Experimental electronic heat capacities of \(\alpha-\) and \(\delta-\) Plutonium; heavy-fermion physics in an element

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We have measured the heat capacities of \(\delta-\)Pu\(_{0.05}\)Al\(_{0.05}\) and \(\alpha-\)Pu over the temperature range \(2 - 303\) K. The availability of data below \(10\) K plus an estimate of the phonon contribution to the heat capacity based on recent neutron-scattering experiments on the same sample enable us to make a reliable deduction of the electronic contribution to the heat capacity of \(\delta-\)Pu\(_{0.05}\)Al\(_{0.05}\); we find \(\gamma = 64 \pm 3\) mJK\(^{-2}\)mol\(^{-1}\) as \(T \to 0\). This is a factor \(\sim 4\) larger than that of any element, and large enough for \(\delta-\)Pu\(_{0.05}\)Al\(_{0.05}\) to be classed as a heavy-fermion system. By contrast, \(\gamma = 17 \pm 1\) mJK\(^{-2}\)mol\(^{-1}\) in \(\alpha-\)Pu. Two distinct anomalies are seen in the electronic contribution to the heat capacity of \(\delta-\)Pu\(_{0.05}\)Al\(_{0.05}\), one or both of which may be associated with the formation of the \(\alpha'\) martensitic phase. We suggest that the large \(\gamma\)-value of \(\delta-\)Pu\(_{0.05}\)Al\(_{0.05}\) may be caused by proximity to a quantum-critical point.

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Plutonium represents the boundary between localised (Am) and delocalised (Np) 5f electrons in the Actinide series \(\text{U, Pu, Am, Cm, Bk, Cf, Es, Fm, Md, No, Lr, Rf, Db, Sg, Bh, Hs, Mt, Ds, Rg, Cn, Nh, Fl, Mc, No} \). For instance, it is thought that itinerant 5f electrons lower their energy by causing Peierls-like distortions, yielding the low-temperature \(\alpha\) (monoclinic), \(\beta\) (body-centred monoclinic) and \(\gamma\) (body-centred orthorhombic) phases. By contrast, it is believed that some or all of the 5f electrons are localised in the technologically-important \(\delta\) phase, allowing the Madelung potential of the remaining \(s, p\) and \(d\) electrons to produce a higher symmetry face-centred cubic structure. Very little provocation is required to transform the low-symmetry phases into \(\delta\)-Pu; the \(\delta\) phase occurs between 319 and 451°C in pure Pu and is stabilised to zero temperature by adding a tiny amount of a trivalent element, such as Al, Ce or Ga.

A reliable estimate of the electronic contribution to the entropy of Pu is a very important key in understanding the difference between the \(\alpha\)- and \(\delta\)-phases and the dramatic effect of alloying. Unfortunately, attempts to extract relevant information from \(C_P\), the experimental heat capacity, have been inconclusive because the phonon contribution to \(C_P\) was unknown. A traditional way to circumvent this problem is to use low-temperature \(C_P\) data; a plot of \(C_P/T\) versus \(T^2\), where \(T\) is the temperature, is linear at sufficiently low \(T\):

\[
(C_P/T) = \gamma + \alpha T^2. \tag{1}
\]

Here, \(\gamma T\) and \(\alpha T^3 = (12\pi^4 R)/(5\theta_0^3)\) are the electronic and phonon contributions to \(C_P\); \(\theta_0\) is the Debye temperature. The \(T = 0\) intercept, \(\gamma\), is a good measure of the electronic density of states. Sadly, the lack of \(C_P\) data below \(T \approx 10\) K, due to problems associated with self-heating caused by radioactive decay, have made such extractions of \(\gamma\) inaccurate in both \(\alpha\)- and \(\delta\)-Pu.\(^{15}\)

In this Letter, we report the surmounting of these problems by: (i) measuring \(C_P\) for \(\alpha\)-Pu and Al-stabilised \(\delta\)-Pu to significantly lower temperatures than has been previously possible (\(T \approx 2\) K), using a sample mount which minimises the effect of self-heating; and (ii) extracting the electronic component of \(C_P\) for \(\delta\)-Pu\(_{0.05}\)Al\(_{0.05}\) by subtracting the phonon contribution, deduced using recent neutron-scattering data, from the raw data. These procedures show that the electronic contribution to the heat capacity varies linearly with \(T\) only when \(T \leq 10\) K. Moreover, we observe two distinct anomalies in the electronic heat capacity of \(\delta\)-Pu\(_{0.05}\)Al\(_{0.05}\), one or both of which may be associated with the \(\alpha'\)-martensitic phase observed by optical metallography. By restricting our analysis to suitably low temperatures, we obtain \(\gamma = 64 \pm 3\) mJK\(^{-2}\)mol\(^{-1}\) for \(\delta\)-Pu\(_{0.05}\)Al\(_{0.05}\) and \(\gamma = 17 \pm 1\) mJK\(^{-2}\)mol\(^{-1}\) for pure \(\alpha\)-Pu in the limit \(T \to 0\).

The \(\alpha\)-Pu sample was prepared by levitation zone refining and distillation as described in Ref. \(^{18}\). Starting material was double-electrorefined \(242\)Pu cast into rods. The rods were purified by passing a 10 mm-wide molten floating zone (750°C) ten times through a cast rod at a travel rate of 1.5 cm/h at \(10^{-5}\) Pa.\(^{18}\) After this, the impurity level was 176 ± 26 ppm, of which U forms approximately 110 ppm.\(^{18}\) The \(\delta\)-Pu specimen was alloyed by arc melting followed by a lengthy anneal at 450°C. The specimen was formed into a plate by rolling followed by heat treatments to relieve the cold work. Samples were cut, mechanically polished, chemically polished and heat
The phonon density of states $g(E)$ was determined using neutron-scattering techniques [20]. Neutron-scattering and sound-velocity data were used to derive $g(E)$ at $T = 27$ K, 65 K, 150 K and 300 K [20]. The phonon contribution to $C_P$, $C'_{P_{ph}}$, was computed using

$$C'_{P_{ph}} = C_{V_{ph}} = \frac{\partial}{\partial T} \left( \int_0^\infty E g(E) f(E,T) dE \right).$$

Here $C'_{P_{ph}}$ is the phonon heat capacity at constant volume [21]. $E$ is the energy and $f(E,T)$ is the Bose-Einstein distribution function.

Such an approximation neglects anharmonic effects; however, the $T$-dependence of $g(E)$ [20] shows that such effects are small for $T \lesssim 150$ K. More significantly, the computed $C'_{P_{ph}}$ varied by up to $\pm 1\%$ (i.e. of similar size to the experimental uncertainty in $C_P$), depending on which $g(E)$ (i.e. that based on the 27 K, 65 K, 150 K or 300 K data) was used. To minimise the impact of this effect, the phonon contribution to the heat capacity $C'_{P_{ph}}$ plotted in Fig. 1 (curve) is a $T$-dependent interpolation between the computed $C'_{P_{ph}}$.

$C_{el}$, the electronic contribution to $C_P$ of $\delta$-Pu$_{0.95}$Al$_{0.05}$, was estimated by subtracting $C'_{P_{ph}}$ from the experimental $C_P$ data [21]; $C_{el}$ values are shown as hollow points in Fig. 1 and on an expanded vertical scale in Fig. 2a. As noted in the discussion of Eq. 1, the expectation for a simple metal is that $C_{el} = \gamma T$. Even a cursory inspection of Fig. 2a shows that the experimental values of $C_{el}$ only follow a straight line through the origin for $T < 10$ K; between approximately 10 and 40 K, there is a distinct “hump” superimposed on the quasilinear increase, whilst at $T \approx 65$ K there is a “$\lambda$-shaped” maximum, eventually followed by a more gentle increase.

A $\lambda$-like feature in the heat capacity of the high-temperature martensite is characteristic of a martensitic transition [22]. Support for this attribution comes from the retention of a small fraction of the $\alpha'$-phase, as revealed by the characteristic “tweed” structure shown in a metallographic examination of the sample after thermal cycling (Fig. 3). Note that a knowledge of the phonon contribution was required to reveal the martensite feature in the heat capacity; until the current work, no clear indication of such a phase has been extracted from the heat capacity of $\delta$-Pu. Moreover, the manifestation of the transition in $C_{el}$ strongly suggests that the transition is electronically driven.

Fig. 4 shows the effective $\gamma$ (Eq. 1) for $\delta$-Pu$_{0.95}$Al$_{0.05}$, plotted as a function of $T$. For $T \lesssim 10$ K, $\gamma \approx 65$ mJK$^{-2}$mol$^{-1}$. Around 10 K, there is a sharp dip, followed immediately by the above-mentioned “hump” in $C_{el}$, which appears as a broad peak (maximum at $T \approx 13$ K) in the effective $\gamma$. Such a peak suggests a contribution to the electronic entropy associated with a second phase transition at $T \approx 13$ K. This may perhaps be linked to the $\lambda$-transition seen in $C_{el}$ at $T \approx 65$ K (Fig. 2b); multistage phase transitions have been observed in actinides such as U and predicted in Pu [24].

Above 40 K, $C_{el}/T$ returns briefly to $\gamma \approx 70$ mJK$^{-2}$mol$^{-1}$, before falling gradually to $\gamma \approx 20$ mJK$^{-2}$mol$^{-1}$. This complicated variation illustrates the great importance of low-temperature (i.e., $T \lesssim 10$ K)
The low-temperature values of $C_P/T$ for both the pure $\alpha$–Pu (●) and $\delta$–Pu$_{0.95}$Al$_{0.05}$ (●) samples plotted as a function of $T^2$; the low-$T$ portions of the data have been fitted to Eq. 1. The value of $\gamma$ for $\alpha$–Pu is remarkable enough, being bigger than that of any other element [12, 22]; nevertheless its large size may be understood reasonably conventionally when the 5$f$ electrons are taken into account [12]. However, $\gamma$ for $\delta$–Pu$_{0.95}$Al$_{0.05}$ is a factor $\sim 4$ bigger, being large enough to class it as a heavy-fermion system [26]. Note that the increase cannot be simply related to the presence of Al, which has a comparatively small value of $\gamma$ in its pure form [25].

Finally, we compute the specific entropies using

$$S_{el} = \int_0^{300} \frac{C_{el}}{T^2} dT \quad \text{and} \quad S_{total} = \int_0^{300} \frac{C_P}{T} dT.$$  \hspace{1cm} (3)

For $\delta$–Pu$_{0.95}$Al$_{0.05}$, we find that $S_{el} = 11.4$ JK$^{-1}$mol$^{-1}$, of which approximately 2 JK$^{-1}$mol$^{-1}$ is associated with the peak in $C_{el}$ at $T \approx 13$ K; this should be compared with $S_{total} = 68.4$ JK$^{-1}$mol$^{-1}$. By contrast, $S_{total} = 57.1$ JK$^{-1}$mol$^{-1}$ for $\alpha$–Pu. Although the lack of neutron data means that we do not have a reliable means of extracting $C_{el}$ in $\alpha$–Pu, an upper bound for $S_{el}$ is given by $300 \times \gamma \approx 5.1$ JK$^{-1}$mol$^{-1}$. Hence $S_{el}/S_{total} \lesssim 0.09$ for $\alpha$–Pu, roughly half the value $S_{el}/S_{total} \approx 0.17$ obtained for $\delta$–Pu$_{0.95}$Al$_{0.05}$. As in the case of $\gamma$, the $S_{el}/S_{total}$ values suggest that the role of the electronic system is enhanced on going from the $\alpha$– to the $\delta$– phase.

In a number of respects, the behavior of Pu is similar to recent models of quantum criticality [23, 25] which associate quantum-critical points with rearrangements of the Fermi surface, due either to a charge- or spin-density-wave-like reconstruction (analogous to the Peierls-like
distortions thought to occur in the $\alpha$–phase \cite{15}, or to the onset of itineracy for previously localised electrons (as may occur in the transition from $\delta$– to $\gamma$–Pu \cite{16}). A characteristic feature of a quantum-critical point is the proximity of many excited states to the groundstate, leading to, for example, a large heat capacity \cite{15}. All of the strange properties of Pu, including the complicated phase diagram, may, therefore, be the result of $\delta$–Pu being very close to a quantum-critical point. This could imply that the properties of Pu are “emergent”, and not easily derivable from microscopic models.

In summary, we have measured the heat capacities of $\delta$–Pu$_{95.05}$Al$_{0.05}$ and $\alpha$–Pu over the temperature range 2 – 303 K. The availability of data below 10 K plus an estimate of the phonon contribution to the heat capacity based on recent neutron-scattering data enable us to make a reliable deduction of the low-temperature electronic contribution to the heat capacity of $\delta$–Pu$_{0.95}$Al$_{0.05}$; we find $\gamma = 64 \pm 3$ JK$^{-2}$mol$^{-1}$. By contrast, $\gamma = 17 \pm 1$ JK$^{-2}$mol$^{-1}$ in $\alpha$–Pu. We note two distinct anomalies in the electronic contribution to the heat capacity of $\delta$–Pu$_{0.95}$Al$_{0.05}$, one or both of which may be associated with a martensitic phase transition. The large increase in $\gamma$ and the electronic contribution to the entropy on going from $\alpha$– to $\delta$–Pu may be associated with the proximity of $\delta$–Pu to a quantum-critical point.

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