Anomalous suppression of the superfluid density in the Cu$_3$Bi$_2$Se$_3$ superconductor upon progressive Cu intercalation

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(Dated: May 2, 2014)

Cu$_3$Bi$_2$Se$_3$ was recently found to be likely the first example of a time-reversal-invariant topological superconductor accompanied by helical Majorana fermions on the surface. Here we present evidence for unconventional superconductivity. 

A topological superconductor (TSC) is a superconducting analog of topological insulators (TIs) and is characterized by a nontrivial topological structure of the Hilbert space, which is specified by nontrivial $Z$ or $Z_2$ indices. Its hallmark signature is the appearance of surface Majorana fermions, which are their own antiparticles and are of fundamental intellectual interest. Recently, it was theoretically predicted and experimentally confirmed that a superconducting doped TI material Cu$_3$Bi$_2$Se$_3$ is likely the first concrete example of a time-reversal-invariant TSC. Its parent TI material Bi$_2$Se$_3$ consists of basic crystallographic units of Se–Bi–Se–Bi–Se quintuple layers, which are weakly bonded by the van der Waals force. Upon intercalation of Cu into the van der Waals gap, superconductivity appears below the critical temperature $T_c$ of up to $\sim 3.8$ K. This is high for its low charge carrier concentration of only $\sim 10^{20}$ cm$^{-3}$. As a “superconducting topological insulator”, this material has attracted a great deal of interest.

Unfortunately, Cu$_x$Bi$_2$Se$_3$ has a materials problem in that samples with a large superconducting volume fraction are difficult to obtain with the usual melt-growth methods, which has hindered detailed studies of the superconducting properties of this material. However, this problem has been ameliorated recently by the development of an electrochemical synthesis technique which allowed the synthesis of superconducting samples with shielding fraction exceeding 50%. Such an improvement made it possible to perform point-contact spectroscopy on a cleaved surface of Cu$_x$Bi$_2$Se$_3$ to find a signature of the Andreev bound state in the form of a pronounced zero-bias conductance peak, which gives evidence for unconventional superconductivity. Knowing that the symmetry of this material allows only four types of superconducting gap functions and that all possible unconventional states are topological, it was possible to conclude that Cu$_3$Bi$_2$Se$_3$ is most likely a TSC.

Although the point-contact spectroscopy elucidated the possible TSC nature of Cu$_3$Bi$_2$Se$_3$, the electron mean free path $\ell$ in the superconducting samples of this material is comparable to the coherence length $\xi_0$, according to the common belief, the odd-parity pairing should be strongly suppressed by impurity scattering in such a situation. In this context, a recent theory by Michaeli and Fu addressed this issue and showed that odd-parity superconductivity in strongly spin-orbit coupled semiconductors such as Cu$_3$Bi$_2$Se$_3$ are much more robust against the pair-breaking effect induced by impurity scattering than in more ordinary odd-parity superconductors. Therefore, thanks to the role of spin-orbit coupling, $T_c$ of Cu$_3$Bi$_2$Se$_3$ is expected to be rather insensitive to nonmagnetic impurities, which is similar to conventional superconductors.

In this Rapid Communication, we address the issue of disorder effects in Cu$_x$Bi$_2$Se$_3$. Through our systematic studies of the effects of Cu intercalation in this system, it turned out that increasing the Cu content beyond $x \sim 0.3$ in the superconducting regime does not increase $T_c$ or the carrier concentration, but its main effect is to enhance the residual resistivity $\rho_0$. This suggests that one can consider the Cu content $x$ to be a parameter to control the disorder while keeping other fundamental parameters virtually unchanged. By looking at the data from this perspective, the $x$ dependence of the superfluid density obtained from the lower critical field shows an unusual disorder dependence that is distinct from that in conventional BCS superconductors, which gives support to unconventional pairing. In addition, we show that the $x$ dependence of $T_c$ is essentially a reflection of the disorder effect and is consistent with the particular odd-parity pairing state that is supposed to be realized in Cu$_3$Bi$_2$Se$_3$.

Cu$_3$Bi$_2$Se$_3$ single crystals of slab-like geometry with various Cu contents $0.11 \leq x \leq 0.50$ were prepared by the electrochemical technique described earlier. The typical sample size was $4 \times 2.5 \times 0.3$ mm$^3$. The magnetic field dependence of the magnetization, $M(B)$, were measured with a commercial superconducting quantum interference device (SQUID) magnetometer (Quantum Design MPMS) with particular attention being paid to the low field regime. Roughly half of the samples were also char-
characterized by transport measurements by a standard six-probe method. Figure 1 summarizes the \( x \) dependences of \( T_c, \rho_0 \) (defined as \( \rho \) at \( T = 5 \) K), the superconducting shielding fraction at \( T = 1.8 \) K, and the charge carrier concentration \( n \) (determined from the Hall coefficient at 5 K). Most notably, \( \rho_0 \) strongly increases for \( x > 0.3 \) and \( n \) is basically independent of \( x \) at \( n \approx 1.5 \times 10^{20} \text{ cm}^{-3} \).

Before presenting magnetic properties, we define and summarize important parameters. The layered structure of Cu$_x$Bi$_2$Se$_3$ leads to anisotropies in the superconducting parameters, and we denote the lower and upper critical fields for magnetic fields parallel and perpendicular to the crystallographic \( ab \) planes as \( B_{c1,ab}, B_{c1,c}, B_{c2,ab}, \) and \( B_{c2,c} \), respectively. Also, the penetration depths and the coherence lengths along the in-plane and out-of-plane directions are denoted as \( \lambda_{ab}, \lambda_c, \xi_{ab}, \) and \( \xi_c \), respectively. The anisotropic Ginzburg-Landau parameters are defined as \( \kappa_{ab} = \sqrt{\lambda_{ab}/\xi_{ab} \xi_c} \) and \( \kappa_c = \lambda_{ab}/\xi_{ab} \). The upper critical fields are related to the coherence lengths via \( B_{c2,ab} = \Phi_0/2\pi \xi_{ab} \xi_c \) and \( B_{c2,c} = \Phi_0/2\pi \xi_{ab} \xi_c \).

![Figure 1](image1.png)

![Figure 2](image2.png)

In the Ginzburg-Landau theory, \( B_{c1} \) is related to the vortex line energy \( E \) via \( B_{c1} = 4\pi \mu_0 E/\Phi_0 \), for extremely type-II superconductors with \( \kappa \gg 1 \), one obtains \( E = \Phi_0^2/(4\pi \lambda^2) \ln \kappa \). However, to take into account the vortex core energy, the \( \ln \kappa \) term has to be corrected by adding \( 0.5 \ln(\kappa_{ab}) \), and the formula for \( B_{c1,ab} \) becomes

\[
B_{c1,ab} = \frac{\Phi_0}{4\pi} \left[ \ln(\kappa_{ab}) + 0.5 \right] \frac{1}{\lambda_{ab} \lambda_c}.
\]

This equation relates the Ginzburg-Landau parameter \( \kappa_{ab} \), we use \( B_{c1,ab}/B_{c2,ab} = (\ln \kappa_{ab} + 0.5)/2\kappa_{ab}^2 \). The anisotropy factor is defined as \( \gamma = B_{c2,ab}/B_{c2,c} = B_{c1,c}/B_{c1,ab} = \lambda_c/\lambda_{ab} \) and the penetration depths are determined by solving Eq. 1 for \( \lambda_{ab} \) (by using \( \lambda_c = \gamma \lambda_{ab} \)). For the following discussion, we define the averaged penetration depth \( \lambda_{av} = \sqrt{\lambda_{ab} \lambda_c} \), which allows the calculation of the superfluid density via \( n_s = m^*/(\mu_0 \gamma^2 \lambda_{av}^2) \) with the effective mass \( m^* \) assumed to be \( x \) independent.

Figure 2 describes how \( B_{c1,ab} \) is determined from the magnetization data \( M_{\text{exp}} \), which is essentially the same as was done in Ref. 17. Figure 2(a) shows \( M_{\text{exp}}(B) \) curves for a sample with \( x = 0.26 \) at various temperatures. (b) Reduced magnetization \( \Delta M \) after subtracting the initial linear Meissner contribution \( M_{\text{lin}} \). The deviation points marked by arrows indicate \( B_1 \) at each temperature. (c) Plot of \( B_1 \) vs \( T \) for \( x = 0.26 \), together with a fit to the data. (d) Plots of \( \Delta M \) vs \( B \) at 1.8 K for various \( x \).
faces, which is the case in all of our as-grown samples (see Fig. S4 of Ref[10] irrespective of the $x$ values, and the bulk pinning is also extremely weak in Cu$_2$Bi$_2$Se$_3$ as indicated by magnetic hysteresis data.\cite{12,15} As for the demagnetization effect, albeit small ($< 10\%$) in the present case, we have corrected for it by using the Brandt’s formula for slab-shaped samples with an aspect ratio $b/a \ll 1$. $B_{c2}(0) = B_{c2}(0)/\tanh \sqrt{0.36 b/a}.$ The obtained $B_{c2}$ for all samples are plotted vs $x$ in Fig. 3(a). The corresponding $\lambda_{av}$ values are shown in Fig. 3(b); for calculating $\lambda_{av}$, we need the anisotropy factor $\gamma$ which was obtained from anisotropic $B_{c2}$ determined from the resistive transitions in magnetic fields applied parallel and perpendicular to the $ab$ plane [Fig. 3(c)]. The obtained $\gamma$ is essentially independent of $x$ [Fig. 3(d)], which supports the idea that the main effect of Cu intercalation beyond $x \sim 0.3$ is to enhance the disorder without changing band structure or mobile carrier density.

As already mentioned, the averaged penetration depth $\lambda_{av}$ directly gives the superfluid density $n_s = m^*/(\mu_0 e^2 \lambda_{av}^2)$\cite{29}. We normalize this value with the normal-state carrier density $n$, and Fig. 4(a) summarizes the $x$ dependence of $n_s^{exp} \equiv n_s/n$. One can see that $n_s/n$ is already only $0.3$ at $x \simeq 0.10$ where the superconductivity starts to appear, and it is further suppressed with increasing $x$. This behavior is obviously a reflection of strong disorder caused by Cu intercalation that can be inferred in Fig. 1(b). Since it is known that disorder causes a reduction in $n_s$ even in conventional BCS superconductors\cite{30,31} it is prudent to discuss this behavior quantitatively.

According to Anderson’s theorem\cite{32}, the superconducting gap $\Delta_0$ and $T_c$ of conventional superconductors are relatively insensitive to small concentrations of nonmagnetic impurities. However, the superfluid density, which reflects the "rigidity" of the electronic system to electromagnetic perturbations, is affected by disorder in conventional superconductors.\cite{20,21,22,23,24} Indeed, the disorder dependence of $n_s$ has been studied in Nb and Pb and was found to follow the theoretical prediction.\cite{25,26} We therefore compare the disorder dependence of $n_s$ observed in Cu$_2$Bi$_2$Se$_3$ to the expectation for ordinary BCS superconductors. For such a comparison, one needs to parametrize disorder, which is usually done by evaluating $k_F \ell$, where $k_F$ is the Fermi wave number and $\ell = \hbar k_F/(\rho_0 e^2)$ is the mean free path.

For a pure BCS superconductor, the penetration depth in the 0-K limit is given by $\lambda_{BCS}^2(0) = m^*/(\mu_0 e^2 n)$, because $n_s$ is equal to $n$ in the clean limit. In the presence of disorder, this $\lambda_{BCS}(0)$ in the clean limit is modified to an effective penetration depth which is evaluated at $T = 0$ K as $\lambda_{BCS}(0) = \lambda_{BCS}(0)\sqrt{1 + \xi_0/\ell} > \lambda_{BCS}(0)$ in the local limit\cite{51,52} where $\xi_0 = k_F/(\pi \Delta_0)$ is the Pippard coherence length for pure superconductors ($\ell_F = \hbar k_F/m^*$ is the Fermi velocity and $\Delta_0$ is the BCS gap)\cite{51,52}. From this $\lambda_{BCS}(0)$ we calculate the superfluid density $n_s^{BCS}(\ell)$, which gives the disorder-induced suppression of $n_s$ for a conventional BCS superconductor.

Figure 4(b) shows the comparison of the $\ell$ dependences of $n_s^{exp}$ and $n_s^{BCS}$ ($k_F \ell$ value is shown in the upper axis). In this figure, the BCS calculation is shown as a solid line and the inset shows the saturation of $n_s^{BCS} \rightarrow 1$ in the clean limit $\ell \rightarrow \infty$. Clearly, $n_s^{exp}$ does not agree with $n_s^{BCS}$; although both are suppressed with decreasing $\ell$, the suppression is much stronger in Cu$_2$Bi$_2$Se$_3$ than is expected for a BCS superconductor. Also, it is useful to compare the result shown in Fig. 4(b) to that in Fig. 1(b): At $x > 0.3$, the residual resistivity starts to increase drastically and $\ell$ becomes shorter than $\sim 25$ nm; however,
\( n_{\text{exp}}^{\text{SP}} \) tends to saturate in this dirtier range of \( \ell < 25 \) nm. Moreover, for \( \ell < 4 \) nm, \( n_{\text{exp}}^{\text{SP}} \) intersects the \( n_{s}^{\text{BCS}} \) curve. Hence, both the strong suppression in the intermediate disorder regime and the saturation tendency in the dirtier regime are anomalous. Such an anomalous behavior of \( n_{s}/n \) is the main result of this work, and it naturally points to an unconventional nature of the superconducting state in \( \text{Cu}_{2}\text{Bi}_{2}\text{Se}_{3} \).

In contrast to the highly anomalous behavior of \( n_{\text{exp}}^{\text{SP}} \), the modest suppression of \( T_{c} \) shown in Fig. 4(c) resembles the behavior of dirty conventional superconductors. One might hasten to conclude that such an ordinary disorder dependence of \( T_{c} \) speaks against the odd-parity pairing, because the common belief for odd-parity superconductors is that \( T_{c} \) is quickly suppressed with impurity-induced disorder. However, as we already mentioned above, the particular type of odd-parity pairing that is considered to be realized in \( \text{Cu}_{2}\text{Bi}_{2}\text{Se}_{3} \) (Refs. 3,10) belies this common belief. This point was recently shown by Michaeli and Fu, who analyzed the novel inter-orbital, odd parity state proposed for \( \text{Cu}_{2}\text{Bi}_{2}\text{Se}_{3} \). The odd-parity pairing takes place between two \( p_{z} \) orbitals with different parity at the upper and lower ends of the quintuple layers via attractive short-range interactions. In such a state, the crucial disorder-induced pair breaking effect is significantly suppressed as a result of strong spin-momentum locking. The dephasing rate of the Cooper pairs depends on the ratio of band mass and chemical potential, \( m/\mu \); as this ratio becomes smaller, the superconductivity becomes more robust. For \( \text{Cu}_{2}\text{Bi}_{2}\text{Se}_{3} \), this ratio has been estimated to be \( \sim 1/3 \) and the calculated \( T_{c} \) depends only weakly on the impurity-induced disorder in qualitative agreement with Fig. 4(c). Therefore, the observed disorder effect in \( T_{c} \) is not inconsistent with the odd-parity pairing.

To summarize, we report an anomalous suppression of the superfluid density \( n_{s}/n \) probed by the lower critical field as a function of the \( \text{Cu} \) content \( x \). Since it appears that the main effect of \( \text{Cu} \) intercalation beyond \( x \sim 0.3 \) is to enhance disorder without significantly changing band structure or carrier density, our result reveals the impact of disorder on the superconducting state in \( \text{Cu}_{2}\text{Bi}_{2}\text{Se}_{3} \). Most strikingly, in the intermediate range of disorder, \( n_{s}/n \) is much more strongly suppressed than is expected for a dirty conventional BCS superconductor, while in the strongly disordered regime \( n_{s}/n \) tends to saturate. In contrast, the occurrence of superconductivity itself is robust against disorder as indicated by an only moderate suppression of \( T_{c} \) with \( x \). The obviously anomalous behavior in \( n_{s}/n \) points to an unconventional pairing state, and the ostensibly normal behavior in \( T_{c} \) is consistent with the theoretically-proposed odd-parity pairing state with strong spin-momentum locking. Altogether, our result gives support to the possible odd-parity pairing state in \( \text{Cu}_{2}\text{Bi}_{2}\text{Se}_{3} \).

We thank L. Fu and Y. Tanaka for fruitful discussions, and S. Wada for technical assistance. This work was supported by JSPS (NEXT Program), MEXT (Innovative Area “Topological Quantum Phenomena” KAKENHI 22103004), and AFOSR (AOARD 124038).

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