Stephen J. Gardiner; Tomas Sjödin

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Mathematica Bohemica, Vol. 145 (2020), No. 1, 71–73

Persistent URL: http://dml.cz/dmlcz/148065

ON A CONJECTURE OF KRÁL CONCERNING THE SUBHARMONIC EXTENSION OF CONTINUOUSLY DIFFERENTIABLE FUNCTIONS

Stephen J. Gardiner, Dublin, Tomas Sjödin, Linköping

Received August 24, 2018. Published online March 5, 2019.
Communicated by Dagmar Medková

Abstract. This note verifies a conjecture of Král, that a continuously differentiable function, which is subharmonic outside its critical set, is subharmonic everywhere.

Keywords: subharmonic function; extension theorem

MSC 2010: 31B05

1. Introduction

A classical result of Radó (see Theorem 12.14 of [9]) says that if f is continuous on an open set $\Omega \subset \mathbb{C}$ and holomorphic on $\{z \in \Omega : f(z) \neq 0\}$, then f is holomorphic on all of Ω. An analogue for harmonic functions due to Král (see [6]) says that if $u\colon \Omega \to \mathbb{R}$ is C^1 on an open set $\Omega \subset \mathbb{R}^N$, $N \geqslant 2$ and harmonic on $\{x \in \Omega\colon \nabla u(x) \neq 0\}$, then u is harmonic on all of Ω. (A short proof of this result was recently given in [8].) Král conjectured in [7] that his result could be strengthened by substituting "subharmonic" for "harmonic" throughout. However, the methods of [6] and [8] are not applicable to subharmonic functions. The purpose of this note is to verify this conjecture.

2. Main result

Theorem 1. *If u is C^1 on an open set $\Omega \subset \mathbb{R}^N$ and subharmonic on $\{x \in \Omega\colon \nabla u(x) \neq 0\}$, then u is subharmonic on all of Ω.*

DOI: 10.21136/MB.2019.0104-18

The idea of the proof below comes from the theory of viscosity solutions of partial differential equations, which is expounded in [2], [3]. In fact, Theorem 1 may readily be deduced from results in [5] concerning viscosity solutions of the p-Laplace equation (cf. [4] for a generalization of Král's original result to p-harmonic functions). However, we will instead give a self-contained argument, partially inspired by [5], that uses only some basic properties of subharmonic functions. A convenient background reference is [1].

P r o o f. Let $\varepsilon > 0$ and B be an open ball $\{x\colon \|x - x_1\| < r\}$ such that $\bar{B} \subset \Omega$. By taking the Poisson integral of u in B and adding the polynomial

$$x \mapsto \varepsilon\Big(1 + \frac{r^2 - \|x - x_1\|^2}{2N}\Big),$$

we obtain a function $h_\varepsilon \in C(\bar{B})$ satisfying

$$\begin{cases} \Delta h_\varepsilon = -\varepsilon & \text{in } B, \\ h_\varepsilon = u + \varepsilon & \text{on } \partial B. \end{cases}$$

It will be enough to show that $h_\varepsilon \geqslant u$ in B, since we can then let ε tend to 0 to arrive at the required spherical mean value inequality for u.

The set

$$O = \{(x, y) \in \bar{B} \times \bar{B}\colon\ h_\varepsilon(x) - u(y) > \tfrac{1}{2}\varepsilon\}$$

is relatively open in $\bar{B} \times \bar{B}$ and contains $\{(x, x)\colon\ x \in \partial B\}$. Thus, the quantity $\|x - y\|^4$ is bounded away from zero on $\partial(B \times B) \setminus O$, and we may choose $c > 0$ large enough so that $w > 0$ on $\partial(B \times B)$, where

$$w(x, y) = h_\varepsilon(x) - u(y) + c\|x - y\|^4, \quad x, y \in \bar{B}.$$

We suppose, for the sake of contradiction, that the minimum value of the continuous function w on $\bar{B} \times \bar{B}$ is attained at some point $(x_0, y_0) \in B \times B$.

Setting $y = y_0$ in the inequality

$$(1) \qquad h_\varepsilon(x) - u(y) + c\|x - y\|^4 \geqslant h_\varepsilon(x_0) - u(y_0) + c\|x_0 - y_0\|^4, \quad x, y \in \bar{B},$$

we see that $h_\varepsilon \geqslant \varphi$, where

$$\varphi(x) = h_\varepsilon(x_0) + c(\|x_0 - y_0\|^4 - \|x - y_0\|^4), \quad x \in \bar{B}.$$

Further, $h_\varepsilon - \varphi$ is smooth and attains its minimum value at x_0, so

$$\frac{\partial^2 (h_\varepsilon - \varphi)}{\partial x_i^2}(x_0) \geqslant 0, \quad i = 1, \ldots, N$$

and hence

$$\Delta\varphi(x_0) \leqslant \Delta h_\varepsilon(x_0) = -\varepsilon.$$

In particular, $x_0 \neq y_0$ since $\Delta\varphi(y_0) = 0$.

Similarly, setting $x = x_0$ in (1), we see that $u \leqslant \psi$, where

$$\psi(y) = u(y_0) + c(\|x_0 - y\|^4 - \|x_0 - y_0\|^4), \quad y \in \bar{B}.$$

Since $u - \psi$ is C^1 and attains its maximum value 0 at y_0, and also $x_0 \neq y_0$, we see that $\nabla u(y_0) = \nabla\psi(y_0) \neq 0$. By hypothesis, the formula

$$v(s) = w(x_0 + s, y_0 + s) = h_\varepsilon(x_0 + s) - u(y_0 + s) + c\|x_0 - y_0\|^4$$

defines a function which is superharmonic on some neighbourhood of 0 in $\mathbb{R}^N$. Since v attains a local minimum at 0, it must be constant near 0. However, this leads to the contradictory conclusion that $\Delta u = -\varepsilon < 0$ near y_0.

The theorem now follows, because

$$\min_{\bar{B}}(h_\varepsilon - u) = \min_{x\in\bar{B}} w(x,x) \geqslant \min_{\bar{B}\times\bar{B}} w = \min_{\partial(B\times B)} w \geqslant 0.$$

$\square$

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Authors' addresses: *Stephen J. Gardiner*, School of Mathematics and Statistics, University College Dublin, Science Centre-North Belfield, Dublin 4, Ireland, e-mail: `stephen.gardiner@ucd.ie`; *Tomas Sjödin*, Department of Mathematics, Campus Valla, House B, Room 3A:681, Linköping University, 581 83, Linköping, Sweden, e-mail: `tomas.sjodin@liu.se`.