Nanoscale Proximity Effect in the High Temperature Superconductor

$\text{Bi}_2\text{Sr}_2\text{CaCu}_2\text{O}_{8+\delta}$

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(Dated: February 7, 2010)

Abstract

High temperature cuprate superconductors exhibit extremely local nanoscale phenomena and strong sensitivity to doping. While other experiments have looked at nanoscale interfaces between layers of different dopings, we focus on the interplay between naturally inhomogeneous nanoscale regions. Using scanning tunneling microscopy to carefully track the same region of the sample as a function of temperature, we show that regions with weak superconductivity can persist to elevated temperatures if bordered by regions of strong superconductivity. This suggests that it may be possible to increase the maximum possible transition temperature by controlling the distribution of dopants.

PACS numbers: 74.72.Gh, 74.55.+v, 74.62.En

Keywords:

Many properties of high temperature cuprate superconductors, such as the transition temperature $T_c$, and the presence of pseudogap, have a strong doping dependence. What happens when two regions with different doping are put into contact? Since pairing in cuprate superconductors has a very local character[1–4], one expects the coherence length to be short, and any proximity effects to occur only on microscopic length scales. Nonetheless, some experiments have demonstrated that high-$T_c$ Josephson junctions can be made with thicknesses many times the coherence length[5]. Other experiments on bilayers have shown transition temperatures higher than that of either layer in isolation[6–8]. Microscopic theories to explain these phenomena include Josephson coupling between superconducting islands[9], and enhancement
of the phase stiffness in underdoped regions by proximity to overdoped regions[7,10,11]. Such scenarios are inherently interesting due to the possibility that interface superconductivity can occur at temperatures above the maximum possible in bulk samples. To date no experiments have been performed to investigate proximity effects locally at microscopic length scales. Here we report a proximity effect in the cuprate superconductor Bi$_2$Sr$_2$CaCu$_2$O$_{8+\delta}$ using scanning tunneling microscopy (STM) and the intrinsic nanoscale spatial variation of the sample. We show that indeed patches of the sample with weaker superconductivity can be enhanced if surrounded by patches with stronger superconductivity, demonstrating that the collapse of superconductivity is caused by more than local thermal pair breaking.

Our experiments were performed in a compact variable temperature scanning tunneling microscope (STM), with the unique ability to acquire spectroscopy on nearly identical grids of points over a wide range of temperatures. This allows us to perform spatial correlations using data from multiple temperatures. The pairing gap is measured from the local differential conductance ($dI/dV$), which is proportional to the local density of states. Figure 1 shows a representative $dI/dV$ spectrum for the high temperature superconductor Bi$_2$Sr$_2$CaCu$_2$O$_{8+\delta}$(Bi-2212). At 30 K there is a visible gap in the spectrum, by 70 K it has diminished considerably, and by 78 K it is gone completely. The gap has been previously described by a $d$-wave extension to the BCS theory with the addition of a lifetime broadening term[12,20].

For high temperature cuprate superconductors, the superconducting gap varies from smallest to largest by a factor of two on nanometer scales[1–4]. By identifying the same atoms in the topography at multiple temperatures we are able to measure $dI/dV$ spectra for the same point at different temperatures. Recently, we have used this technique to visualize the development of superconductivity on the atomic scale in Bi-2212. We have found that the tem-

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**FIG. 1:** Representative $dI/dV$ spectrum at the same point at different temperatures. The setpoint was at -200 mV. The evolution of the spectrum shows a gap that closes near 74 K ($T_c$ is 65 K). The inset shows the gap as extracted from the peak location as a function of temperature.
perature dependence of the spectroscopic gap (\(\Delta(r,T)\)) is inhomogenous, and that the gap vanishes at a local temperature \(T_p(r)\), which is positively correlated in space with the gap size\(^1\). Furthermore, the spectroscopic gap below \(T_c\) is spatially correlated to the density of states at the Fermi level well above \(T_c\) where the gap is absent\(^2\). For this work we simplify the analysis of a large number of points by using a simple, operational definition for the gap and the pairing temperature. We follow the definition used previously\(^3\), defining the gap value as the point of maximum differential conductance for positive bias. This simple procedure agrees with more elaborate fitting schemes to within 10% in most cases. We also need a simple method to describe the temperature evolution of the gap. For this, we define the pairing temperature \(T_p\), which is the highest temperature at which a maximum in the \(dI/dV\) spectrum can be observed within experimental resolution at positive bias.

In underdoped samples, multiple energy features are present in STM spectroscopy\(^4\). While high energy features survive to temperatures well above \(T_c\), lower energy features show the closing of a nodal gap near \(T_c\)\(^5\). However, for strongly overdoped samples pseudogap behavior is absent, there is only one spectroscopic feature in tunneling data, and the median value of \(T_p\) is near the resistive transition temperature \(T_c\). Furthermore, an inhomogeneous superconducting transition is supported by Nernst measurements\(^6\) and \(\mu\)SR\(^7\). Therefore, \(\Delta\) may be taken as the superconducting gap, and \(T_p\) as the temperature for the onset of pairing. We have done detailed measurements of the local \(T_p\) and the local \(\Delta\) for a grid of points on an overdoped sample of Bi-2212 with \(T_c = 65\) K, for a range of temperatures from 50 K to 76 K. These measurements provided evidence that nanoscale regions distinguished by inhomogeneity can influence each other via the proximity effect. We show that the fractional variation in \(T_p\) is less than that for \(\Delta\). The pairing order parameter in a disordered sample has been analyzed theoretically at low temperature\(^8\),\(^9\) and near the transition\(^10\), but a direct comparison of spatial variation between \(T_p\) and \(\Delta\) was not made. Our measurements show that the length scale for correlations in \(T_p\) is longer by 20% than the length scale for the gap. Furthermore, we find that the local gap can disappear at distinct temperatures for different spatial positions on the sample, even if these positions have the same magnitude of gap at low temperature, and this anomalous temperature evolution of the local gap is influenced by the size of gaps in the surrounding 1 nm region.

We have the spectral evolution for more than 10,000 points in a 25 x 28 nm grid\(^11\) at fourteen different temperatures from 50 K to 76 K. For each temperature, we can determine the gap at each point, and plot a series of “gap maps”,

\[\text{Figures added here...}\]
FIG. 2: Evolution of the gap distribution with temperature. a, map of the local pairing temperature ($T_p$).

The pairing temperature is determined from the sequence of images in b-o by finding the temperature above which there is no maximum in the conductance on the positive bias side. b-o, a 25 x 28 nm “gap map” taken at several different temperatures showing the distribution of gaps in real space. At each temperature, the gap map has been aligned to allow point-by-point comparison between maps.

or 2D false color images showing the spatial distribution of gaps, shown in figure 2b-o. Using simultaneously recorded topographic information, we can align gap maps taken at different temperatures, despite their being taken over slightly different areas with varying amounts of thermal drift and piezo creep. This is accomplished by interpolating the two dimensional data in order to maximize the agreement between temperatures. To avoid biasing the re-
results all alignment is based exclusively on topographic data. Points with median-sized gaps surrounded by large gapped regions (consider points with gaps near 20 mV within the box in the upper right of the panels of figure 2) survive to higher temperatures than regions with similar absolute gap sizes elsewhere (consider the oval shaped region in the upper left), which supports our main claim. From the data of figure 2b-o, we can determine $T_p$ for each point, restricted to the temperature range for which we have data, so that we can test our claims statistically. Figure 2a shows the spatial distribution of $T_p$. This is well correlated to the low temperature gap value from figure 2, as we expect if the temperature evolution is determined locally. Figure 3a shows a histogram of all measured gaps and their corresponding $T_p$ values, confirming that the two quantities are well correlated (81%). If we use the median value of the gap (20 mV) and the median value of $T_p$ (64 K), we obtain $2\Delta/k_B T_p = 7.4$, which is determined from the median values of $\Delta$ and $T_p$. The red line represents the average value of $T_p$ as a function of $\Delta$. The deviation in $T_p$ from the average, that is $\delta T_p = T_p - \langle T_p \rangle$, where $\langle T_p \rangle$ is the average $T_p$ for gaps with the same size.

We have found direct evidence that the temperature evolution can be more accurately predicted given knowledge of the gap in the vicinity of a point, compared with knowledge of the gap at a single point only. One can clearly see from figure 3a that knowledge of the gap can only determine $T_p$ in a statistical way, that is, different points of equal gap size have measurably different values of $T_p$. If the pairing temperature were
FIG. 4: Correlation length scales. The cross correlation between \( \delta T_p \) and \( \Delta \) as a function of separation, and the autocorrelations of \( \Delta \) and \( T_p \), radially averaged. The cross correlation shows that areas with large \( T_p \) values for their gap size are on average surrounded by larger gap regions. The autocorrelations show that \( T_p \) has stronger correlation on length scales above 1 nm. The results are not significantly different if averaged along the \( a \) or \( b \) axis instead of radially.

To depend only locally on the gap, the distribution of \( T_p \) values with the same gap would only be due to random fluctuations. Therefore, when we subtract the mean \( T_p \) value (based on gap size) from each measured \( T_p \) value, the result should be uncorrelated noise. However, figure 3b shows a significant spatial pattern associated with this quantity, which we call \( \delta T_p \).

We can understand the meaning of \( \delta T_p \) and relate it to the gap map using the cross correlation as a function of separation distance. We define the cross correlation as

\[
\rho(x) = \frac{1}{N\sigma_{\delta T_p}\sigma_\Delta} \sum_y \delta T_p(y) \Delta(y-x),
\]

where \( \sigma_{\delta T_p} \) and \( \sigma_\Delta \) are the standard deviations of \( \delta T_p \) and \( \Delta \) respectively, and \( y \) runs over the \( N \) available data points. Although the supermodulation on the \( b \) axis does have a small correlation with the gap, in practice \( \rho \) is isotropic within the noise, so we plot a circular average in figure 4.

For zero separation, the cross correlations mathematically must be zero, because we have explicitly eliminated the local relation between \( \Delta \) and \( T_p \) when we subtract the mean to produce \( \delta T_p \). The peak at positive separation indicates that \( T_p \) at a particular point is significantly determined by gaps 1 nm away, which we attribute to the proximity effect. In addition, there is a long tail of positive correlation, indicating that \( T_p \) is also dependent on gaps several nanometers away. Figure 4 also shows the autocorrelation of \( \Delta \) and \( T_p \) averaged along both axes and plotted as a function of separation, showing that the pairing temperature has a longer length scale (1.1 nm at half-maximum) than the gap (0.9 nm at half-maximum). These correlations occur on length scales longer enough than the 0.25 nm pixel spacing to rule out “smoothing” due to the interpolation used in aligning between different temperatures. The strength of \( T_p \) correlations is also higher than that of gap correlations over the tail of the distribution (1 – 6 nm). Although
the exact shape of this tail may reflect details of the specific area chosen for study, the fact that the $T_p$ correlation is consistently higher and the $\delta T_p - \Delta$ cross correlation also extends to this distance indicates that the process by which the gap collapses is more sensitive to the surrounding several nanometers than the process that sets the gap energy scale.

We have performed the first detailed measurements of the temperature evolution of the superconducting gap for a large number of points in overdoped $\text{Bi}_2\text{Sr}_2\text{CaCu}_2\text{O}_{8+\delta}$. Due to dopants and crystalline disorder, the tendency toward pairing is natrually inhomogeneous. Correspondingly, the superconducting gap is also inhomogeneous, albeit smoothed out by interactions between regions. The temperature evolution is also inhomogeneous, but we have found that the compared to the gap the magnitude of its variation is more and the length scale of its variation is shorter, that is, the temperature evolution is even more smoothed out. Also, regions of the sample with a small gap magnitude can have this gap survive to higher temperatures if surrounded by larger gapped regions. We speculate that the closing of the gap may have to do not just with thermal pair-breaking, but also with phase fluctuations, so that regions bordered by larger gapped regions have the phase pinned up to a higher temperature than similar regions bordered by small gapped regions.

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