Measurement of the interaction strength in a Bose-Fermi mixture with $^{87}$Rb and $^{40}$K

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(Dated: 11 August, 2004)

A quantum degenerate, dilute gas mixture of bosonic and fermionic atoms was produced using $^{87}$Rb and $^{40}$K. The onset of degeneracy was confirmed by observing the spatial distribution of the gases after time-of-flight expansion. Further, the magnitude of the interspecies scattering length between the doubly spin polarized states of $^{87}$Rb and $^{40}$K, $|a_{RbK}|$, was determined from cross-dimensional thermal relaxation. The uncertainty in this collision measurement was greatly reduced by taking the ratio of interspecies and intraspecies relaxation rates, yielding $|a_{RbK}| = 250 \pm 30 a_0$, which is a lower value than what was reported in [M. Modugno et al., Phys. Rev. A 68, 043626 (2003)]. Using the value for $|a_{RbK}|$ reported here, current $T = 0$ theory would predict a threshold for mechanical instability that is inconsistent with the experimentally observed onset for sudden loss of fermions in [G. Modugno et al., Science 297, 2240 (2002)].

PACS numbers: 03.75.Ss, 34.50.-s

With many recent advances, ultracold Fermi gas experiments are now beginning to explore the strongly interacting regime, where pairing can lead to fermionic superfluidity. A natural extension to such studies is to investigate the properties of a mixture of a Fermi gas and a Bose-Einstein condensate (BEC). The presence of a BEC can vastly modify the static and dynamic character of a quantum degenerate Fermi gas. Mølmer pointed out that the mixture can phase separate, coexist, or collapse depending on the relative sign and magnitude of the boson-boson and boson-fermion scattering lengths. The spectrum of collective excitations can show rich physics as the interaction strength between the gases increases. In addition, an effective fermion-fermion attraction arises from the boson-fermion interaction, which can significantly increase $T_c$ for a phase transition to a BCS-type superfluid. This mechanism for Cooper pairing of atoms is intriguing because of the analogy to superconductivity.

To date, quantum degenerate atomic Bose-Fermi mixtures have been realized in the following combinations: $^6$Li (fermion) with $^7$Li (boson), $^6$Li with $^{23}$Na (boson), and $^{40}$K (fermion) with $^{87}$Rb (boson). With the last mixture, pioneering experiments by the LENS group revealed that the scattering length between $^{87}$Rb and $^{40}$K is large and negative. At high densities, this strong attractive interaction can exceed the Pauli pressure and cause the whole system to become mechanically unstable and collapse. The LENS group has reported the observation of such a collapse; they see a sudden loss of $^{40}$K atoms as the number of atoms in the $^{87}$Rb BEC exceeds a threshold value.

Here we report the production of a quantum degenerate Bose-Fermi mixture with $^{87}$Rb and $^{40}$K atoms and a determination of the magnitude of the cross-species scattering length. Our experimental apparatus for producing the mixture, which requires only a single magneto-optical trap (MOT), is outlined in Fig. 1. In brief, our vacuum chamber consists of two glass cells — one contains a two-species MOT while the other cell (science cell) is under ultrahigh vacuum, and small coils surrounding the cell produce a magnetic trap with strong confinement for evaporative cooling. (The figure does not show all the coils.) Atoms are transferred from the MOT cell to the science cell using a moving magnetic trap produced by an anti-Helmholz coil pair on a translation stage.

![Fig. 1: Schematic of the experimental apparatus. The glass cell on the left ("MOT cell") is filled with a background vapor of $^{87}$Rb and $^{40}$K released from alkali-metal dispensers attached to the left end of the cell. The cell on the right ("science cell") is under ultrahigh vacuum, and small coils surrounding the cell produce a magnetic trap with strong confinement for evaporative cooling.](https://example.com/figure1.png)

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a quadrupole magnetic trap, whose magnetic field gradient along the symmetry axis in the horizontal direction is 99 G/cm. During the last 50 ms of the MOT, the $^{87}\text{Rb}$ cloud is compressed by reducing the intensity of the hyperfine repumping light. Simultaneously the $^{40}\text{K}$ cloud is Doppler-cooled by reducing the detuning of the trapping light to about one natural linewidth ($\sim$ 6 MHz). In addition, the atoms are optically pumped to their doubly spin polarized states, which are $|F, m_F\rangle = |2, 2\rangle$ for $^{87}\text{Rb}$ and $|9/2, 9/2\rangle$ for $^{40}\text{K}$. Once in the quadrupole magnetic trap, the atoms are transferred to the science cell by physically moving the trapping coils, which are mounted on a motorized translation stage [15]. The observed loss in the phase-space density of the $^{87}\text{Rb}$ cloud during the 81 cm (6 sec) travel is only a factor of two. In the science cell, the atoms are transferred to an Ioffe-Prichard-type magnetic trap for the final cooling. Since there is no MOT in the science cell, the cell size can be small (our cell is 1 cm$^2$ in cross-section) and we can place coils very close to the atoms to achieve tight confinement with relatively low electric current ($\sim$ 27 A). The radial (axial) trapping frequency for $^{87}\text{Rb}$ is $\nu_{z,\text{Rb}} = 160$ Hz ($\nu_{r,\text{Rb}} = 25$ Hz), and the trapping frequencies for $^{40}\text{K}$ are $\sqrt{m_{\text{Rb}}/m_K} = 1.47$ times higher, where $m_{\text{Rb}}$ ($m_K$) is the mass of $^{87}\text{Rb}$ ($^{40}\text{K}$) atoms.

Simultaneous quantum degeneracy is achieved by radio frequency (rf)-induced evaporative cooling of $^{87}\text{Rb}$ and sympathetic cooling of $^{40}\text{K}$. This scheme circumvents the problem of vanishing elastic cross section for spin polarized fermions at ultracold temperatures [10]. The typical initial number and temperature of the $^{87}\text{Rb}$ atoms in the Ioffe-Prichard trap before evaporation are $N_{\text{Rb}} = 3 \times 10^{18}$ and $T_{\text{Rb}} = 400$ μK; with these initial conditions, we produce a nearly pure BEC of $2 \times 10^9$ $^{87}\text{Rb}$ atoms after 40 seconds of evaporation. The initial conditions for $^{40}\text{K}$ in the Ioffe-Prichard trap are not known due to the difficulty of measuring a small optical density cloud with absorption imaging. For sympathetic cooling from 10 μK to 0.4 μK, a range where the $^{40}\text{K}$ cloud can be imaged and there is not yet a $^{87}\text{Rb}$ BEC, we observe less than 10% number loss with typically 1.4 $\times$ 10$^5$ $^{40}\text{K}$ atoms.

Quantum degeneracy for the $^{87}\text{Rb}$ gas is evident in the formation of a Bose-Einstein condensate, which is characterized by the emergence of a bimodal distribution in the absorption images taken after time-of-flight expansion. The fraction of atoms in the BEC is determined by fitting the distribution with the sum of the Thomas-Fermi profile (inverted parabola) for the condensate and the thermal distribution for an ideal Bose gas (Fig. 2(A)). The temperature is determined from the fit to the noncondensed component. For comparison to our data, a theory curve that includes both the effects from finite number and the positive chemical potential due to boson-boson interactions in the condensate is also shown [17]. The theory and the experiment are in good agreement. These data were taken with $\sim 1 \times 10^4$ $^{40}\text{K}$ atoms present at the end of evaporation. In comparing data taken with and without $^{40}\text{K}$ atoms present, no effect of $^{40}\text{K}$ on the $^{87}\text{Rb}$ condensate fraction is observed. This is consistent with the low $^{40}\text{K}$ density ($\sim 3 \times 10^{12}$ cm$^{-3}$), which results in a negligible contribution to the $^{87}\text{Rb}$ mean field.

The effect of quantum degeneracy on fermions is more subtle. The density distribution in time-of-flight becomes more “flat-topped” than that for a classical gas due to the Pauli pressure. The fugacity $z = \exp(\mu_K/k_B T)$ (where $\mu_K$ is the chemical potential of $^{40}\text{K}$), the cloud size in each direction, and the peak density of the gas are used as independent parameters for fitting the images. In Fig. 2(B) the measured fugacity is plotted as a function of $T/T_F$, where $T$ is determined from the cloud size, and $T_F$ is the Fermi temperature. From the fugacity mea-
sement and assuming an ideal Fermi gas, we find that the lowest $T/T_F$ achieved in this experiment was 0.20. For comparison to the data, the solid line shows the prediction for an ideal Fermi gas in a 3D harmonic trap [18]. Most of the data lie to the right of the curve. This discrepancy could be explained if our $^{40}$K number calibration is low by about a factor of two so that $T/T_F$ is systematically overestimated by 20%. Note that the fugacity, which is a measure of the "flatness", is free from calibration errors. The temperature measurement has been confirmed by fitting to the thermal wing of $^{87}$Rb images taken during the same experimental run. Finally, we note that the measured fugacity shows no systematic difference between $^{40}$K images taken with and without a $^{87}$Rb BEC present in the trap. With our highest number of $1.8 \times 10^5$ $^{87}$Rb atoms in a BEC and $8 \times 10^4$ $^{40}$K atoms in the Fermi gas we observe only a slow number loss ($\sim 1$ sec timescale) and no sudden collapse.

The strength of inter-species interactions is critical in determining the static and dynamic properties of the mixture. We have determined the magnitude of the inter-species scattering length $|a_{RbRb}|$ through measurements of cross-dimensional thermal relaxation [19]. In general, this method has limited accuracy because of systematic uncertainties in the atom number, which is typically determined from absorption imaging. Experimental imperfections such as frequency jitter, imperfect polarization of the probe beam, or fluctuation and tilt of the magnetic field during imaging tend to reduce probe beam absorption. This leads to an underestimate of the number of atoms and an overestimate of the cross section. Here we avoid this systematic error by taking the ratio of two cross section measurements that are both proportional to the number of $^{87}$Rb atoms: (1) thermal relaxation of $^{40}$K atoms in the presence of $^{87}$Rb and (2) relaxation of a single-species $^{87}$Rb cloud. We further use the fact that the Rb-Rb cross section is already known with high accuracy [20].

The experimental procedure is as follows. First, we prepare $1 \times 10^5$ $^{40}$K atoms and $4 \times 10^5$ $^{87}$Rb atoms at temperatures $T \sim 1 \mu$K in a magnetic trap whose radial trapping frequency $\nu_{r,Rb}$ is 90 Hz. Both gases are away from quantum degeneracy and elastic collisions are in the $s$-wave limit. Multiple 1 ms rf sweeps can be applied to reduce the number of $^{87}$Rb atoms by as much as a factor of four, for the purpose of varying the density. The bias magnetic field is then ramped from 4.3 G to 1.4 G to increase the radial confinement of the magnetic trap to its regular strength ($\nu_{r,Rb} = 160$ Hz); this adds energy to the radial direction. The duration of the ramp is kept long ($\geq 10$ ms) compared to the radial trapping period to avoid excitation of collective modes, but short compared to the relaxation time in the gas. This is always possible unless the gases enter into the hydrodynamic regime.

Just after the ramp, the energy of the gas in the radial direction is higher than in the axial direction. The cross-dimensional rethermalization time constant is extracted by holding the mixture for a variable time in the final trap and measuring the aspect ratio after time-of-flight. Shown in Fig. 3 is a typical relaxation curve for the energy anisotropy. Rather than the radial and axial sizes, the aspect ratio of the cloud, $\sigma_z/\sigma_r$, is used for data analysis since it is less sensitive to shot-to-shot variations in the absolute temperature of the cloud before the compression [21].

The data analysis is simplified by two facts: (i) due to the Fermi statistics, the spin-polarized $^{40}$K atoms collide only with $^{87}$Rb atoms, and (ii) in our experiment there is no net flow of energy between the $^{40}$K and $^{87}$Rb gases. Therefore, the thermal relaxation rate of the $^{40}$K cloud, $1/\tau_K$, depends only on the collision rate with $^{87}$Rb atoms.

\begin{equation}
\frac{1}{\tau_K} = \frac{1}{\beta} \langle n_{Rb} \rangle \sigma_{RbK} v_{RbK} .
\end{equation}

Here, $\langle n_{Rb} \rangle$ is the average density of $^{87}$Rb atoms in the trap, $\sigma_{RbK} = 4\alpha a_{RbK}^2$ is the elastic cross section for Rb-K collisions, and $v_{RbK} = \sqrt{8k_BT/\pi\mu}$ is the thermally averaged relative speed between $^{87}$Rb and $^{40}$K atoms, where $\mu = m_{Rb}m_K/(m_{Rb} + m_K)$ is the reduced mass. The coefficient of proportionality, $\beta$, can be regarded as the number of collisions per $^{40}$K atom needed for thermal relaxation. The relaxation rate for a single-species $^{87}$Rb cloud $1/\tau_{Rb}$ is proportional to the Rb-Rb collision rate:

\begin{equation}
\frac{1}{\tau_{Rb}} = \frac{1}{\alpha} \langle n_{Rb} \rangle \sigma_{RbRb} v_{Rb} .
\end{equation}

where $\sigma_{RbRb} = 8\pi a_{Rb}^2$ is the elastic cross section for Rb-Rb collisions, $v_{Rb} = 4\sqrt{k_BT/\pi m_{Rb}}$ is the thermally averaged relative speed between $^{87}$Rb atoms, and $\alpha$ is the

![Figure 3](https://via.placeholder.com/150)

**FIG. 3:** Typical relaxation curve for the energy anisotropy. Shown is the the square of the $^{40}$K cloud aspect ratio after 5 ms time-of-flight; this is proportional to the ratio of the energies in each direction. The $^{40}$K cloud rethermalizes through elastic collisions with $^{87}$Rb atoms. The line is a fit to the ratio of exponentially decaying curves. The error bar represents only the statistical uncertainty.
between experimental parameters, including the initial energy anisotropy relaxation. Thus, the ratio of the two time constants is free from systematic uncertainties in the origin. The ratio of the slopes is used to extract the coefficient of proportionality for single-species relaxation. This measured value of $|\alpha_{\text{RB}}|$ is in mild disagreement with the value of $-395 \pm 10$ determined from a comparison of theory predictions and experimental observation of collapse phenomena [14]. These results suggest a need for further investigation of the behavior of the mixture close to the collapse. For example the zero temperature phase diagram in ref. [12] which assumed $a_{\text{RB}} = -260 a_0$ predicts that a condensate with $2 \times 10^6$ atoms remains mechanically stable with numbers of $^{40}$K atoms as high as $1 \times 10^7$. The new value for $|\alpha_{\text{RB}}|$ that we report here is also likely to have an impact on the predicted positions of Feshbach resonances [27, 27].

Acknowledgments

The authors thank Eric Cornell, and Carl Wieman for useful discussions. We acknowledge support from the U.S. Department of Energy, Office of Basic Energy Sciences, the W. M. Keck Foundation, and the National Science Foundation. B.D.D. expresses his thanks to the JILA Visiting Fellow program.

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