\mathcal{F}^k_{r_1,r_2}|$ are $\Theta(m^r)$, whereas $|\mathcal{I}^k_{r_1,r_2} \backslash \mathcal{F}^k_{r_1,r_2}| < m^{r-2}$. The Complete Intersection Theorem, conjectured by Frankl, and proved by Ahlswede and Khachatrian [1], is that any k-uniform, $(k-r)$-intersecting family of maximum size on a given ground set is isomorphic to $\mathcal{I}^k_{r-p,p}$, for some $0 \le p \le r$, which depends on the size of the ground set. We prove the following result.

Theorem 2 *Suppose $\mathcal{A}$ is a k-uniform $(k-r)$-intersecting set system on $[m]$ of size at least $(5r)^{5r} m^{r-1}$. Then $\mathcal{A} \subset \mathcal{I}^k_{r-p,p}$ for some $0 \le p \le r$.*

We use this theorem in our proofs of the upper bounds in Theorem 1 in cases where $\mathcal{A}$ is a k-uniform $(k-r)$-intersecting set system satisfying some additional properties. If $|\mathcal{A}|$ is small, we can ignore it for the purposes of upper bounds. If $|\mathcal{A}|$ is large enough to matter for the upper bounds, we can use the fact that $\mathcal{A} \subset \mathcal{I}^k_{r-p,p}$ to deduce structure in $\mathcal{A}$ (e.g. the partition G, H above) which we can exploit in our proofs.

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