Point-contact spectroscopy in neutron-irradiated Mg$^{11}$B$_2$

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We report on recent results of point-contact spectroscopy measurements in Mg$^{11}$B$_2$ polycrystals irradiated at different neutron fluences up to $\Phi = 1.4 \cdot 10^{20}$cm$^{-2}$. The point contacts were made by putting a small drop of Ag paint – acting as the counterelectrode – on the cleaved surface of the samples. The gap amplitudes were extracted from the experimental conductance curves, showing Andreev-reflection features, through a two-band Blonder-Tinkham-Klapwijk fit and reported as a function of the Andreev critical temperature of the junctions, $T^A_{c}$. The resulting $\Delta_c(T^A_{c})$ and $\Delta_x(T^A_{c})$ curves show a clear merging of the gaps when $T^A_{c} \simeq 9$ K that perfectly confirms the findings of specific-heat measurements in the same samples. Anomalous contacts with $T^A_{c} > T^A_{c}$ (being $T^A_{c}$ the bulk critical temperature) were often obtained, particularly in samples irradiated at very high fluences. Their fit gave a different dependence of $\Delta_x$ on $T^A_{c}$. The possible origin of these contacts is discussed in terms of local current-induced annealing and/or nanoscale inhomogeneities observed by STM in the most irradiated samples.

PACS numbers: 74.45.+c, 74.70.Ad, 74.62.Dh

I. INTRODUCTION

Most of the present fundamental research on the two-band superconductor MgB$_2$ is devoted to studying the effects of substitutions and disorder on its properties. This interest in exploring the “neighborhood” of the pure compound is justified in part by the quest of a recipe for improving some of its properties – especially in view of power or electronic applications – and in part by the need of understanding at the best this unique example of two-band phonon-mediated superconductor with a relatively high $T_c$. As a matter of fact, the presence of two systems of bands crossing the Fermi surface, each developing an energy gap below $T_c$, has a number of intriguing consequences that make the physics of MgB$_2$ unexpectedly rich and complex. One of these aspects is the role of scattering by impurities. Due to the different parity of the $\sigma$ and $\pi$ bands, scattering of quasiparticles between them is highly improbable in the pure compound, while almost independent scattering rates exist within the bands. Intraband scattering has no effect on the gaps or on $T_c$, but affects various properties of the material, e.g. the critical field and the magnetic-field dependence of the gaps. On this basis, the ratio of the diffusivities in the two bands has been experimentally evaluated in pure MgB$_2$.

According to an early prediction of the two-band model, the increase of interband scattering in a system like MgB$_2$ should make the two gaps approach each other and finally merge into a single BCS gap. However, observing this effect in a real material has turned out to be more difficult than expected. The few chemical substitutions that actually take place (e.g. C substitution for B, Al or Mn substitution for Mg) give rise to lattice or electronic effects that can mask the increase in disorder. For example, C and Al substitutions also cause remarkable changes in the DOS at the Fermi level, in the phonon frequencies, in the cell volume and so on, with an obvious complication in the interpretation of the data. In C-substituted single crystals the merging of the gaps has been recently observed, as arising from the interplay of the band filling due to electron doping and an increasing amount of interband scattering, probably due to extrinsic reasons.

The controlled damaging of the compound by means of irradiation allows partly overcoming these difficulties, even though the irradiated material is far from being an “ideal” disordered version of MgB$_2$. In particular, side effects of irradiation are the creation of Li atoms and He nuclei in the lattice (due to the thermal neutron capture by $^{10}$B nuclei), the reduction in the partial DOS of the $p_{x,y}$ states, the anisotropic expansion of the crystal lattice. The effect of neutron irradiation (up to very high fluences) on the energy gaps of MgB$_2$ has been recently studied by means of specific-heat measurements, showing the achievement of single-gap superconductivity in samples with $T_c$ as low as 11 K.

In this paper, we present and discuss the results of point-contact spectroscopy measurements (in the Andreev-reflection regime) in the same neutron-irradiated Mg$^{11}$B$_2$ samples studied in Ref. 12. We will show that the gap amplitudes measured by PCS agree very well with those given by specific-heat measurements and we will discuss the experimental trend of the gaps within the two-band Eliashberg theory.

Moreover, we will report on the anomalous features of a large number of contacts whose Andreev critical temperature $T^A_{c}$ is greater than the bulk $T_c$. These contacts feature very good Andreev-reflection conduc-
tance curves that were very well fitted by the two-band Blonder-Tinkham-Klapwijk (BTK) model to extract the gap amplitudes $\Delta_\sigma$ and $\Delta_\pi$. Once reported as a function of $T^A_c$, $\Delta_\pi$ has a completely different trend with respect to that reported in Ref. 12 and observed by PCS in “standard” contacts. We will discuss this odd result in terms of local nanoscale inhomogeneities of the material and/or local annealing due to the technique we used to tune the properties of our “soft” point-contact junctions.

II. EXPERIMENTAL DETAILS

The procedure for sample fabrication and irradiation is reported in detail elsewhere\cite{11,12}. The samples were prepared by direct synthesis from pure elements, using in particular isotopically-enriched $^{11}$B (99.95% purity) with a residual $^{10}$B concentration lower than 0.5% so as to make the penetration depth of thermal neutrons greater than the sample thickness\cite{12}. The samples we measured had been irradiated at the Paul Scherrer Institute (PSI) in Villigen, Switzerland. For simplicity and ease of comparison, let us label them as in Ref\cite{12} i.e. P0 (pristine MgB$_2$), P3 (fluence $\Phi = 7.6 \cdot 10^{17}$cm$^{-2}$), P3.7 ($\Phi = 5.5 \cdot 10^{18}$cm$^{-2}$), P4 ($\Phi = 1.0 \cdot 10^{19}$cm$^{-2}$) and P6 ($\Phi = 1.4 \cdot 10^{20}$cm$^{-2}$). Many of their structural and transport properties are reported in Refs. 11 and 12. The bulk critical temperatures, defined as $T_c = T_{90\%}$ of the superconducting transition measured by susceptibility, are: 38.8 K for P0, 35.6 K for P3, 25.8 K for P3.7, 20.7 K for P4, 8.7 K for P6. The width of the superconducting transition, defined as $\Delta T_c (10\% - 90\%)$, varies from 0.3 K (in P0 and P3) up to a maximum of 0.9 K (in sample P4)\cite{12}. The transition remains rather sharp also in the most irradiated sample, which indicates a highly homogeneous defect distribution even at the highest fluence. This homogeneity is also confirmed by the sharp X-ray diffraction peaks for the (002) and (110) reflections reported in Ref. 13, which also indicate an anisotropic expansion of the cell parameters, more pronounced along the c axis (up to 1%). The residual resistivity increases by two orders of magnitude (from 1.6 $\mu\Omega$cm for P0 to 130 $\mu\Omega$cm for P6) with a corresponding reduction in the residual resistivity ratio (RRR).

The point contacts were made by placing a small drop of silver paint on the freshly cleaved surface of the samples\cite{12}. The conductance curves, $dI/dV$ vs. $V$, were obtained by numerical differentiation of the measured $I - V$ curve. In all cases, we studied the temperature dependence of the curves, which show clear Andreev-reflection features, so as to determine the critical temperature of the junction (in the following referred to as the “Andreev critical temperature”, $T^A_c$). Strictly speaking, in fact, $T^A_c$ rather than the bulk $T_c$ is the critical temperature to be related to the local gap amplitudes measured in a given contact. In point-contact spectroscopy, $T^A_c$ can correspond to any temperature between the onset and the completion of the superconducting magnetic transition. Therefore, one usually has $T^A_c = T_c$ within the experimental broadening of the superconducting transition, i.e. $T_{90\%} \leq T^A_c \leq T_{100\%}$ (let us recall that here we defined $T_c \equiv T_{90\%}$). In irradiated samples, this actually occurs in a subset of contacts we will call “standard” contacts. The conductance curves were divided by the normal-state conductance and then fitted with a two-band BTK model in which the conductance through the junction is expressed by $G = (1 - \omega_\pi)G_\sigma + \omega_\pi G_\pi$, $G_\sigma$ and $G_\pi$ being the partial $\sigma$- and $\pi$-band conductances, and $\omega_\pi$ the weight of the $\pi$-band contribution\cite{11,15}. The model contains as adjustable parameters the gap amplitudes $\Delta_\sigma$ and $\Delta_\pi$, the barrier parameters $Z_\sigma$ and $Z_\pi$, the phenomenological broadening parameters $\Gamma_\sigma$ and $\Gamma_\pi$, plus the weight $w_\pi$. The broadening parameters enter in the definition of the density of states in the usual way, i.e.

$$N(E) = \Re \left( \frac{E - i\Gamma}{\sqrt{(E - i\Gamma)^2 - \Delta^2}} \right).$$

In this context, they account for both intrinsic (i.e. finite lifetime of quasiparticles) and extrinsic (related to the technique and the nature of the contacts) phenomena that smear out the conductance curves. $Z_{\sigma,\pi}$ are related to the potential barrier height at the interface and to the mismatch in the Fermi velocity $v_F$ between the two sides of the contact. Owing to the different values of $v_F$ in the $\sigma$ and $\pi$ bands, we allow $Z_\sigma \neq Z_\pi$. Finally, $w_\pi$ is predicted to range from 0.66 to 0.99 for perfectly directional tunneling in pure MgB$_2$, depending on the angle of current injection with respect to the $ab$ planes. In the absence of specific predictions in samples with reduced anisotropy, we kept $w_\pi$ in the same range as in Refs. 11,14.

We generally selected contacts with rather high values of the normal-state resistance $R_N$, corresponding to small values of the contact size a which has to be smaller than the electronic mean free path $\ell$ for energy-resolved spectroscopy to be possible. The limit condition $a \ll \ell$ defines the so-called ballistic regime of conduction\cite{14}. Based on Ref. 15, we also required the conductance curves of our point contacts not to present dips, which are the hallmark of a breakdown of the conditions for ballistic conduction at finite voltage and signal the presence of heating in the contact region. When the contact resistance was too small, or its conductance did not show clear Andreev-reflection features, we were able to change the contact characteristics (in a surprisingly repeatable way) by applying short voltage or current pulses to the junction itself. In some cases, we also used the magnetic field to clarify whether one or two gaps were present, as explained in detail elsewhere\cite{15} and in the following.

III. RESULTS IN STANDARD CONTACTS

Fig. 11 reports an example of the raw conductance curves measured as a function of the temperature in three
point contacts made on samples P3, P4 and P6. The low-temperature curves clearly show the typical Andreev-reflection features – in particular, the two symmetric maxima at ±V_{peak} approximately corresponding to the edges of the small gap. The large gap-features are usually less clear even in pure MgB\textsubscript{2} and in disordered samples they are difficult to see. The thick curve in each panel indicates the normal-state conductance and the relevant temperature is thus chosen as the T\textsubscript{c} of the contacts. Note that, in all cases, T\textsubscript{c} lies between the begin and the end of the magnetic superconducting transition.

In Fig. (a) and (b) the shape of the normal-state conductance curves and the absence of dips\textsuperscript{19} in the superconducting state indicate that no heating occurs in the junctions, which are thus in the ballistic regime (i.e., the contact size a is smaller than the mean free path ℓ) and energy-resolved spectroscopy is possible. Here and in the following ℓ is defined through the relation ℓ\textsuperscript{-1} = ℓ\textsubscript{e}\textsuperscript{-1} + ℓ\textsubscript{i}\textsuperscript{-1}, where ℓ\textsubscript{e} and ℓ\textsubscript{i} are the elastic and inelastic mean free paths, respectively (at sufficiently low temperature, ℓ ≃ ℓ\textsubscript{e}).

In Fig. (c) small dips at |V| > |V_{peak}| suggest that the contact might actually be in the diffusive regime (i.e. ℓ\textsubscript{e} < a < Λ, where Λ is the diffusion length\textsuperscript{17}), in which energy-resolved spectroscopy is still possible. In this regime, the resistance of a point contact between two normal metals – in the hypothesis that the Fermi velocity of the metals are almost equal and the resistivity of one metal (here Ag) is much smaller than the resistivity of the other (here sample P6) – can be expressed\textsuperscript{20,21}.

\begin{equation}
R_N = \frac{4\rho e}{3\pi a} + \Gamma(k) \frac{\rho}{4a}
\end{equation}

where the first term is the Sharvin resistance for ballistic conduction and the second one is the Maxwell resistance for the thermal regime multiplied by a function of the Knudsen ratio k = ℓ/a. This function, Γ, is always of the order of unity. ρ is the normal-state resistivity of the irradiated sample (that we will identify with the residual resistivity) and ℓ is the mean free path (evaluated in Ref\textsuperscript{13}). In the second term, the contribution of the first half of the contact (the Ag counter electrode) has been neglected\textsuperscript{22} due to the much smaller resistivity of Ag with respect to that of sample P6. At T < T\textsubscript{c} the irradiated MgB\textsubscript{2} is superconducting and, thus, the contribution of the second term in eq. (1) should disappear. Nevertheless, it is easy to show that even at very low bias voltages – of the order of the energy gap, here about 1 meV as we will discuss later – the current density in the contact is higher than the critical current density and thus tends to drive normal a small volume of the superconductor pushing back the NS boundary a short distance\textsuperscript{23}. If the size of this normal region is smaller than the coherence length the spectroscopy of the gap is still possible\textsuperscript{20}, but the second term in eq. (1) starts playing a role and a small, voltage-dependent and temperature-dependent heating appears in the contact. The small vertical shift in the conductance curves shown in Fig. (c) on increasing temperature confirms this picture indicating that the temperature-dependent resistivity of the material plays a role in the contact resistance. Heating of the contact region generally gives rise to an apparent decrease of the critical temperature of the contact T\textsubscript{c}\textsuperscript{A} with respect to the bulk T\textsubscript{c}. However, here the superconducting features disappear at some temperature between 8.0 and 8.5 K, which is only slightly smaller than T\textsubscript{c} = 8.7 K. Hence, we can conclude that a very moderate heating is likely to occur in the contact shown in Fig. (c) and it can be safely neglected as long as the voltage drop across the junction is of the order of V_{peak}. We will show in greater detail in a forthcoming section that the two conditions described above (normal-region size < ξ and very small heating) are compatible with the curves shown in Fig. (c) only if parallel diffusive nanocontacts are supposed to be present in the contact region.

Fig. 2 reports an example of experimental, normalized conductance curve (symbols) for each sample. Notice that the horizontal scale is the same for all the panels, so as to highlight the shrinking of the Andreev-reflection structures on increasing the neutron fluence – which indicates, in turn, a decrease in the amplitude of the gaps. While in the top curve (sample P0) the presence of peaks

FIG. 1: Temperature dependence of the raw conductance curves measured in three contacts on samples P3, P4 and P6, whose bulk critical temperature is indicated. Thicker lines indicate the normal-state conductance, which, in most of the contacts, is practically temperature-independent and is reached when T = T\textsubscript{c}\textsuperscript{A}. The temperature of each curve is also indicated in the legend.
and shoulders clearly witnesses the existence of two gaps, in the irradiated samples this evidence is lacking, due to a progressive broadening of the curves accompanied by a reduction in their height. The same happens in doped MgB$_2$. In all these cases, the existence of two gaps can be inferred from the fit of the curves with the BTK model or evidenced by the application of a magnetic field.$^{12}$

The BTK curves that best fit the experimental data are shown in Fig. 2 as solid lines. In sample P0 (pristine MgB$_2$), the fit can only be obtained with the two-band BTK model. In samples P3 and P3.7, the two-band fit works better than the single-band one, since it reproduces both the width of the Andreev-reflection structures and the position of the peaks, while the single-band fit (dashed lines) does not. The curve measured in sample P4 admits both a single-band and a two-band BTK fit, which are almost equally good – as a matter of fact, dashed and solid lines are almost superimposed in this case. In sample P6, the dips at $|V| > |V_{peak}|$ modify the shape of the curve so that asking the model to fit the curve in this region is nonsense. In these conditions, the parameters of the BTK model should be adjusted so as to fit the conductance maxima and the zero-bias dip between them. The single-band BTK model is sufficient to accomplish this task very well (see the line in the bottom panel of Fig. 4). If a two-gap fit is tried, the values of $\Delta_\pi$ and $\Delta_s$ turn out to be so close to each other to be practically identical. Hence, in this sample the existence of a single gap can be safely concluded, in agreement with the findings of Ref. $^{12}$.

The gap amplitudes extracted from the fit of the curves shown in Fig. 2 (and of other curves not reported here, measured in different contacts on the same samples) are plotted in Fig. 3 as a function of $T_c^\pi$ (black symbols). In the region around 18–19 K, the gap amplitudes resulting from the two-band fit of the conductance curves are shown, but it should be borne in mind that a single-gap fit is possible as well in this region, giving a gap value $\Delta \approx \Delta_\pi$. In the same figure, the gap amplitudes extracted from the fit of specific-heat measurements$^{12}$ are also shown (open symbols). The agreement between the two sets of data is good in the whole range of critical temperatures, especially if one takes into account that: i) PCS is a local, surface-sensitive technique while specific heat is a bulk property; ii) the gap values obtained by PCS are correctly plotted versus the Andreev critical temperature of the contacts, $T_c^\pi$, while those taken from Ref. $^{12}$ are reported as a function of the specific-heat $T_c$.

The trend shown in Fig. 3 clearly indicates a transition from two-band to single-band superconductivity at high neutron fluences. That the heavily-irradiated material undergoes deep changes above a certain neutron fluence ($\Phi \approx 10^{19}$ cm$^{-2}$) is confirmed by the steep decrease in $T_c$ and $B_{c2}$, by the increase in the cell parameters $a$ and $c$,$^{11,13}$ and by the observed decrease in the $\sigma$-band DOS.$^{10}$ Incidentally, it is interesting to note the initial, small
increase in $\Delta_\pi$, which is the hallmark of an increase in the scattering between bands.

We tried to reproduce the experimental trend of the gaps $\Delta_\pi$ and $\Delta_\sigma$ reported in Fig. 4 within the two-band Eliashberg theory. A complete fit of the $\Delta_\pi(T_c^A)$ and $\Delta_\sigma(T_c^A)$ curves is actually impossible since in a certain range of critical temperatures both gaps are smaller than the BCS value (see Fig. 3) until a BCS-like gap ratio is almost recovered at $T_c \simeq 9$ K, when $\Delta \simeq 1$ meV. An energy gap smaller than the BCS value has indeed been observed in disordered, conventional superconductors and the same might occur in a two-band system, but it is strictly forbidden within the Eliashberg theory and no explanation for these findings has been given yet. Once established this point, one can proceed with the fit.

The simplest approach is to consider the irradiated material as if it was only “disordered MgB$_2$”, thus neglecting the changes in the DOS, in the phonon frequencies and in the cell volume, and only increasing the interband scattering $\Gamma_{\pi\pi}$. Once the value of this single parameter is chosen to reproduce the critical temperature of a given sample, no further degrees of freedom are left to reproduce the gap amplitudes. The resulting curves are shown in Fig. 4(a) as dashed lines and the corresponding values of $\Gamma_{\pi\pi}$ are reported in Fig. 4(b). Notice that very high values of $\Gamma_{\pi\pi}$ would be necessary to suppress $T_c$ below $30$ K and make the gaps merge. Such an intense interband scattering is never observed in real systems and is probably not physical. In doped MgB$_2$, for example, the suppression of $T_c$ and $\Delta_\sigma$ is mainly due to other effects (typically a reduction in the DOS) and even if $\Gamma_{\pi\pi}$ moderately increases (usually remaining smaller than $10$ meV) its effects are partially masked, so that a tendency of $\Delta_\pi$ to remain constant or slightly increase is at most observed. The present case is not very different since, as previously pointed out, neutron irradiation has “side effects” such as sizeable changes in the $\sigma$ DOS and in the cell parameters that are not included in this description.

The opposite approach for the fit of the experimental gap values of Fig. 4(a) thus consists in disregard the effect of disorder (scattering) and only taking into account the change in the $\sigma$ DOS at the Fermi level, $N_\sigma(E_F)$. A reasonable fit of the experimental $\Delta_\pi(T_c^A)$ and $\Delta_\sigma(T_c^A)$ curves (with the general theoretical limitation that the gap ratios cannot be both smaller than the BCS one) is indeed obtained in this way, as indicated by the solid lines in Fig. 4(a). That using a single parameter one can reproduce in such a good way the values of the two gaps and the critical temperature is, by itself, a good result and indicates that $N_\sigma(E_F)$ is largely dominant in determining the observed gap trend. This conclusion is consistent with the findings of Ref. 10 where the depression of $T_c$ down to about $10$ K was justified by inserting in the McMillan formula the reduced DOS (about 25% of the value in pristine MgB$_2$) measured by NMR. Fig. 4(c) reports the $T_c^A$ dependence of the $\sigma$-band DOS necessary to fit our PCS data (solid line).

To account for the initial increase in $\Delta_\pi$ (also clearly shown by specific-heat measurement) a small amount of interband scattering must be inserted in the model. In particular, in our case $\Gamma_{\pi\pi}$ should be about $0.7$ meV when $T_c=35$ K and should saturate at a constant value (no more than $2$ meV) at low $T_c$. It is clear, however, that even including in the model all the possible effects of neutron irradiation, the agreement with the data can be hardly improved due to the aforementioned anomaly of the gap values that are both smaller than the BCS value in the $T_c^A$ range between $\simeq 9$ K and $\simeq 20$ K.

### IV. RESULTS IN ANOMALOUS CONTACTS

The percentage of “standard” contacts (as defined in the previous section) is equal to 100% in samples P0 and P3, but fast decreases in more irradiated samples. For example, it is about 70% in sample P3.7, 30% in sample P4 and becomes as small as 10% in sample P6. The remaining contacts are “anomalous” in the sense that their $T_c^A$ exceeds $T_c$, which is clearly related to some kind of intrinsic or induced inhomogeneity in the samples. Fig. 5 reports the conductance curves of one of such anomalous contacts on the most irradiated sample (P6, bulk $T_c = 8.7$ K). The normal-state resistance of the contact was $R_N = 71$ $\Omega$. The temperature dependence of its conductance curve, reported in Fig. 5(a), clearly shows that the Andreev-reflection features persist well above the bulk critical temperature and disappear at $T_c^A = 32.7$ K, which is more than three times the bulk $T_c$ measured by susceptibility. The thick line in Fig. 5(a) indicates the normal-state conductance curve. A fit of the low-temperature curve with the BTK model unambiguously shows the presence of two gaps whose values are
FIG. 5: (a) Temperature dependence of the raw conductance curves measured in a contact with $T_c^A=32.7$ K obtained on sample P6 (bulk $T_c=8.7$ K). The thick line is the normal-state conductance. (b) Magnetic-field dependence of the same conductance curve as in (a). Again, the thick line is the normal-state conductance. (c) Comparison of the conductance curves measured in a contact with $B=2$ T. The outward displacement of the conductance peaks is highlighted by vertical lines.

The shift of the conductance peaks is indicated by the two vertical lines. The values of the best-fitting parameters are the following: $\Delta_\sigma = 3.38$ meV, $\Gamma_\pi = 1.35$ meV, $Z_\pi = 0.74$, $\Delta_\sigma = 5.00$ meV, $\Gamma_\sigma = 1.20$ meV, $Z_\sigma = 0.9$ for the zero-field curve; $\Delta_\pi = 0.6$ meV, $\Gamma_\pi = 2.05$ meV, $Z_\pi = 0.74$, $\Delta_\sigma = 4.85$ meV, $\Gamma_\sigma = 2.75$ meV, $Z_\sigma = 0.9$ for the zero-field curve. The weight $w_\sigma$ was taken equal to 0.8, as usual in polycrystalline samples.

FIG. 6: Normalized conductance curves (symbols) of different anomalous point contacts on neutron-irradiated MgB$_2$ polycrystals at $T=4.2$ K. The curves are labeled with the Anderson critical temperature $T_c^A$ but the name of the samples and the relevant bulk $T_c$ are also indicated. Lines are the best-fit curves given by the two-band BTK model.

To further enlighten this point, we applied to the junction a magnetic field perpendicular to the direction of main current injection, and studied the behavior of the conductance curves on increasing the field intensity. In pure MgB$_2$, using a magnetic field allowed us to separate the partial contributions of the $\sigma$ and $\pi$ bands to the conductance across the junction. In doped MgB$_2$, the complete separation is not always possible but, if two gaps are present, an outward shift of the conductance maxima occurs when the smaller gap is strongly suppressed by the field. Fig. 6(b) reports the raw conductance curves of the same contact as in Fig. 6(a), measured in a magnetic field of increasing intensity. Again, the thick line corresponds to the normal-state conductance curve obtained here at $B = 6$ T (notice that it is identical to that of panel (a)). It is clearly seen that, at lower fields, the conductance peaks shift towards higher energies – a behavior that cannot be explained within a single-band model and arises from the stronger suppression of the $\pi$-band gap by the magnetic field. The curves measured with $B = 0$ and $B = 2$ T are reported, after normalization, in Fig. 6(c) together with the relevant two-band BTK fit. The shift of the conductance peaks is indicated by the two vertical lines. The agreement between experimental data and fitting curves is remarkably good. The gap amplitudes extracted from these fits (and from the fit of the curves in other anomalous contacts) are reported as a function of the local critical temperature $T_c^A$ in Fig. 6 (black symbols).
contacts, the trend of $\Delta_{\pi}$ is fairly different. In anomalous contacts, the small gap $\Delta_{\pi}$ tends to remain constant or slightly increases on decreasing $T_c^{A}$, which generally indicates a substantial increase in the interband scattering.\textsuperscript{8,9} Extrapolating the experimental curves to lower critical temperatures suggests that the two gaps might tend to a common value of about 3 meV and reach it at a critical temperature of about 18 K, as in C-doped MgB$_2$ single crystals.\textsuperscript{7} Finally, it is worthwhile to note that, in anomalous contacts, the BCS rule for the gap ratio is no longer violated.

The experimental trend of the gaps in anomalous contacts as a function of $T_c^{A}$ can be analyzed within the two-band Eliashberg theory, as we did for standard contacts. Again, the first and simplest possibility consists in keeping all the parameters fixed to their values in pristine MgB$_2$ and simply increasing the interband scattering rate $\Gamma_{\sigma\pi}$ to simulate the disorder due to irradiation. The theoretical curves are reported in Fig. 8(a) as dashed lines, and the corresponding values of $\Gamma_{\sigma\pi}$ are the same we already showed in Fig. 4(b). As in standard contacts, the experimental values of $\Delta_{\pi}$ are incompatible with this simple picture. As we did for standard contacts, the next step towards a theoretical reproduction of the experimental data is to allow variations in the $\sigma$-band density of states at the Fermi level, neglecting the increase in interband scattering. The best fit of the experimental gaps versus $T_c$ is obtained by decreasing almost linearly $N_{\sigma}(E_F)$ from 0.30 down to 0.23 states/(eV unit cell) while $T_c$ ranges from 38.8 K to 20 K. The resulting curves, reported as thin solid lines in panel (a), clearly do not follow the experimental values of $\Delta_{\pi}$. A much better result can be obtained by using both $N_{\sigma}(E_F)$ and $\Gamma_{\sigma\pi}$ as adjustable parameters to fit the experimental data. The best-fitting $\Delta_{\pi}(T_c^A)$ and $\Delta_{\sigma}(T_c^A)$ curves are reported in Fig. 8(a) (thick solid lines) while the values of the relevant parameters are reported as a function of $T_c^A$ in Fig. 8(b) and (c). The experimental gap values measured in anomalous contacts look to be quite well reproduced by taking into account the reduction in the $\sigma$-band DOS and the increase in interband scattering. The interesting point is that the data in anomalous contacts cannot be fitted without interband scattering – while the data in standard contacts can, as clearly shown in Fig. 4(b). This is a consequence of the different behaviour of the small gap in the two cases and suggests that standard and anomalous contacts occur in regions of the sample with different degrees of disorder.

V. POSSIBLE ORIGIN OF ANOMALOUS CONTACTS

Let us summarize here the properties of anomalous contacts that follow from the above.

1) Their critical temperature $T_c^{A}$ is much greater than the bulk $T_c$ (from 10 to 25 K more).

2) In these contacts $\Delta_{\pi}$ is very similar to that measured in standard contacts with the same $T_c^{A}$, while $\Delta_{\sigma}$ is a little greater indicating a possible enhancement of interband scattering.

3) The probability of finding anomalous contacts increases on increasing neutron irradiation.

Properties (1) and (2) might indicate that anomalous contacts are established in regions of the sample that are either less damaged or partially “reconstructed”, but in any case less disordered than the surrounding material. Point (3), however, rules out the former possibility so that anomalous contacts are most probably due
to reconstructed regions. It has been shown in a recent paper\textsuperscript{22} that heavily neutron-irradiated MgB\textsubscript{2} (with $T_c$ as small as 5 K) thermally annealed at sufficiently high temperatures (up to 500 °C) and long times (24 h) almost recovers all the characteristics (i.e. cell parameters, critical temperature, residual resistivity) of the pristine samples. In our case, there is no thermal treatment of the samples after irradiation, so one can wonder whether similar annealing effects can be due to the PCS measurements – i.e., because of the current locally injected in the sample through the point contacts – or from irradiation itself above a certain threshold dose.

Let us analyze first the hypothesis that local annealing occurs due to the PCS technique. To do so, let us focus for convenience on the contact made on sample P6 whose conductance curves are shown in Fig. 1. The normal-state resistance of this contact is $R_N = 40 \, \Omega$ and, as already said, the shape of the curves (i.e. the presence of small dips\textsuperscript{23} and the offset of the curves on increasing temperature) tells us that the contact must be in the diffusive regime\textsuperscript{27}. If only one contact was established between sample and counterelectrode, its radius $a$ – evaluated from the resistance $R_N$ by means of the Wexler formula (eq. 1) – would be $a \approx 90 \, \AA$, which has to be compared with the effective mean free path $\ell \approx 5 \, \AA$ and with the coherence length $\xi \approx 100 \, \AA$.\textsuperscript{12} None of the two conditions for spectroscopic analysis to be possible, i.e. $a \ll \ell$ (ballistic conduction) and $a \ll \xi$, would be fulfilled. In this situation, at bias voltages comparable to the energy gap, the carrier velocity would largely exceed the depairing value\textsuperscript{24} and superconductivity would be destroyed in a region close to the contact of radius three times larger than $\xi$, with consequent loss of the Andreev signal. Of course this contrasts with the evidence of spectroscopic information present in the curves of Fig. 1(c). Moreover, in these conditions the heating in the contact would be greater than experimentally observed. In fact, using the standard equation valid for a circular aperture\textsuperscript{25}

$$T_{\text{max}}^2 = T_{\text{bath}}^2 + \frac{V^2}{4L} \quad (2)$$

one obtains that, for a total voltage drop of the order of $V_{\text{peak}}$, the temperature of the contact would reach the bulk $T_c$ for $V = V_{\text{peak}}$ when $T_{\text{bath}} = 8.2 \, \text{K}$. Moreover, when the bias is of the order of magnitude of the gap, the current density $j$ in the contact region is overcritical (take into account that $j_c \approx 2 \cdot 10^7 \, \text{A/cm}^2$ in P6), but the distance $r_j$ in the superconductor over which $j$ decays to the critical value is of the order of 80 \AA $< \xi$ thus ensuring the spectroscopic properties of the contact.

It turns out from the above that the current injected during the measurement of the $I - V$ curve gives rise to little or no heating in the contact region, even in the worst contact we measured. However, it is worth recalling that, whenever necessary, we tuned the normal-state resistance by applying voltage pulses of some Volts for $\approx 20 \div 80$ ms, as experimentally determined. At these bias values, $r_j$ is certainly greater than $\xi$ so that a big normal region is formed (see Fig. 1) in which a very intense current flows for a few tens of milliseconds. The normal region and the contact itself are then quickly heated above the bath temperature ($T_{\text{bath}} = 4.2 \, \text{K}$). It can be shown that temperatures of several hundred Kelvin are easily reached in the contact. This is witnessed, for example, by the early observation of an anomaly at about 250 mV in the $d^2V/dI^2$ of Fe-Fe homocontacts, associated with the ferromagnetic transition of iron at the Curie temperature $T_C = 770 \, \text{K}\textsuperscript{29,28}$.

To evaluate the maximum temperature reached in our case, let $V$ be the total measured voltage drop between sample and counterelectrode and $V - V_0$ the voltage drop in the contact itself (let us refer again to the contact on sample P6 for convenience), so that $V_0$ is the potential difference across the (hemispherical) normal region of radius $r_j$ (see Fig. 1). If $j_0$ is the current density in the orifice, then at a distance $r$ from it one has

$$j(r) = j_0 \frac{a^2}{2r^2}. \quad (3)$$

The current flowing through the contact is $I = (V - V_0)/R_{\text{PC}}$. Here, $R_{\text{PC}}$ is the resistance of the point contact according to eq. 1 where, in the Maxwell term, $\rho(T)$ is
the resistivity of the sample in the normal state, at the temperature it will reach in the contact region because of the Joule effect. Let us call $\rho_{\text{ave}}$, the average of $\rho(T)$ in the temperature range to be determined (in sample P6 the RRR is so small that the value $\rho_{\text{ave}} \approx 160 \mu\Omega cm$ can be acceptable for a wide range of temperatures). Using these expressions one can calculate the voltage drop across the normal region that is given by

$$V_0 = \frac{K \cdot V}{1 + K}$$

where

$$K = \frac{\rho_{\text{ave}}}{2\pi R_{\text{PC}}} \left( \frac{1}{a} - \frac{1}{r_j} \right).$$

Using eq. 3 one also obtains

$$r_j = \sqrt{\frac{(V - V_0)}{2\pi R_{\text{PC}} J c}}.$$  

In our case (20 contacts, each with $a = 8.2 \text{ Å}$) and for $V = 1 \text{ V}$, the solution of Eqs. 2 and 3 gives $V_0 = 0.257 \text{ V}$ and $r_j = 2576 \text{ Å}$. The maximum temperature in the contact region (point A in fig. 9), evaluated from eq. 2 and from the voltage drop in the Maxwell part of the contact is $T_A \simeq 1300 \text{ K}$. The maximum temperature reached in the normal region of radius $r_j$ can be evaluated by asking that the thermal energy generated within the normal volume by heating effects equals the flux of heat current across the boundary. After suitably simplifying the complex geometry of the problem, we estimate the maximum temperature at the center of the normal region (point B in fig. 9) to be $T_B \simeq 640 \text{ K}$. An alternative approach to evaluate $T_B$ consists in using eq. 2 that, even if originally derived for a circular aperture, approximately holds in this case too. This approach gives the result $T_B \simeq 820 \text{ K}$. These estimated temperatures are higher than those used by Wilke et al., even if the duration of the heating process is by far shorter. According to our results, annealing processes are most probable in the contact region, i.e. close to the physical interface between the two materials.

The hypothesis of local annealing as the origin of anomalous contacts is thus very reasonable and well rooted in the physics of point contact spectroscopy. However, we examined as well the other possibility, i.e. pre-existent regions with higher $T_c$ than the surrounding material, originated by local reconstruction due to irradiation. Annealing effects due to the irradiation itself can indeed occur, if irradiation takes place at low temperature, because of the stimulated recombination of close Frenkel pairs. If, otherwise, irradiation is carried out at room temperature or above, competing phenomena such as creation and annihilation of point defects or formation and coagulation of defect clusters can partly compensate each other, giving rise to saturation in some physical parameters. Similar phenomena are suggested, in our case, by the tendency to saturation in $\rho_0$, $T_c$ and the $c$-axis parameter at very high neutron doses – being the other possible reason of saturation, i.e. the complete amorphization, ruled out by the sharpness of the X-ray peaks. Whatever the exact nature of the reconstruction process, locally-annealed regions should feature higher critical temperature than the remaining part of the sample, but since their presence is neither detected by susceptibility, nor by specific heat and resistivity measurements, they should represent a negligible part of the sample volume and should be imagined as isolated regions of small size. Moreover, if the macroscopic correlation between $\rho_0$ and $T_c$ observed in irradiated and annealed samples is to be conserved also on a local scale, these regions are expected to feature higher conductivity and greater density of states than the surrounding matrix.

With these ideas in mind, we performed room-temperature SEM and STM analysis of the most irradiated sample, where the probability of finding anomalous contacts was the highest. FESEM morphological images of sample P6 showed large, well connected grains with smooth surfaces. Microprobe analysis (EDX with SiLi detector sensitive to light elements, B included) showed no trace of chemical species other than Mg and B. Owing to the relatively large size of the grains, we were able to perform scanning tunneling microscopy at room temperature on the surface of a single grain. The topographical image reported in Fig. 10(a) shows rather smooth modulations on a length scale $\simeq 10 \text{ nm}$ in the $xy$ plane and small brighter “dots” that look like protrusions. However, morphological SEM images on the surface of grains on a similar scale ($100 \text{ nm} \times 100 \text{ nm}$) show no trace of such spots. The reason is that STM is sensitive not only to morphology, but also to the local density of states; regions with higher DOS appear brighter in the STM map because they give rise to a higher conductance across the tunnel junction. The topographical signal can be removed by operating in STS mode, i.e. keeping the tip-to-sample distance constant. The resulting map of the current measured across the junction at a constant bias of 0.1 V is shown, in inverted gray scale, in Fig. 10(b). The darker spots (corresponding to higher currents) clearly correspond to the bright spots of Fig. 10(a), while the smooth modulation is no longer observed. For further confirmation, Fig. 10(c) reports the $I$-$V$ characteristics measured in two points (indicated by small squares in panels (a) and (b)) together with the average of the $I$-$V$ curves measured in the whole region. It is clear that the “dots” observed in the STM maps represent very small regions (typically $\varnothing \simeq 1 \text{ nm}$) with higher conductivity with respect to the surrounding material, that is exactly what one would expect for locally annealed regions with higher critical temperature than the bulk.

The problem now arises of understanding if these dots can be superconducting above the critical temperature of the matrix in spite of their very small size (if compared to the bulk coherence length $\xi \simeq 10 \text{ nm}$). A large number of experimental and theoretical papers have been devoted to the so-called “size effect” in isolated superconducting nanoparticles but very little is known about
FIG. 10: (a) Scanning tunnel microscopy (STM) map of the surface of a single grain in sample P6, measured at room temperature. The map was taken with a fixed current equal to 2.0 nA. (b) Map of the current across the N-I-N junction (tip/air gap/sample) measured at constant tip-to-sample distance and constant voltage equal to 0.1 V. (c) I-V characteristics of the N-I-N tunnel junction in points 1 and 2 of the topographical image (a). The average I-V characteristic is also shown for comparison.

the case in which these particles are embedded in a conductive matrix. To the best of our knowledge, only one experimental investigation was reported showing a reduction in the critical temperature of lead nanoparticles embedded in a metallic matrix on decreasing the particle size\(^{33}\). The reduction in \(T_c\) becomes effective below 20 nm (to be compared with the bulk \(\xi \approx 90\) nm) but is much smoother than for Pb isolated particles\(^{33}\), so that even for very small size (\(\approx 5\) nm) \(T_c\) is only reduced by 30\% with respect to the bulk value. On this basis, we can argue that regions of 3-5 nm in size with a partially reconstructed lattice (which would be superconducting even if isolated, according to Anderson’s criterion\(^{34}\)) could well be superconducting even above the critical temperature of the matrix and possibly give rise to proximity effect on the surrounding normal material. Similar regions, made up of clusters of nanoscopic “dots”, are indeed observed by STM in some part of the grain surface. Their density is much lower than that of the bright dots in Fig. 10(a) and this raises the problem of explaining the very high probability of anomalous contacts. Again, the answer can be given by the technique we used to tune the contact characteristics. Owing to their higher conductivity with respect to the surrounding matrix, these regions could in fact be privileged for the formation of new conduction channels when a voltage pulse is applied. The resulting new contact would then be dominated by the conductivity (and the critical temperature) of these regions.

Both the proposed mechanisms of formation of anomalous contacts require the application of a voltage pulse, either to provoke the local annealing in the contact region or to select the preexistent regions with higher conductivity (and possibly higher local \(T_c\)). Looking for indirect support to our hypotheses, we checked all the contacts we studied during several months and we realized that indeed only “modified” contacts show anomalous characteristics and the few standard contacts we were able to obtain in highly irradiated samples (among which the one shown in Fig. 1(c)), were actually “as-made”. This evidence further supports our picture and indicate that one of the mechanisms described above could really explain the origin of the anomalous contacts.

The local annealing induced by our PCS technique appears to be the best understood and most likely process giving rise to anomalous contacts. It easily accounts for all the experimental facts, i.e.: i) the occurrence of anomalous contacts only after voltage pulses; ii) the increasing-with-fluence probability to find such contacts (related to the greater concentration of defects that can annihilate on annealing); iii) the different behaviour of \(\Delta\alpha\) with respect to standard contacts (due to the persistence of additional disorder in the annealed regions, which is consistent with the partial recovery of the pristine properties under annealing\(^{25}\)).

The second picture, in which anomalous contacts are established on pre-existent regions partially reconstructed by irradiation requires making some hypotheses: i) the regions with higher DOS observed by STM are less disordered than the surrounding matrix; ii) regions of 3-5 nm in size can develop superconductivity even above the bulk \(T_c\); iii) the density of these regions is so small that the probability for them to occur in ”as-made” contacts is vanishingly small; iv) these regions are privileged for the formation of new conduction channels when a voltage pulse is applied. Some of these points deserve further investigation, also for a better understanding of the nature of defects in irradiated MgB\(_2\).

Nevertheless, at this stage of investigation, it seems very unlikely that the nanoscale inhomogeneities do not play any role in the formation of the anomalous con-
contacts; on the other hand, the mechanism of local current-induced annealing appears very convincing. The most reasonable picture is that these two effects coexist and interact. On one hand, local heating in the contact region might help the migration of defects and their clustering together with the partial re-arrangement of nuclei in the lattice disordered by irradiation. On the other hand, more conductive regions might really be preferred in the lattice disordered by irradiation. On the other hand, the voltage pulse is applied, and thus become the centers from which the annealing process starts.

VI. CONCLUSIONS

In conclusion, we have presented the results of point-contact measurements in polycrystalline samples of neutron-irradiated MgB$_2$. By using the soft point-contact technique developed for MgB$_2$ and related compounds, we measured the dependence of the gaps on the local critical temperature of the contacts, $T_c$. The resulting trend is in very good agreement with the results of specific-heat measurements, especially in the most irradiated samples, and perfectly confirms the first observation of gap merging in undoped MgB$_2$. This is particularly noticeable since the two techniques are completely different and probe the surface and the bulk of the samples, respectively. An analysis of the experimental gap trend within the Eliashberg theory shows that a major role is probably played by the decrease in the density of $p_{xy}$ states, even if an increase in interband scattering can be present as theoretically expected. A fit of the gaps is however not possible in the whole range of critical temperatures because in a certain intermediate region both the gaps are smaller than the BCS value.

A striking experimental result was the occurrence of anomalous contacts with $T'_c$ higher than the bulk $T_c$, in a percentage increasing with fluence and approaching 100% in the most irradiated sample. The conductance curves of these contacts are perfectly fitted by the two-band BTK model, and their temperature and magnetic-field dependencies are perfectly standard. However, the trend of the small gap $\Delta_s$ extracted from their fit differs from that obtained in standard contacts and can be interpreted within the Eliashberg theory as being due to a more effective interband scattering. Annealing effects, either due to our particular PCS technique or to irradiation itself, have been proposed to explain this anomaly. The two pictures have been carefully investigated, both theoretically and experimentally. The first one – in which local annealing arises from the voltage pulses we used to tune the contact resistance – appears to be the most likely, but the observation by STM of nanoscale regions with higher DOS than the surrounding matrix could support the second as well. Actually, a cooperative interaction of the two phenomena looks very probable at this stage of investigation.

We are indebted to Ruggero Vaglio for suggestions about the interpretation of anomalous contacts and to Pratap Ray chaudhuri for enlightening discussion about heating in the contact region. Special thanks to Marina Putti for fruitful collaboration and help. This work was done within the PRIN Project No. 2004022024 and the INTAS Project No. 01-0617. V.A.S. acknowledges support by Russian Foundation for Basic Research (Proj. No. 06-02-16490).

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