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Scratching as a Fracture Process: From Butter to Steel

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We present results of a hybrid experimental and theoretical investigation of the fracture scaling in scratch tests and show that scratching is a fracture dominated process. Validated for paraffin wax, cement paste, Jurassic limestone and steel, we derive a model that provides a quantitative means to relate quantities measured in scratch tests to fracture properties of materials at multiple scales. The scalability of scratching for different probes and depths opens new venues towards miniaturization of our technique, to extract fracture properties of materials at even smaller length scales.

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Scooping cold butter with a knife [Fig. 1(a)] is a familiar experience. As the knife advances along an initially flat surface, it plows and cuts as small chips emanate in the process, leaving behind a well-defined groove. We regard the scooping of butter as a scratch test, which is probably one of the oldest techniques in the characterization of mechanical material properties. For instance, in 1824, Mohs’ hardness scale was introduced as an empirical way to quantify the scratch resistance of minerals [1]. Despite the apparent simplicity of this procedure, a fundamental understanding of the underlying mechanism remains aloof. The challenge lies in the difficulty to predictively rationalize the mechanisms that drive the scratch resistance vis-à-vis the chipping of material [Fig. 1(b)], with the shape and size dependence on the mechanical properties of the material, scratch depth and geometry of the scratch device. Nonetheless, the scratch test remains popular today in many applications involving material characterization, including adhesion properties of coatings [2], damage and wear of metals and polymers [3], strength of rocks [4], and skin biomechanics [5].

Here, we focus on scratching as a fracture process and approach this problem through a combination of well-controlled experiments, scaling analysis, and theory. First, we perform precision tests on paraffin wax, which we regard as a model material. Dimensional analysis enables us to identify the mechanical ingredients involved. We then develop a theoretical framework based on an energetic approach to rationalize the process. Our predictive model is turned into an inverse application to determine the fracture toughness for a wide range of materials, namely, the strength by uniaxial tension tests on finite plates with a centered hole, $\sigma_0 = 2.03 \pm 0.25$ MPa, and the fracture toughness by 3-point bending tests on notched specimen, $K_c = 0.146 \pm 0.01$ MPa $\sqrt{m}$. A paraffin block (dimensions $3.4 \times 5.7 \times 22$ cm) was clamped at its lateral sides, set on a linear stage and moved at constant velocity against a vertical steel cutter blade at depth $d$ (measured from the block’s top surface). This blade of rectangular cross section ($6.35$ mm thick and $w$ wide) was held by a rigid frame that ensured a constant depth and a zero back- rake angle during the test. The values of $w$ and $d$ were

\[
\begin{align*}
\text{width} & \quad \text{area} \\
2.5 \text{mm} & \quad 12.5 \text{mm} \\
5 \text{mm} & \quad 25 \text{mm} \\
10 \text{mm} & \quad 50 \text{mm} \\
15 \text{mm} & \quad 75 \text{mm} \\
20 \text{mm} & \quad 100 \text{mm}
\end{align*}
\]

FIG. 1 (color online). (a) Scooping of butter with a knife. (b) Chips formation during the scratch test on paraffin wax. (c1) Schematic diagram of the scratch tests. (c2) Contour surface used in the $J$ integral. (d) Tangential force, $F_T$, versus projected area of the blade $wd$. A total number of 55 tests was carried out on paraffin wax with six different scratch widths, $2.5 \leq w \leq 25$ mm, that were operated at five different depths, $2.5 \leq d \leq 12.5$ mm.
varied such that their aspect ratio was in the range \(0.2 \leq w/d \leq 10\). For each test, the horizontal and vertical forces generated, \(F_T\) and \(F_V\), respectively, were recorded using load cells. In Fig. 1(d) we plot the dependence of the average of \(F_T\) as a function of the blade’s projected contact area \(wd\). For low values, \(F_T\) scales linearly with \(wd\) which is significant of a strength process, in which the stress is limited by a threshold value that is the strength of the material, which is proportional to the slope of the curve \(F_T(\cdot wd)\). However, for higher values of \(wd\), deviations from this linear scaling are attributable to the fracture nature of the problem.

We start by rationalizing the problem through a dimensional analysis of the quantities involved. Neglecting rate and thermal effects, we find that,

\[
\frac{F_T}{K_c wd} = \prod \left(\frac{\nu}{(K_c/\sigma_0)^2}, \frac{E}{\sigma_0}, \frac{w}{d}\right),
\]

where \(K_c\) is the fracture toughness, \(\sigma_0\) the material strength and \(E\) the Young’s modulus. The quantity \((K_c/\sigma_0)^2\) has dimensions of length, and is characteristic (within a multiplying factor) of the size of the fracture process zone (FPZ) \([6]\). In Fig. 2 we reanalyze the original data [Fig. 1(b)], after making use of Eq. (1) to scale the results, and present the dependence of the normalized scratch force, \(F_T/(K_c wd)\) versus \(wd\). Remarkably, the results for all different scratch widths and depths collapse onto a characteristic curve which converges for, \(wd > 2\), to a horizontal asymptote of approximately \(\sqrt{2}\). In this domain, the width-to-FPZ ratio is \(w/r_p \gg 1\), where the characteristic FPZ size is determined to be \(r_p = (\pi/8)(K_c/\sigma_0)^2 = 2.0\, \text{mm}\), which indicates the validity of applying linear elastic fracture mechanics (LEFM) to our problem. Stress concentration at the blade edges for low \(wd\) may entail plastic dissipation, which is why the experimental values converge to \(\sqrt{2}\) for large width-to-depth ratios reminiscent of a fracture process.

We proceed by developing a quantitative theoretical framework that explains this fracture behavior. The aim is to thereby be able to determine the fracture toughness \(K_c\) from the measured tangential force, \(F_T\), the scratch width, \(w\), and scratch depth, \(d\).

Consider a linear elastic fracture process, in the simplified geometry illustrated in Fig. 1(c1). The spontaneous change in potential energy of the system, \(E_{\text{pot}}\), is due to the creation of a new fracture surface \(\Gamma = p\ell\), where \(p\) is the perimeter edge of the cutter blade, defining the crack tip geometry, and \(\ell\) is the crack length. The energy release rate, \(G\), is the thermodynamic driving force of crack propagation, and can be found from the relation,

\[
\frac{dE_{\text{pot}}}{dt} = \frac{\partial E_{\text{pot}}}{\partial \Gamma} = -G\ p\ell. \tag{2}
\]

For planar crack growth, and within the framework of LEFM, the energy release rate can be estimated using a contour integral procedure, known as the \(J\) integral \([7,8]\). The fundamental idea of this method is to estimate the change in potential energy during a fracture process from the perspective of an observer attached to a propagating crack tip. Under displacement control, this observer witnesses two sources in the change of potential energy: one due to the change in free energy density, \(\psi\), in a material volume, \(V\), enclosing the crack tip; the other due to the energy release that is convectively transported at a speed \(V \cdot n = -\hat{\psi} n_x\) past the (fixed) observer:

\[
\frac{dE_{\text{pot}}}{dt} = \int_V \frac{\partial \psi}{\partial t} dV - \int_{\partial A} \psi \hat{n}_x \, dA, \tag{3}
\]

where \(A\) is the closed boundary of \(V\), \(n\) the outward unit normal to \(A\), and \(n_x = n \cdot e_x\). Developing the volume integral into a surface integral \([9]\) for a linear elastic material, for which \(\psi = \frac{1}{2} \sigma_{ij} u_{ij}\) (\(\sigma_{ij}\) is the stress tensor and \(u_{ij}\) is the displacement gradient), and then comparing Eqs. (2) and (3), yields the energy release rate,

\[
G = \frac{1}{\ell} \int_A \left(\psi n_x - t_i \frac{\partial u_i}{\partial x}\right) dA, \tag{4}
\]

where \(t_i = \sigma_{ij} n_i\) are surface tractions. Compared to the classical form of the \(J\) integral \([8]\), in which the fracture perimeter coincides with the fracture width, \(dA = pd\ell\), we choose to consider a difference between these lengths, in order to later extend the technique to other scratch geometries. We hypothesize the existence of crack planes surrounding the blade and choose a closed volume that includes \([\text{Fig. 1(c2)}]\) (i) the blade-material interface, the stress-free surface at the top \((n_x = 0; t_i = 0)\), (ii) the (stress-free) fracture surfaces in prolongation of the scratch probe surface \((n_x = 0; t_i = 0)\), and (iii) closing material surfaces far removed from the surfaces \((\psi = 0; u_{ix} = 0)\). Physically, the energy release so defined is associated with the energy stored, prior to chipping, into a material domain in front of the scratch blade.
For the case of a rectangular blade \( (n_x = -1) \) of width \( w \), the generated fracture surface is \( \Gamma = (w + 2d)t \). Noting that \( t_i = \sigma_{yi}n_y = -\sigma_{xy}x_y, \sigma_{xx} = -F_T/(wd); \psi = \frac{1}{2}\sigma_{xx} \psi_{xx} = \kappa \sigma_{xx}^2/(2E); u_{xx} = \kappa \sigma_{xx}/E \) (where \( \kappa = 1 \) for unconfined and \( \kappa = 1 - \nu^2 \) for confined stress state applications) and \( dS = wdz \), we readily obtain, \( G = \kappa F_T^2/(2Ew^2d(1 + 2d/w)) \). As the scratch probe advances, fracture surfaces are generated along the probe’s bottom and lateral surfaces. In the process, a fracture energy \( G_c \) is released, which can be related to the fracture toughness as \( G_c = \kappa K_c^2/E \), [10]. Expressed in terms of the dimensionless expression of Eq. (1), the fracture propagation criterion therefore reads as,

\[
\frac{F_T}{K_c \sqrt{w/d}} = \sqrt{2} \left( 1 + 2 \frac{d}{w} \right)^{1/2}. \tag{5}
\]

For large enough \( w/d \) ratios, Eq. (5) quantitatively confirms the fracture scaling of Eq. (1) and accurately describes the asymptotic value of \( \sqrt{2} \) in the experimental results plotted in Fig. 2, for the scratch tests with paraffin. This opens the path for using the fracture criterion of Eq. (5) in an inverse application to determine the fracture toughness, \( K_c \), for large values of \( w/d \).

We now explore the generality of our scratch fracture model, by predicting the fracture toughness in different experimental assays for two additional blade geometries, at different length scales: (i) an inclined rectangular cutter blade and (ii) a conical scratch device.

In the first case, an inclined blade (back-rake angle \( \theta \) and out-of-plane width \( w \)) is held at a depth \( d \) by a vertical force \( F_V \) [Fig. 3(a)]. In contrast to the previous straight blade, \( F_V \) is applied through the inclined surface and needs to be considered in the calculation. The classical \( J \) integral \( (w = p) \) evaluated in this configuration [11] yields \( J = \kappa F_{eq}^2/(2Ew^2d) \) and \( F_{eq} = (F_T^2 + \frac{1}{2} F_V^2)^{1/2} \). Noting that the projected perimeter of the fracture surface is now \( p = w + 2d \), and correcting for \( w/p \), i.e. \( G = (w/p)J \), we obtain a fracture criterion analogous to Eq. (5),

\[
\frac{F_{eq}}{K_c \sqrt{w/d}} = \sqrt{2} \left( 1 + 2 \frac{d}{w} \right)^{1/2}, \tag{6}
\]

where the tangential force is replaced by a force, \( F_{eq} \), that accounts for both \( F_T \) and \( F_V \) and drives the fracture process over the inclined blade-material interface.

In Fig. 3 we apply this new fracture criterion to the experimental test of two materials—a cement paste and a Jurassic limestone—using the inclined blade geometry (15° back-rake angle). In Figs. 3(a) and 3(c) we plot \( F_{eq} \) vs \( w\sqrt{2d} \), over a scratch path of 3.5 cm. Two observations deserve particular attention. First, the straight-line fits confirm the linearity between \( F_{eq} \) and \( w\sqrt{2d} \) for each scratch width series. Moreover, the slope, which is representative for large values of \( w/d \) of the fracture toughness, decreases with the increase of the scratch width. In the linear fit of the data, we admit an offset value [Fig. 3(c), inset], which can be attributed to the highly localized plastic deformation at the contact of the indenter with the material. In Figs. 3(b) and 3(d) we explore the same results, in terms of \( F_{eq}/(w\sqrt{2d}) \) vs \( w/d \). As in the previous case for paraffin, \( F_{eq}/(w\sqrt{2d}) \) converges with \( w/d \) to a constant value that is representative of the fracture toughness. The mean value for cement paste toughness of \( K_c = 0.66 \pm 0.05 \text{ MPa} \sqrt{\text{m}} \) obtained from averaging \( F_{eq}/(w\sqrt{2d}) \) values for \( w/d > 10 \) is indeed in excellent agreement with reported fracture toughness values obtained by notched three-point bending tests for large specimen, \( K_c = 0.67 \text{ MPa} \sqrt{\text{m}} \) [12], or by means of extrapolation techniques that avoid interference with specimen size, \( K_c = 0.65 \text{ MPa} \sqrt{\text{m}} \) [13]. We have also successfully employed this technique for other geomaterials, including sandstone and cemented siltstone.

Finally, we consider a conical scratch device [schematic diagram in Fig. 4(a)], which is routinely used in micro- and nanoscratch applications [14]. In these tests, the protocol typically consists of linearly increasing the vertical force, \( F_V \), along the scratch path [solid line in Fig. 4(b)], resulting in an increase of both the scratch depth and groove size. In parallel, the tangential force, \( F_T \) is measured [dashed line in Fig. 4(b)]. A representative top view of the resulting scratch path is presented in Fig. 4(c).
To obtain a probe of half-apex angle $\theta = 60^\circ$ ends in a hemispherical tip with mean radius $R = 200 \ \mu m$, which transitions from the sphere to the cone at $d/R = 0.132$ [see schematic in Fig. 4(a)]. In Fig. 4(d) we present the scaling of $F_T/d^{3/2}$ vs the scratch path, $X$, for a microscratch test on steel. In these experiments, $F_T$ is linearly imposed from zero to 100 N [Fig. 4(b)] resulting in a variable depth up to 47 $\mu m$ and a residual groove along a 5 mm scratch path [Fig. 4(c)]. The most important feature that emerges from the data shown in Fig. 4(d) is that $F_T/d^{3/2}$ converges towards a straight line in the region of the conical probe, where acoustic emissions [15] provide strong evidence that a fracture process is indeed at play. Through Eq. (7), we determine the fracture toughness of the material at microscales, $K_c = 40 \pm 0.2 \text{ MPa } \sqrt{m}$, a value that is consistent with typical macrotoughness values for steel, $K_c = 50 \text{ MPa } \sqrt{m}$ [16].

In summary, we have uncovered that scratching is a fracture dominated process. The model we have proposed and validated through well-controlled experiments provides a readily applicable methodology to determine fracture toughness of materials. The scalability of our approach opens new venues towards further miniaturization of this technique, to extract fracture properties of materials at even smaller length scales.

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