

# The vertex sets of subtrees of a tree

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## Abstract

Let  $\mathcal{F}$  be a set of subsets of a set  $W$ . When is there a tree  $T$  with vertex set  $W$  such that each member of  $\mathcal{F}$  is the set of vertices of a subtree of  $T$ ? It is necessary that  $\mathcal{F}$  has the Helly property and the intersection graph of  $\mathcal{F}$  is chordal. We will show that these two necessary conditions are together sufficient in the finite case, and more generally, they are sufficient if no element of  $W$  belongs to infinitely many infinite sets in  $\mathcal{F}$ .

**Mathematics Subject Classifications:** 05C05, 05C63, 05C69

## 1 Introduction

In 1972, Tucker [16] asked and answered the following question. Let  $\mathcal{F}$  be a set of subsets of a set  $W$ : when is there a finite path  $P$  with vertex set  $W$  such that each member of  $\mathcal{F}$  is the set of vertices of a subpath of  $P$ ?

In this paper we consider a similar question: when is there a tree  $T$  with vertex set  $W$  such that each member of  $\mathcal{F}$  is the set of vertices of a subtree of  $T$ ? In the finite case this turns out to have a pretty answer. (Graphs in this paper have no loops or parallel edges, and may be infinite.) There are two necessary conditions for the existence of such a tree  $T$ :

- **(The chordal property)** The intersection graph of  $\mathcal{F}$  is *chordal*, that is, all its induced cycles have length three.
- **(The Helly property)** For all  $S_1, \dots, S_k \in \mathcal{F}$  with  $k$  finite, if  $S_i \cap S_j \neq \emptyset$  for  $1 \leq i < j \leq k$ , then  $S_1 \cap \dots \cap S_k \neq \emptyset$ .

Our main result is that these necessary conditions are together sufficient, at least in the finite case:

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**Theorem 1.1.** *Let  $\mathcal{F}$  be a set of subsets of a set  $W$ . Suppose that  $W$  is finite, or more generally, no element of  $W$  belongs to infinitely many infinite members of  $\mathcal{F}$ . Then there is a tree  $T$  with vertex set  $W$  such that each member of  $\mathcal{F}$  is the set of vertices of a subtree of  $T$ , if and only if  $\mathcal{F}$  has the chordal property and the Helly property.*

This will follow from a more general result, Theorem 2.1 below.

There is a well-known theorem of Surányi (see page 584 of [6]) and others [1, 5, 18], that a finite graph is chordal if and only if it is the intersection graph of a set of subtrees of a tree. (This is not always true for infinite graphs, as Halin [7] showed.) We stress that the result of Theorem 1.1 is different.

Let us see first that the two necessary conditions are not always sufficient:

**Proposition 1.2.** *There is a set  $\mathcal{F}$  of subsets of a set  $W$ , such that  $\mathcal{F}$  has the chordal property and the Helly property, and yet there is no tree  $T$  with vertex set  $W$  such that each member of  $\mathcal{F}$  is the vertex set of a subtree of  $T$ .*

*Proof.* Let  $W$  be the set of non-negative integers, and let

$$\mathcal{F} = \{\{i, i + 1\} : i \geq 1\} \cup \{\{0, i, i + 1, i + 2, \dots\} : i \geq 1\}.$$

This satisfies the two necessary conditions, but there is no corresponding tree. To see the latter, suppose that  $T$  is a tree with  $V(T) = W$  and all members of  $\mathcal{F}$  are vertex sets of subtrees. In particular,  $(i, i + 1)$  is an edge of  $T$  for each  $i \geq 1$ , so there is only one more edge in  $T$ , and it is incident with 0; and for each  $i \geq 1$ , making  $(0, i)$  an edge does not work, because  $\{0, i + 1, i + 2, \dots\}$  is supposed to be the vertex set of a subtree. This proves Theorem 1.2.  $\square$

The set of Theorem 1.2 was derived from an example of Halin [7]. He gave a chordal graph  $G$  that is not expressible as the intersection graph of a set of subtrees of a tree. Let  $G$  be any such graph, let  $W$  be the set of all maximal cliques of  $G$  (a *clique* of a graph is a set of pairwise adjacent vertices, not necessarily maximal), and for each  $v \in V(G)$ , let  $S_v$  be the set of all members of  $W$  that contain  $v$ . Then  $\mathcal{F} = \{S_v : v \in V(G)\}$  satisfies Theorem 1.2, as can easily be checked.

A strengthening of Theorem 1.1 is proved in the next section. Later in the paper, we consider the same question with paths instead of trees. Tucker [16] solved this question for finite paths, and we extend his result to the infinite case. Then we apply this to “line-width”, which is a version of “path-width” for infinite graphs.

## 2 The main result

Let us say that  $\mathcal{F}$  is *well-founded* if there is no countable sequence  $(S_i : i \geq 1)$  of members of  $\mathcal{F}$  such that  $S_1 \cap S_2 \cap \dots \neq \emptyset$  and  $S_1 \cap \dots \cap S_i \not\subseteq S_{i+1}$  for each  $i \geq 1$ . (If  $(S_i : i \geq 1)$  is such a sequence, then all the sets  $S_i$  must be infinite: we will use this later.) We observe that the example given above for Theorem 1.2 is not well-founded. Our main result is:

**Theorem 2.1.** *Let  $\mathcal{F}$  be a set of subsets of a set  $W$ , such that  $\mathcal{F}$  has the chordal property and the Helly property, and such that  $\mathcal{F}$  is well-founded. Then there is a tree  $T$  with vertex set  $W$  such that each member of  $\mathcal{F}$  is the vertex set of a subtree of  $T$ .*

*Proof.* If  $W \notin \mathcal{F}$ , we could replace  $\mathcal{F}$  by  $\mathcal{F} \cup \{W\}$ , and the hypotheses would still hold; so we may assume that  $W \in \mathcal{F}$ . Let us say a *fleet* is a set  $\mathcal{F}$  of subsets of a set  $W$ , such that

- $\mathcal{F}$  has the chordal property and the Helly property;
- $\mathcal{F}$  is well-founded; and
- $W \in \mathcal{F}$ .

We call the members of a fleet  $\mathcal{F}$  the *ships* of  $\mathcal{F}$ . Note that every ship  $S$  is nonempty, by the Helly property applied to  $\{S\}$ . A ship of cardinality two is called an *edge-ship*. A fleet  $\mathcal{F}'$  is an *extension* of a fleet  $\mathcal{F}$  if  $\mathcal{F} \subseteq \mathcal{F}'$ , and  $\mathcal{F}' \setminus \mathcal{F}$  contains only edge-ships. In that case, if  $\mathcal{F}$  is well-founded then so is  $\mathcal{F}'$ . A fleet  $\mathcal{F}$  is *maximal* if no extension of  $\mathcal{F}$  is different from  $\mathcal{F}$ .

(1) *For every fleet  $\mathcal{F}$ , there is an extension of  $\mathcal{F}$  that is maximal.*

Let  $I$  be a set that is linearly ordered by some relation  $<$ , and for each  $i \in I$  let  $\mathcal{F}_i$  be a fleet, such that for all distinct  $i, j \in I$ , if  $i < j$  then  $\mathcal{F}_j$  is an extension of  $\mathcal{F}_i$ . Let  $\mathcal{F} = \bigcup_{i \in I} \mathcal{F}_i$ . We claim that  $\mathcal{F}$  is a fleet. For every finite set  $\mathcal{R}$  of ships of  $\mathcal{F}$  that pairwise intersect, there exists  $i \in I$  such that  $\mathcal{R} \subseteq \mathcal{F}_i$  (since  $\mathcal{R}$  is finite), and since  $\mathcal{F}_i$  is a fleet, there is a vertex that belongs to every member of  $\mathcal{R}$ ; and so  $\mathcal{F}$  has the Helly property. Similarly it has the chordal property, and trivially all its ships of size different from two belong to each  $\mathcal{F}_i$ . Since  $\mathcal{F}$  only differs from each  $\mathcal{F}_i$  by the addition of edge-ships, it is well-founded. This proves that  $\mathcal{F}$  is a fleet extending each  $\mathcal{F}_i$  ( $i \in I$ ). From Zorn's lemma, this proves (1).

Consequently, to prove the theorem it suffices to prove it for maximal fleets, so we may assume that  $\mathcal{F}$  is maximal. A nonempty subset  $X \subseteq W$  is *disconnected* if the set of edge-ships included in  $X$  is the edge set of a disconnected graph with vertex set  $X$ .

(2) *If  $W$  is not disconnected then the theorem holds.*

If  $W$  is not disconnected, there is a tree  $T$  with vertex set  $W$  such that all its edges are edge-ships of  $\mathcal{F}$ . Suppose that there is a ship  $S$  that is not the vertex set of a tree in  $T$ . Hence there are at least two components of  $T[S]$ ; choose a minimal path  $P$  of  $T$  that joins two vertices in different components of  $T[S]$ . Thus  $P$  has length at least two, since the ends of  $P$  are in different components of  $T[S]$ . Let  $P$  have vertices  $p_1, \dots, p_k$  in order; thus,  $k \geq 3$ , and  $p_1, p_k \in S$ , and  $p_2, \dots, p_{k-1} \notin S$ . If  $k = 3$  then the three ships  $\{p_1, p_2\}, \{p_2, p_3\}, S$  pairwise intersect and yet have no common vertex, contradicting that

$\mathcal{F}$  has the Helly property; and if  $k \geq 4$  then the intersection graph of the set of ships  $E(P) \cup \{S\}$  is a cycle of length at least four, contradicting the chordal property. Thus every ship  $S$  induces a tree in  $T$ , and so the theorem holds. This proves (2).

Let us say a nonempty subset of  $W$  expressible as an intersection of finitely many ships is a *meeting*. (Since  $\mathcal{F}$  is well-founded, every nonempty intersection of ships is an intersection of finitely many ships, but we do not need that.) If no meeting is disconnected, then the theorem holds by (2), since  $W$  is a meeting; so let us suppose that there is a disconnected meeting. Since  $\mathcal{F}$  is well-founded, there is no infinite sequence of meetings with nonempty intersection such that each is a proper subset of its predecessor. It follows that there is a disconnected meeting  $A$  such that no proper subset of  $A$  is a disconnected meeting. Let  $F$  be the graph with vertex set  $A$  and edge set all edge-ships included in  $A$ . Thus  $F$  is not connected; let the vertex sets of its components be  $F_d$  ( $d \in D$ ). Let  $\mathcal{R}$  be the set of all ships that do not include  $A$  as a subset.

(3) *There is no sequence of ships  $R_1, \dots, R_k \in \mathcal{R}$  such that for some distinct  $d, d' \in D$ ,  $R_1 \cap F_d \neq \emptyset$  and  $R_k \cap F_{d'} \neq \emptyset$ , and  $R_i \cap R_{i+1} \neq \emptyset$  for  $1 \leq i < k$ .*

Suppose there is such a sequence  $R_1, \dots, R_k$ , and choose one with  $k$  minimum. Choose finitely many ships  $S_1, \dots, S_\ell$  such that  $S_1 \cap \dots \cap S_\ell = A$ . If  $k = 1$ , then  $R_1 \cap A$  is a disconnected meeting, and is a proper subset of  $A$ , a contradiction. If  $k = 2$ , then from the Helly property, since every two of the ships  $S_1, \dots, S_\ell, R_1, R_2$  have nonempty intersection, they have a common member  $c$  say. So  $c \in A \cap R_1 \cap R_2$ , and so one of  $R_1, R_2$  meets two of the sets  $F_d$  ( $d \in D$ ), contrary to the minimality of  $k$ . Thus  $k \geq 3$ , and  $R_i \cap R_j = \emptyset$  for  $1 \leq i, j \leq k$  with  $j > i + 1$ ; and  $R_2, \dots, R_{k-1}$  are all disjoint from  $A$  (because otherwise we could reduce  $k$ ). If each of  $S_1, \dots, S_\ell$  has nonempty intersection with  $R_2$ , then  $S_1 \cap \dots \cap S_\ell \cap R_2$  is nonempty by the Helly property, contradicting that  $A \cap R_2 = \emptyset$ . So we assume that  $S_1 \cap R_2 = \emptyset$ . Since  $S_1 \cap R_k \supseteq A \cap R_k \neq \emptyset$ , we may choose  $j \in \{3, \dots, k\}$  minimum such that  $S_1 \cap R_j \neq \emptyset$ . Thus  $S_1$  has nonempty intersection with  $R_1, R_j$  and is disjoint from  $R_2, \dots, R_{j-1}$ . Since  $j \geq 3$ , the intersection graph of the set of ships  $\{R_1, \dots, R_j, S_1\}$  is a cycle of length at least four, contradicting that  $\mathcal{F}$  has the chordal property. This proves (3).

Choose distinct  $d, d' \in D$  and  $a \in F_d$  and  $b \in F_{d'}$ . Since  $\{a, b\}$  is not an edge-ship, the maximality of  $\mathcal{F}$  tells us that  $\mathcal{F} \cup \{\{a, b\}\}$  is not a fleet, and therefore violates either the chordal property or the Helly property.

Suppose that  $\mathcal{F} \cup \{\{a, b\}\}$  does not have the Helly property. Thus there are finitely many ships  $P_1, \dots, P_m$ , pairwise with nonempty intersection, and each containing one or both of  $a, b$ , such that neither of  $a, b$  belongs to all of  $P_1, \dots, P_m$ . We may assume that  $a \notin P_1$  and  $b \notin P_2$ , and so  $P_1, P_2 \in \mathcal{R}$ . Since  $P_1 \cap P_2 \neq \emptyset$ , this contradicts (3).

Thus  $\mathcal{F} \cup \{\{a, b\}\}$  does not have the chordal property; and so there are finitely many ships  $P_1, \dots, P_m$  such that the intersection graph of  $\{P_1, \dots, P_m, \{a, b\}\}$  is a cycle of length at least four. Consequently each of  $P_1, \dots, P_m$  contains at most one of  $a, b$ , and so

$P_1, \dots, P_m \in \mathcal{R}$ , contrary to (3). This contradiction shows that there is no disconnected meeting, and so the theorem holds by (2). This proves Theorem 2.1.  $\square$

There is a question that is not yet completely resolved: if  $G$  is a chordal graph, when is  $G$  the intersection graph of a set of subtrees of a tree?

- The countable graphs for which this is true were characterized by Diestel [3];
- Halin [7] showed that it is always true if  $G$  has no infinite clique; and
- Kríž and Thomas [10] showed it is true provided that for some finite  $k$ , every two distinct maximal cliques meet in at most  $k$  vertices.

We have a common strengthening of the last two of these:

**Proposition 2.2.** *Let  $G$  be a chordal graph, such that no countable clique can be ordered as  $\{v_i : i \geq 1\}$  in such a way that for each  $i \geq 1$ , there is a vertex adjacent to all of  $v_1, \dots, v_{i-1}$  and not to  $v_i$ . Then  $G$  is the intersection graph of a set of subtrees of a tree.*

*Proof.* Let  $W$  be the set of all maximal cliques of  $G$ , and for each  $v \in V(G)$ , let  $S_v$  be the set of all maximal cliques that contain  $v$ . From the hypothesis,  $\mathcal{F} = \{S_v : v \in V(G)\}$  satisfies the hypotheses of Theorem 2.1, and so there is a tree  $T$  with vertex set  $W$  such that each member  $S_v$  of  $\mathcal{F}$  is the vertex set of a subtree  $T_v$  of  $T$ . Then distinct  $u, v \in V(G)$  are adjacent if and only if  $S_u \cap S_v \neq \emptyset$ , that is, if and only if  $V(T_u) \cap V(T_v) \neq \emptyset$ . Thus,  $G$  is the intersection graph of this multiset of trees. However, the trees  $T_v$  ( $v \in V(G)$ ) need not all be distinct. To represent  $G$  as the intersection graph of a set of subtrees of a tree, for each  $v \in V(G)$  choose  $b_v \in V(T_v)$ , and take a new vertex  $a_v$ . Let  $T'$  be the tree obtained from  $T$  by adding  $a_v$  adjacent to  $b_v$  for each  $v \in V(G)$ ; and for each  $v \in V(G)$ , let  $T'_v$  be obtained from  $T_v$  by adding  $a_v$  and the edge  $a_v b_v$ . Then  $G$  is the intersection graph of the set  $\{T'_v : v \in V(G)\}$  of subtrees of  $T'$ . This proves Theorem 2.2.  $\square$

### 3 Interval ships

There is a natural variation on the question we just discussed for subtrees: given a set of subsets of a set  $W$ , when is there a linear ordering of  $W$  such that each of the sets is an interval under this ordering? When  $W$  is finite, this is closely related to a theorem of Lekkerkerker and Boland [9] (their characterization of interval graphs using “asteroidal triples”), and was answered by Tucker [16]. If  $\mathcal{F}$  is a set of subsets of a set  $W$ , we say  $X \subseteq W$  is  $\mathcal{F}$ -connected if for every partition  $(A, B)$  of  $X$  into two nonempty sets  $A, B$ , there exists  $S \in \mathcal{F}$  with  $S \subseteq X$  such that  $S \cap A, S \cap B \neq \emptyset$ . Tucker [16] proved:

**Theorem 3.1.** *Let  $\mathcal{F}$  be a set of subsets of a finite set  $W$ . Then there is a path  $P$  with vertex set  $W$  such that each member of  $\mathcal{F}$  is the vertex set of a subpath of  $P$ , if and only if there do not exist distinct  $v_1, v_2, v_3 \in W$ , and  $\mathcal{F}$ -connected subsets  $X_1, X_2, X_3$  of  $W$ , such that  $v_i \in X_j$  if and only if  $i \neq j$  for all  $i, j \in \{1, 2, 3\}$ .*

Tucker expressed his result in terms of “matrices with the consecutive ones property” and their associated bipartite graphs, but it is easy to derive one form from the other.

We would like to point out that this has an extension when  $W$  is infinite. In fact, unlike Theorem 2.1, the natural extension to infinite  $W$  needs no extra hypothesis (except we have to replace “path” by “linear ordering”). We will prove:

**Proposition 3.2.** *Let  $\mathcal{F}$  be a set of subsets of a set  $W$ . Then there is a linear ordering  $<$  of  $W$  such that each member of  $\mathcal{F}$  is an interval under this ordering, if and only if there do not exist distinct  $v_1, v_2, v_3 \in W$ , and subsets  $X_1, X_2, X_3$ , each connected in  $\mathcal{F}$ , such that  $v_i \in X_j$  if and only if  $i \neq j$  for all  $i, j \in \{1, 2, 3\}$ .*

*Proof.* The “only if” part is easy, and we prove “if”. If we have a linear ordering  $<$  of a set  $X$ , and  $a, b \in X$  are distinct, then the ordering of  $X$  induces an ordering of  $\{a, b\}$ , say  $a < b$ . In this case we say the pair  $(a, b)$  is *induced* by  $<$ . We will add more conditions on the linear ordering we hope for, of the form that certain ordered pairs are induced by  $<$ .

Let  $\mathcal{T}$  be a set of ordered pairs of  $W$ . If  $X \subseteq W$ , a linear ordering of  $X$  is  $(\mathcal{F}, \mathcal{T})$ -*acceptable* if

- for each  $S \in \mathcal{F}$ , if  $S \cap X \neq \emptyset$  then  $S \cap X$  is an interval under the ordering; and
- every pair  $(a, b)$  in  $\mathcal{T}$  with  $a, b \in X$  is induced by the ordering of  $X$ .

We say that a subset  $X$  of  $W$  is  $(\mathcal{F}, \mathcal{T})$ -*feasible* if there is a  $(\mathcal{F}, \mathcal{T})$ -acceptable linear ordering of  $X$ .

By Tucker’s theorem, we may assume that every finite subset of  $W$  is  $(\mathcal{F}, \emptyset)$ -feasible. By Zorn’s lemma we may choose the set  $\mathcal{T}$  maximal such that every finite subset of  $W$  is  $(\mathcal{F}, \mathcal{T})$ -feasible. We claim that:

(1) *Let  $a, b \in W$  be distinct. Then  $\mathcal{T}$  contains exactly one of  $(a, b), (b, a)$ .*

Since  $\{a, b\}$  is  $(\mathcal{F}, \mathcal{T})$ -feasible, at most one of  $(a, b), (b, a)$  is in  $\mathcal{T}$ ; suppose that neither are. By adding  $(a, b)$  to  $\mathcal{T}$ , forming  $\mathcal{T}_1$  say, the maximality of  $\mathcal{T}$  tells us that there is a finite subset  $X_1 \subseteq W$  that is not  $(\mathcal{F}, \mathcal{T}_1)$ -feasible; and so  $a, b \in X_1$ , and no  $(\mathcal{F}, \mathcal{T})$ -acceptable linear ordering of  $X_1$  induces  $(a, b)$ . Define  $X_2$  similarly, adding  $(b, a)$ . But  $X_1 \cup X_2$  is finite, and so is  $(\mathcal{F}, \mathcal{T})$ -feasible, a contradiction. This proves (1).

Say  $a < b$  if  $a, b \in W$  are distinct and  $(a, b) \in \mathcal{T}$ . Since every finite subset of  $W$  is  $(\mathcal{F}, \mathcal{T})$ -feasible, it follows that if  $a, b, c \in W$  then not all three of  $(a, b), (b, c), (c, a) \in \mathcal{T}$ ; and so, by (1),  $<$  is a linear ordering of  $W$ . We claim that every  $S \in \mathcal{F}$  is an interval under this ordering. Suppose that  $a, b, c \in W$  where  $a < b < c$  and  $a, c \in S$  and  $b \notin S$ ; then  $\{a, b, c\}$  is not  $(\mathcal{F}, \mathcal{T})$ -feasible, a contradiction. This proves Theorem 3.2.  $\square$

Halin [8] proved a related result, that if every finite subgraph of a graph  $G$  is an interval graph, then  $G$  is an interval graph; and this can be derived from Theorem 3.2 in the same way that Halin’s theorem of [7] was derived from Theorem 2.1 in Theorem 2.2.

There are many similar questions. For instance, given a set of subsets  $\mathcal{F}$  of a set  $W$ , when is there a tree  $T$  with vertex set  $W$  such that each member of  $\mathcal{F}$  is the vertex set of a path of  $T$ ? Even in the finite case, this is open as far as we know. Assuming the members of  $\mathcal{F}$  are all nonempty, there are three necessary conditions we see: the Helly property and the chordal property, as in Theorem 2.1, and in addition, for each  $S_0 \in \mathcal{F}$ , the set of all sets of the form  $S \cap S_0$  (for  $S \in \mathcal{F}$ ) must satisfy the condition of Theorem 3.1. We do not know whether these three are sufficient.

Another interesting question is, given a set of subsets  $\mathcal{F}$  of a set  $W$ , when is there a tree  $T$  with *edge set*  $W$  such that each member of  $\mathcal{F}$  is the edge set of a path of  $T$ ? In the finite case, this can be answered, as follows. For each  $S \in \mathcal{S}$ , take a new element  $v_S$ . Let  $V$  be the set of all the new elements  $v_S$  ( $S \in \mathcal{F}$ ), and let  $M$  be the binary matroid with element set  $W \cup V$ , in which  $W$  is a base and each set  $S \cup \{v_S\}$  is a fundamental circuit with respect to this base. The tree we want exists if and only if  $M$  is graphic; that is (by Tutte's famous theorem [17]) if and only if  $M$  has no minor isomorphic to the Fano matroid or its dual, and no minor isomorphic to the bond matroid of  $K_5$  or of  $K_{3,3}$ . These "minor" conditions can presumably be reformulated as explicit conditions on  $\mathcal{F}$ , though we have not worked out exactly what they say.

## 4 Path-width and line-width

There is an application of these results to a question about path-width. A *path-decomposition* of a finite graph  $G$  is a sequence  $(B_1, \dots, B_n)$  of subsets of  $V(G)$ , such that:

- for each vertex  $v$  of  $G$ , there exists  $i \in \{1, \dots, n\}$  with  $v \in B_i$ ;
- for each edge  $uv$  of  $G$ , there exists  $i \in \{1, \dots, n\}$  with  $u, v \in B_i$ ;
- for each vertex  $v$  of  $G$  and all  $i, i', i'' \in \{1, \dots, n\}$  with  $i \leq i' \leq i''$ , if  $v \in B_i \cap B_{i''}$  then  $v \in B_{i'}$ .

We call the sets  $B_i$  *bags*. Its *width* is the maximum of  $|B_i| - 1$  over  $i \in \{1, \dots, n\}$ , and the *path-width* of a finite graph is the minimum width of a path-decomposition.

What happens for infinite graphs? One could try to extend the definition of path-decomposition, using one- or two-way infinite sequences of bags instead of finite sequences, but it is not satisfactory. For instance, with path-width defined this way, graphs with uncountably many vertices and no edges do not have finite path-width, and the same holds for the disjoint union of countably many infinite paths, and the disjoint union of countably many infinite "stars" (trees with one vertex and countably many neighbours). So graphs in which every finite subgraph has path-width at most  $k$  may have no finite path-width. This contrasts with tree-width (we omit the definition): Thomas [14] proved that if every finite subgraph of  $G$  has tree-width at most  $k$  then  $G$  has tree-width at most  $k$ .

Here is a better way to do it. Say a *line* is a set with a linear order  $<$ , and a *line-decomposition* of  $G$  is a family  $(B_i : i \in L)$  where  $L$  is a line, and each  $B_i$  is a subset of  $V(G)$ , satisfying:

- for each vertex  $v$  of  $G$ , there exists  $i \in L$  with  $v \in B_i$ ;
- for each edge  $uv$  of  $G$ , there exists  $i \in L$  with  $u, v \in B_i$ ;
- for each vertex  $v$  of  $G$  and all  $i, i', i'' \in L$  with  $i \leq i' \leq i''$ , if  $v \in B_i \cap B_{i''}$  then  $v \in B_{i'}$ .

Define the *line-width* of  $G$  to be the maximum of  $|B_i| - 1$  over all  $i \in L$ , if this maximum exists. This definition was used in [12, 13], to increase the generality of some results about graphs with bounded path-width. It is also used in [2, 4], where what we call “line-decompositions” are called “linear decompositions”.

For finite graphs, path-width and line-width are the same, but for infinite graphs they might not be. We will prove an analogue of Thomas’ theorem for line-width, the following. (Alternatively, this result could be derived from Halin’s theorem about interval graphs [8], via a compactness argument.)

**Proposition 4.1.** *For every integer  $k \geq 0$ , if every finite subgraph of  $G$  has path-width at most  $k$  then  $G$  has line-width at most  $k$ .*

*Proof.* Let  $G$  have the property that every finite subgraph of  $G$  has path-width at most  $k$ , and choose  $G$  maximal (under adding edges) with this property: this is possibly by Zorn’s lemma. It follows that for all  $u, v$  that are distinct and nonadjacent, adding the edge  $uv$  would violate the property, so there is a finite subgraph  $G_{uv}$  containing both  $u, v$ , such that if we add the edge  $uv$  to  $G_{uv}$ , it no longer has path-width at most  $k$ . So in every path-decomposition  $(B_1, \dots, B_n)$  of  $G_{uv}$ , there is no  $i \in \{1, \dots, n\}$  with  $u, v \in B_i$ .

We claim that every finite subgraph  $G'$  of  $G$  admits a path-decomposition of width at most  $k$  such that every bag is a clique of  $G'$ . Let  $H$  be the union of  $G'$  and the subgraphs  $G_{uv}$  for all nonadjacent  $u, v \in V(G')$ . Then  $H$  is finite, and so admits a path-decomposition  $(B_1, \dots, B_n)$  of width at most  $k$ . For each nonadjacent pair  $u, v \in V(G')$ ,

$$(B_1 \cap V(G_{uv}), \dots, B_n \cap V(G_{uv}))$$

is a path-decomposition of  $G_{uv}$  of width at most  $k$ ; and so from the property of  $G_{uv}$ , none of  $B_1, \dots, B_n$  include both of  $u, v$ . Consequently

$$(B_1 \cap V(G'), \dots, B_n \cap V(G'))$$

is a path-decomposition of  $G'$  of width at most  $k$ , and each  $B_i \cap V(G')$  is a clique, as claimed.

Each clique of  $G$  has cardinality at most  $k + 1$ . Let  $W$  be the set of all maximal cliques of  $G$ , and for each  $v \in V(G)$ , let  $S_v$  be the set of cliques in  $W$  that contain  $v$ . It suffices to show there is a linear order of  $W$  such that  $S_v$  is an interval for each  $v \in V(G)$ ,

because this would give us a set of bags in a linear order, making a line-decomposition. By Theorem 3.2 applied to  $\{S_v : v \in V(G)\}$ , this is true if and only if for every finite subset  $U \subseteq W$  and every finite subset  $X \subseteq V(G)$ , there is a linear order of  $U$ , such that  $S_v \cap U$  is an interval of this order for each  $v \in X$ . But for each such  $U$  and  $X$ , there is a finite subgraph  $G'$  of  $G$  such that each clique in  $U$  is a clique of  $G'$ , and  $X \subseteq V(G')$ . Since  $G'$  is finite, it admits a path-decomposition  $(B_1, \dots, B_n)$  of width at most  $k$  such that each  $B_i$  is a clique of  $G'$ . Each member of  $U$  is a subset of some  $B_i$ , and therefore equals some  $B_i$  from its maximality; and so  $(B_1, \dots, B_n)$  induces a linear order of  $U$  with the desired property. This proves Theorem 4.1.  $\square$

One can approach Thomas' (unpublished) theorem [14] in a similar way. Say a graph is  $k$ -good if every finite subgraph has tree-width at most  $k$ . By considering an edge-maximal  $k$ -good supergraph, Thomassen [15] showed that every  $k$ -good graph is a subgraph of a  $k$ -good chordal graph; so to prove Thomas' theorem, it suffices to prove that chordal graphs with no cliques of size more than  $k + 1$  have tree-width at most  $k$ . This is theorem 2.1 of a paper by Thomas and Kříž [10]. Alternatively, it follows from Halin's theorem [7] or our theorem Theorem 2.2, which both imply that every such chordal graph is the intersection graph of some set of subtrees of a tree, and therefore admits a tree-decomposition in which each bag is a clique.

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