Anomalous electron-phonon coupling probed on the surface of ZrB$_{12}$ superconductor.

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PACS numbers: 74.70.Ad, 74.62.Fj, 74.25.Ha, 83.80.Fg

Magnetization measurements under hydrostatic pressure up to 10.5 kbar in zirconium dodecaboride ZrB$_{12}$ superconductor ($T_c \approx 6.0 \text{ K at } p = 0$) were carried out. A negative pressure effect on $T_c$ with $dT_c/dp = -0.0225(3) \text{ K/kbar}$ was observed. The electron-phonon coupling constant $\lambda_{el-ph}$ decreases with increasing pressure with $d\ln \lambda_{el-ph}/dp \simeq -0.20\%$/kbar. The magnetic field penetration depth $\lambda$ was studied in the Meissner state and, therefore, probes only the surface of the sample. The absolute values of $\lambda$ and the superconducting energy gap at ambient pressure and zero temperature were found to be $\lambda(0) = 140(30) \text{ nm}$ and $\Delta_0 = 1.251(9) \text{ meV}$, respectively. $\Delta_0$ scales linearly with $T_c$ as $2\Delta_0/k_B T_c = 4.79(1)$. The studies of the pressure effect on $\lambda$ reveal that $\lambda^{-2}$ increases with pressure with $d\ln \lambda^{-2}(0)/dp = 0.60(23) \%$/kbar. This effect cannot be explained within the framework of conventional adiabatic electron-phonon pairing, suggesting that close to the surface, an unconventional non-adiabatic character of the electron-phonon coupling takes place.

The traditional concept of superconductivity is strictly associated with the electron-phonon interaction. The conventional theory is based on the Migdal-Eliashberg adiabatic approximation [1] that, in fact, leads to the prediction of many peculiar features which are a direct evidence of a phonon mediated superconductivity. The adiabatic approximation is valid if the parameter $\omega_0/E_f$ is small ($\omega_0$ is the relevant phonon frequency and $E_f$ is the Fermi energy). Usually this parameter is regarded as a measure of nonadiabaticity. However, crossover from a conventional adiabatic to an unconventional nonadiabatic regime does not depend only on the value of the $\omega_0/E_f$ ratio. Paci et al. [8] show that even in a case of small “adiabatic” ratio one would expect the nonadiabatic coupling in superconductors having high value of the electron-phonon coupling constant $\lambda_{el-ph}$. Among BCS superconductors the zirconium dodecaboride (ZrB$_{12}$) is probably a candidate for the observation of such type of anomalous coupling. It stems from the rather small value of the Fermi energy $\sim 1 \text{ eV}$ [5], that, together with the Debye temperature $\sim 20 \text{ meV}$ [4], leads to a ratio $\omega_0/E_f \sim 0.02$. A strong coupling ratio $2\Delta/k_BT_c \approx 4.8$ was observed by surface sensitive techniques [3, 4]. This suggests that the electron-phonon coupling constant, which has a bulk value $\lambda_{el-ph} \simeq 0.67$ [8], increases at the surface. From the comparison with strong coupled metallic superconductors [2] one would expect $\lambda_{el-ph}^{surf} \simeq 1.7 - 1.9$. Moreover, it was pointed out by Cappelluti et al. [2] that nonadiabatic character can be further enhanced by low charge carrier density, that is the case for ZrB$_{12}$ [4, 8].

One of the key feature of nonadiabatic superconductivity is the observation of unconventional isotope and pressure effects on the magnetic field penetration depth $\lambda$. Note, that in adiabatic superconductors (or in the superconductors where the nonadiabatic effects are small) the pressure effect (PE) [4, 10] as well as the isotope effect (IE) [11] on $\lambda$ was found to be almost negligible in comparison with substantial PE [12] and IE [12] on $\lambda$ observed in highly nonadiabatic high-$T_c$ cuprates. In this paper we report on PE on $T_c$ and $\lambda$ studies in ZrB$_{12}$ superconductor. The magnetic penetration depth measured in the Meissner state is largely determined by the surface characteristics. The absolute value of $\lambda$ at zero temperature and zero pressure was found to be $\lambda(0) = 140(30) \text{ nm}$. The transition temperature $T_c$ and the electron-phonon coupling constant decrease with pressure with the pressure effect coefficients $dT_c/dp = -0.0225(3) \text{ K/kbar}$ and $d\ln \lambda_{el-ph}/dp \simeq -0.2\%$/kbar, respectively. In contrast to $T_c$, $\lambda^{-2}(0)$ was found to increase with $d\lambda^{-2}(0)/dp = 0.29(11) \text{ mm}^{-2}$/kbar. Only a small part of this effect can be explained by a pressure induced renormalization of the electron-phonon interaction and the band structure changes. The major part is probably a consequence of nonadiabatic coupling of the charge carriers to the crystal lattice appearing in ZrB$_{12}$ close to the surface.

Details on the sample preparation for ZrB$_{12}$ can be found elsewhere [14]. The single crystal has been grounded in mortar and then sieved via 10 $\mu$m sieve in order to obtain small grains needed for determination of $\lambda$ from magnetization measurements. The grain size dis-
turbation was determined by analyzing scanning electron microscope (SEM) photographs. The hydrostatic pressure was generated in a copper–beryllium piston cylinder clamp especially designed for magnetization measurements under pressure \cite{15}. The sample was mixed with Flhorent FC77 (pressure transmitting medium) with a sample-to-liquid volume ratio of approximately 1/6. The pressure dependence of $T_c$ was taken from a separate set of magnetization experiments where a small piece of indium [$T_c(p=0) = 3.4$ K] with known $T_c(p)$ dependence was added to the sample and both $T_c$‘s of indium and ZrB$_{12}$ were recorded. The field–cooled (FC) magnetization measurements were performed with a SQUID magnetometer in a field of 0 mT at temperatures between 1.75 K and 10 K. The absence of weak links between grains was confirmed by the linear magnetic field dependence of the FC magnetization, measured at 0.25 mT, 0.5 mT, and 1.0 mT for the highest and the lowest pressures at $T = 1.75$ K.

Figure 1 shows the pressure dependence of the transition temperature $T_c$ of ZrB$_{12}$ obtained from magnetization measurements. $T_c$ was taken from the linearly extrapolated $M(T)$ curves in the vicinity of $T_c$ with $M = 0$ line (see inset in Fig. 1). The linear fit yields strong coupled BCS superconductor can be described by the following equation \cite{16}:

$$\frac{d \ln T_c}{d \ln V} = -B \frac{d \ln T_c}{d p} = (2A - 1) \gamma + A \frac{d \ln \eta}{d V},$$

where $A = 1.04 \lambda_{el-ph} [1 + 0.38 \mu^*] [\lambda_{el-ph} - \mu^*(1 + 0.62 \lambda_{el-ph})]^{-2}$ is a function of the electron-phonon coupling constant $\lambda_{el-ph}$ and the Coulomb pseudopotential $\mu^*$. $B$ denotes the bulk modulus, $\gamma = -d \ln (\omega)/d \ln V$ is the Gr"uneisen parameter, $\omega$ is an average phonon frequency, $\eta \equiv N(E_f)/\langle f^2 \rangle$ is the Hopfeld parameter \cite{17}. $N(E_f)$ is the density of states at the Fermi level, and $\langle f^2 \rangle$ is the average squared electronic matrix element. The Hopfeld parameter $\eta$ generally increases under pressure with $d \ln \eta/d \ln V \approx -1$ for s-, and p-metal superconductors \cite{18} and $-3$ to $-4$ for transition-metal (d-electron) superconductors \cite{15}. Assuming that $d \ln \eta/d \ln V \approx -1$, $B = 2490$ kbar in analogy with UB$_{12}$ \cite{19}, $\mu^* = 0.1$ (that is the typical value for conventional phonon-mediated superconductors (see e.g. Ref. \cite{7}), and taking $\lambda_{el-ph} \approx 0.67$ \cite{3}, for the Gr"uneisen parameter we get the value $\gamma \approx 2.83$. This value is in reasonable agreement with $\gamma \approx 3.3$ obtained at a temperature slightly above $T_c$ by Lortz et al. \cite{4} based on thermal expansion measurements.

PE on the electron-phonon coupling constant $\lambda_{el-ph}$ can be determined by using the well-known McMillan equation \cite{21}:

$$\lambda_{el-ph} \propto \frac{N(E_f)\langle f^2 \rangle}{\langle \omega^2 \rangle},$$

which leads to

$$\frac{d \ln \lambda_{el-ph}}{d p} = - \frac{1}{B} \frac{d \ln \eta}{d \ln V} - \frac{2\gamma}{B}. \tag{3}$$

Substitution of $\gamma = 2.83$ and $d \ln \eta/d \ln V = -1$ gives $d \ln \lambda_{el-ph}/d p = -0.19\%/\text{kbar}$. A slightly larger value $d \ln \lambda_{el-ph}/d p = -0.22\%/\text{kbar}$ is obtained with $\gamma = 3.3$ from the Ref. \cite{4}.

As a next step we studied the pressure effect on the magnetic field penetration depth $\lambda$. The temperature dependence of $\lambda$ was calculated from the measured FC magnetization by using the Shoenberg formula \cite{21}, modified for the known grain size distribution $N(R)$ \cite{22}:

$$\chi = \frac{3}{2} \int_0^\infty \left( 1 - \frac{3\lambda}{R} \coth \frac{R}{\lambda} + \frac{3\lambda^2}{R^2} \right) g(R) dR,$$

where $\chi = M/HV$ is the volume susceptibility, $V$ is the volume of the sample, $R$ is the grain radius and $g(R)$ is the analytical function describing the $N(R)R^3$ dependence (see inset in Fig. 2). The resulting temperature dependence $\lambda^{-2}(T)$ at ambient pressure is shown in Fig. 2.
dependence of the energy gap, and \( \Delta T \) where \( T \) is the temperature value of the superconducting gap. \( \tilde{\Delta}(T) \) is the normalized gap taken from Ref. \[25\]. The best line represent the analytical function used in Eq. \(4\).

The reconstructed data were fitted with the empirical power-law \( \lambda^{-2}(T)/\lambda^{-2}(0) = 1 - (T/T_c)^n \) \[23\]. The fit yields \( \lambda^{-2}(0) = 48.4(2) \mu m^{-2} \), \( T_c = 6.078(5) \) K, and \( n = 3.65(4) \). Note, that the value of the power exponent \( n \) is close to \( ^4 \) which corresponds to a strong–coupled BCS superconductor \[24\].

In order to obtain the value of the superconducting gap \( \Delta \), the data have also been analyzed by means of the BCS model. For clean superconductor the temperature dependence of \( \lambda^{-2} \) can be described in the following way \[24\]:

\[
\frac{\lambda^{-2}(T)}{\lambda^{-2}(0)} = 1 + 2 \int_{\Delta(T)}^{\infty} \frac{\partial F}{\partial E} \frac{E}{\sqrt{E^2 - \Delta(T)^2}} dE ,
\]

where \( F = (1 + \exp(E/k_BT))^{-1} \) is the Fermi function, \( \Delta(T) = \Delta_0 \cdot \Delta(T/T_c) \) represents the temperature dependence of the energy gap, and \( \Delta_0 \) is the zero temperature value of the superconducting gap. \( \Delta(T/T_c) \) is the normalized gap taken from Ref. \[23\]. The best fit to the data using Eq. \(5\) gives \( T_c = 6.09(2) \) K, \( \lambda^{-2}(0) = 47.4(2) \) nm, and \( \Delta_0 = 1.251(9) \) meV. The ratio \( 2\Delta_0/k_BT_c = 4.77(4) \) is found, suggesting that ZrB\(_{12}\) is a strong coupled BCS superconductor. Note, that a rather close value \( 2\Delta_0/k_BT_c \approx 4.8 \) has been obtained in point-contact spectroscopy \[3\] and tunnelling \[6\] experiments. From the other hand a smaller value \( \approx 3.7 \) has been reported by Lortz et al. \[4\] using the heat-capacitance technique, thus suggesting a weak coupling strength. This difference has been already pointed out by Tsindlekht et al. \[2\]. It was explained by enhanced surface characteristics of the ZrB\(_{12}\) leading to rather different superconducting properties of bulk \[4,6,26\] and surface \[3,4,27,28\]. Our measurements were performed in the Meissner state, with the field penetrating on a distance \( \lambda \) from the surface and, therefore, give a value of the superconducting gap consistent with those one reported in the surface sensitive experiments \[3,4\]. To estimate the uncertainty in the \textit{absolute} value of \( \lambda(0) \) we used a procedure similar to that one described in Refs. \[4,12\].

The temperature dependence of \( \lambda(T) \) was calculated for \( N(R) + \sqrt{N(R)} \) and \( N(R) - \sqrt{N(R)} \) distributions. The fit of the resulting \( \lambda(T) \) curves with the power law as well as with the BCS model gives \( \lambda(0) \) in the range from 110 to 170 nm.

Fig. 3 (a) shows the pressure dependence of \( \lambda^{-2}(0) \) obtained by fitting the reconstructed \( \lambda(T) \) data at different pressures with the BCS model [Eq. \(5\)]. In these experiments we studied relative effects measured on the same sample in the same pressure cell. The main systematic error of these measurements comes from misalignments of the experimental setup occurring when the cell is removed from the SQUID magnetometer, to change the pressure, and put back again. This procedure was checked with a set of measurements at constant pressure. The systematic scattering of the magnetization data is about 0.3\%, giving a relative error in \( \lambda^{-2}(T) \) of about 3\%. The reducing of the grain size with pressure was taken into account in \( \lambda(T) \) calculation [Eq. \(5\)], by using the bulk modulus reported above. The linear fit yields \( \lambda^{-2}(0) = 48.4(7) + 0.29(11) p \) implying that \( \lambda^{-2} \) increases under pressure with pressure \( \frac{d \ln \lambda^{-2}(0)}{dp} = 0.60(23) \% / \text{kbar} \) [see Fig. 3 (a)].

To analyze the observed effect we used a procedure similar to that one described by Di Castro et al. \[10\]. There, it was suggested that \( \lambda^{-2} \) increases under pressure because of two reasons: (i) band structure effects and (ii) renormalization of the electron-phonon coupling \[10\]. Under the assumption of ellipsoidal or cylindrical Fermi surface the first one can be obtained as \[10\]:

\[
\frac{d \ln \lambda^{-2}(0)}{dp} = \frac{1}{3B} \frac{d \ln N(E_f)}{dp} \simeq \frac{1}{3B} - \frac{1}{B} \frac{d \ln \eta}{d \ln V} ,
\]

where we used the fact that the pressure dependence of the electronic matrix element \( (f^2) \) entering the Hopfeld parameter \( \eta \) can usually be neglected \[29\]. Hence, by setting \( d \ln \eta / d \ln V \approx -1 \), and \( B = 2490 \) kbar (see above) we obtain \( d \ln \lambda^{-2}(0)/dp = 0.05 \% / \text{kbar} \).

The electron-phonon renormalized penetration depth
The charge carriers to the lattice in ZrB

are expected assuming conventional (adiabatic) coupling of

phonons. This implies that in addition to band structure ef-

fects and renormalization of the electron-phonon cou-

pling there are other effects responsible for the increas-

ing with pressure, with the pressure effect coefficient

being 10.08%/kbar [3]. This coefficient is much larger than that one estimated theoretically within

the adiabatic approximation. This can be explained by considering that in ZrB 12, close to the surface, the cou-

pling of the charge carriers to the lattice has a nonadia-

batic character. The ratio 2\Delta_0/k_BT_c is pressure independent within experimental errors, with mean value 4.79(1).

In conclusion, we performed magnetization measure-

ments in ZrB 12 under hydrostatic pressure. A negative pressure effect on T_c, with dT_c/dp = −0.0225(3) K/kbar is observed. The electron-phonon coupling constant λ_{el−ph} decreases with pressure with d\ln λ_{el−ph}/dp ≃ −0.20%/kbar. The magnetic field penetration depth λ measured in the Meissner state is largely determined by the surface characteristics. λ was found to increase with pressure, with the pressure effect coefficient d\ln T_c/dp = 0.60(23)/kbar. This coefficient is much larger than that one estimated theoretically within the adiabatic approximation.

The authors are grateful to S. Str¨ asse for help during manuscript preparation. This work was supported by the Swiss National Science Foundation and by the NCCR program Materials with Novel Electronic Properties (MaNEP) sponsored by the Swiss National Science Foundation.

\[ \lambda^{-2}(0) = \lambda^{-2}(0)/(1 + \lambda_{el−ph}) \]

where λ(0) is the bare quantity we have considered before. We have then:

\[ \frac{d\ln \lambda^{-2}(0)}{dp} = -\frac{\lambda_{el−ph}}{1 + \lambda_{el−ph}} \frac{d\ln \lambda_{el−ph}}{dp}. \]

By substituting λ_{el−ph} ≃ 0.67 [2] and d\ln λ_{el−ph}/dp ≃ −0.2%/kbar obtained above we get d\ln \lambda^{-2}(0)/dp ≃ 0.08%/kbar [2]. Thus the total pressure shift of \lambda^{-2}(0) expected assuming conventional (adiabatic) coupling of the charge carriers to the lattice in ZrB 12 is of the order of 0.13%/kbar. This value is more than three times smaller than the experimentally observed one 0.60(22)%/kbar. This implies that in addition to band structure effects and renormalization of the electron-phonon coupling there are other effects responsible for the increasing of \lambda^{-2}(0) under pressure. Bearing in mind that λ measurements have been performed in a Meissner state, the observed dependence of λ on p can be explained assuming that in ZrB 12 close to the surface the coupling of the charge carriers to the lattice has a nonadiabatic character. Note that similar effect have been observed in YBa_2Cu_4O_8 that appears to be a highly nonadiabatic superconductor [12].

The results on the zero temperature superconducting gap \Delta_0 are summarized in Fig. 3 (b), where the ratio 2\Delta_0/k_BT_c is plotted as a function of the pressure p. \Delta_0 and T_c were obtained from the fit of \lambda^{-2}(T,p) data by using Eq. 6. The solid line represents a fit by the relation 2\Delta_0/k_BT_c = const to the data. Bearing in mind that T_c scales linearly with pressure (see Fig. 3) the constant ratio can be understood in the frame of the BCS theory, which predicts 2\Delta_0/k_BT_c = 3.52. In the present study this ratio was found to be pressure independent within experimental errors, with mean value 4.79(1).

In conclusion, we performed magnetization measurements in ZrB 12 under hydrostatic pressure. A negative pressure effect on T_c, with dT_c/dp = −0.0225(3) K/kbar is observed. The electron-phonon coupling constant λ_{el−ph} decreases with pressure with d\ln λ_{el−ph}/dp ≃ −0.20%/kbar. The magnetic field penetration depth λ measured in the Meissner state is largely determined by the surface characteristics. λ was found to increase with pressure, with the pressure effect coefficient d\ln T_c/dp = 0.60(23)/kbar. This coefficient is much larger than that one estimated theoretically within the adiabatic approximation. This can be explained by considering that in ZrB 12, close to the surface, the coupling of the charge carriers to the lattice has a nonadiabatic character. The ratio 2\Delta_0/k_BT_c is 4.79(1) is found to be pressure independent and close to the strong coupling BCS value 4.8(1) reported in Refs. 3, 10. The value of λ extrapolated to zero temperature and at p = 0 was estimated to be 140(30) nm.

The authors are grateful to S. Strasser for help during manuscript preparation. This work was supported by the Swiss National Science Foundation and by the NCCR program Materials with Novel Electronic Properties (MaNEP) sponsored by the Swiss National Science Foundation.

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