Superconductor-Insulator Phase Separation Induced by Rapid Cooling in $\kappa-(ET)_2Cu[N(CN)_2]Br$

O.J. Taylor, A. Carrington, and J.A. Schlueter

H. H. Wills Physics Laboratory, University of Bristol, Tyndall Avenue, BS8 1TL, United Kingdom and Materials Science Division, Argonne National Laboratory, Argonne, Illinois 60439, U.S.A.

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We present measurements of the low temperature specific heat of single crystals of $\kappa-(ET)_2Cu[N(CN)_2]Br$ as a function of the cooling rate through the glasslike structure transition at $\sim 80$K. We find that rapid cooling produces a small ($\lesssim 4\%$) decrease in the superconducting transition temperature accompanied by a substantial (up to 50\%) decrease in the normal-state electronic specific heat. A natural explanation of our data is that there is a macroscopic phase separation between superconducting and insulating regions in rapidly cooled samples.

Organic superconductors based on the ET [bis(ethylenedithio)-tetraphiafulvalene] molecule, with general formula (ET)$_2X$, are composed of conducting cation (ET) layers separated by ‘insulating’ anion (X) layers. The weak overlap between the conducting layers means that their electronic properties are quasi-two-dimensional. These materials display a rich phase diagram as a function of temperature and pressure. For example, at low temperature and ambient pressure $\kappa-(ET)_2Cu[N(CN)_2]Cl$ is an antiferromagnetic insulator (AFI). Application of moderate pressure ($\sim 300$ bar) causes an insulator-superconductor transition (IS) with a maximum $T_c \simeq 13$K. Close to this transition there is multiphase region where the superconducting and insulating phases coexist. There is strong evidence that the superconductivity is unconventional, with $d$-wave like nodes in the superconducting energy gap. Although the phase diagram is similar to the high $T_c$ cuprate superconductors, here the pressure induced IS transition is caused by a reduction of the ratio of on-site Coulomb repulsion $U$ to the conduction electron bandwidth $W$, rather than a change in carrier density. The position at ambient pressure of different compounds in the series is controlled by the anion and/or the degree of deuteration of the ET molecules, both of which can be thought of as applying ‘chemical pressure’.

A widely studied member of the $\kappa$ phase materials is $\kappa-(ET)_2Cu[N(CN)_2]Br$ (hereafter abbreviated to $\kappa$-Br), which is a superconductor with a $T_c$ of $\sim 12.4$ K. At ambient pressure $\kappa$-Br sits close to the AFI phase boundary, and deuteration causes it to move even closer to this boundary. At $T_g \simeq 77$K there is a glasslike structural transition and the cooling rate through this temperature strongly effects the normal and superconducting state properties. The nature of this structural transition is unclear. A widely held hypothesis is that it is associated with a configuration change in the order of the terminal ethylene groups of the ET molecules. Although this theory is supported by the existence of an isotope effect on $T_g$, a recent high resolution x-ray structural study found that, even in fast cooled samples, the ethylene groups are almost completely ordered at the lowest temperatures ($\sim 9$K). It was suggested that the disorder may instead be associated with the polymeric anion chain.

One consequence of rapid cooling through $T_g$ in this compound is a reduction in the superconducting transition temperature $T_c$. This effect has been shown to vary over four orders of magnitude of cooling rate. Magnetization measurements have shown that fast cooling also causes a marked decrease in the magnetic screening which was interpreted as either a decrease in the superconducting volume fraction or an increase in the magnetic penetration depth $\lambda$. Scanning microregion infrared reflectance spectroscopy (SMIRS) measurements have shown evidence for macroscopic insulating/metallic region phase separation at the surface of fast cooled samples. In deuterated $\kappa$-Br $^{13}$C-NMR and magnetoresistance measurements show evidence for phase separation even in slowly cooled samples.

In this paper, we report measurements of the specific heat of single crystals of $\kappa$-Br as the cooling rate through $T_g$ is varied from $\sim 0.02$ K/min to $\sim 100$ K/min. By applying a large magnetic field ($\mu_0H=14$T) perpendicular to the conducting planes we can suppress the superconductivity and study the evolution of the normal state electronic specific heat. We find that that the Sommerfeld constant $\gamma$ is reduced by up to a factor two by fast cooling which we suggest is caused by insulating/metallic region phase separation occurring throughout the bulk of the whole sample.

Single crystals of $\kappa$-Br were grown by a standard electrochemical technique. The specific heat was measured using a ‘long relaxation’ calorimetry technique using a bare Cernox chip as the sample platform, heater and thermometer. The performance of the calorimeter was extensively checked by measuring samples of Ag. The maximum absolute error was $\sim \pm 1\%$. The field dependence of the Cernox thermometer was measured against a capacitance thermometer and checked by measuring the specific heat of Ag which is virtually field independent in our temperature range.

Two samples of $\kappa$-Br were measured. Sample A had a mass of 249 $\mu$g and dimensions $0.66 \times 0.61 \times 0.30$ mm$^3$ (the shortest dimension is the low-conductivity $b$ axis).
FIG. 1: (color online). Low temperature normal state specific heat measured in a field of 14 T for sample A after it had been cooled, through the glass transition region (85-65K), at the different rates indicated. The lines are second order polynomial fits.

and sample B had a mass of 545 µg and dimensions 0.90 × 0.85 × 0.35 mm³. These samples were repeatedly cooled down from T = 85 K to T = 65 K, which is the temperature range of the glass transition, at cooling rates between 0.02 K/min and ~100 K/min, then to T = 1.3 K at the maximum cooling rate of the cryostat (~1–2 K/min for the slow cooled samples). Rapid cooling above 1.5 K/min was achieved by admitting ⁴He exchange gas, which was then pumped out while the sample was held at ≈20 K to prevent gas absorption on the calorimeter. The specific heat C was measured after each cool down at various fields between 0 and 14T, applied perpendicular to the conducting planes. It was shown previously that in κ-Br C becomes field independent above µ₀Hc₂ ≃ 8 T, and so C(µ₀H = 14T) can be taken as the normal state value.

FIG. 2: (color online). Cooling rate dependence of γ for both samples. The inset shows the same data plotted versus (cooling rate)⁰·³. The solid lines in both parts of the figure are fits to this power law.

By subtracting the 14T normal state data from the zero field data the superconducting anomaly at T_c is clearly discernable (see Fig. 2). The anomaly is a rather small proportion of the total specific heat (∆C/C ≃ 3%). For simplicity we fit the anomaly to a mean-field theory, neglecting the fact that the anomaly is broadened both by thermal fluctuations and sample inhomogeneity. Specifically, we use a strong coupling form of the mean-field d-wave theory which was shown to fit the data from the lowest temperatures right up to T_c. We note however, the superconducting volume fraction (or decrease in superfluid density) observed in magnetization measurements.

FIG. 3: (color online). Zero field electronic specific heat [C(0) - C(14)]/T of sample B, for two different cooling rates. The solid lines are fits to a mean-field model which is used to determine T_c and the height of the specific heat jump at T_c. Inset: Scaled plot of the data close to T_c.
that an s-wave model works equally well close to $T_c$. $T_c$ corresponds to the mid-point of the leading edge of the anomaly, and the extrapolated anomaly height $\Delta C_{MF}$ is taken from the fit. The figure shows data for the slowest cooling rate and a fast one. Cooling at 52K/min causes $T_c$ to decrease by 0.6 K and $\gamma$ to decrease by $\sim 40\%$. The inset to this figure shows the the same data with the axes normalized. It can be seen that the anomaly does not get significantly broader upon rapid cooling.

The decrease in $T_c$ with increased cooling rate is shown in Fig. 4. The data for both samples is in good agreement and also agrees reasonably well with previous studies (see Ref.19 and references therein). The $T_c$ reduction at our maximum cooling rate is $\sim 0.6$ K or $\sim 4\%$. We note that here we have a very small thermometer stage in direct contact with the sample and so the cooling rate registered should be an accurate reflection of that experienced by the sample. At our slowest cooling rates $T_c$ appears to have saturated at its maximum value within our resolution ($\pm 20$mK).

The detailed evolution of the height of the superconducting anomaly can be seen in Fig. 5. Given the dramatic reduction in $\gamma$ the normalized anomaly height is remarkable constant with cooling rate. For the highest cooling rates $\gtrsim 12$K/min $\Delta C_{MF}/\gamma T_c$ is seen to increase, although this is close to the resolution limit. For these high cooling rates a small upturn in $C/T$ is seen in the 14T data for $T \lesssim 2$K, probably because of additional magnetic contributions, which increases the uncertainty of our estimates of $\gamma$.

In Fig. 5 we show the low temperature behavior of the electronic specific heat $[C(0) - C(14)]/\gamma T$ for sample A at two different cooling rates. In both cases, $[C(0) - C(14)]/\gamma T$ is linear with $T$ below $\sim 4$K, and fits the strong coupling form of the d-wave model very well (details of the fit can be found in Ref.14). Hence, at least for moderately fast cooling the order parameter symmetry is unaffected.

In conventional models of superconductivity, the density of states at the Fermi level $N_0$ is an important factor in determining $T_c$ [in simple BCS theory $T_c \propto \exp(-1/N_0 V)$, where $V$ is the superconducting pairing potential energy]. This continues to be the case even in most more exotic theories, and so it appears very difficult to reconcile the relatively small decrease in $T_c$ with the large decrease in $\gamma$ (see Fig. 4) which in band-theory is proportional to $N_0$. This behavior is similar to that found upon deuteration of $\kappa$-Br, which also produces a large

![FIG. 4: (color online). Cooling-rate dependence of $T_c$ for both samples. Inset: $\gamma$ versus $T_c$. The lines are guides to the eye.](image)

![FIG. 5: (color online). Normalised superconducting anomaly height $\Delta C_{MF}/\gamma T_c$ as a function of cooling rate for both samples. The inset shows behavior of $\Delta C_{MF}$ in units of Jmol$^{-1}$K$^{-1}$.](image)

![FIG. 6: (color online). Low temperature behavior of the electronic specific heat in the superconducting state, $[C(0) - C(14)]/\gamma T$, along with fits to a strong coupling d-wave model, at two different cooling rates (sample A). The 9K/min data have been offset vertically for clarity by 0.1 as indicated by the arrow.](image)
decrease in $\gamma$ with only a small decrease in $T_c$. There is clear evidence that deuteration moves the system towards the antiferromagnetic state. In some systems, $\gamma$ is found to diverge at the metal insulator boundary, however the behavior in deuterated $\kappa$-Br is similar to that observed in the high $T_c$ cuprates. A natural explanation of our results is that upon fast cooling $\kappa$-Br phase separates into insulating and metallic (superconducting) regions. Given the proximity of $\kappa$-Br to the AFI phase boundary this is plausible and explains the reduction of the average value of $\gamma$ for the whole sample. It is also consistent with the SMIRS results mentioned above. However, it does not, in itself, explain the observed reduction of $T_c$. One possibility is that fast cooling causes the structure transition at $T_\gamma$ to be incomplete throughout the whole sample, and effectively produces a negative pressure moving the system further towards the AFI phase. As the AFI phase transition is first order, the system naturally may then break up into superconducting and insulating regions. This picture also explains the progressive lowering of $\gamma$ as a function of increased deuteration. The small reduction in $T_c$ could then result, at least partially, from small changes in the intrinsic density of states and/or pairing interaction strength as the phase diagram is transversal. This is similar to the behavior observed upon deuteration of $\kappa$-Br, where $T_c$ at first rises slightly and then falls as the AFI boundary is approached. However, in $\kappa$-Cl the opposite trend is found with $T_c$ being maximum close to the phase boundary. Another factor which needs to be taken into account is the direct effect of disorder. As $\kappa$-Br has a strongly anisotropic energy gap, even non-magnetic impurities are expected to decrease $T_c$ rapidly, as observed experimentally for $\kappa$-NCS. The correlation of the increase in residual resistance $\rho_0$ with the decrease of $T_c$ as the cooling rate is increased in $\kappa$-Br has been found to be in agreement with that expected for a d-wave superconducting energy gap. We note however, the presence of insulating regions in rapidly cooled samples, as suggested by the present work, would also cause a substantial increase $\rho_0$ in addition to the direct effect of disorder. Hence $\rho_0$ may overestimate the true level of disorder present in the superconducting fraction of the fast cooled samples.

In summary, we have measured the low-temperature specific heat $\kappa$-Br as a function of cooling rate through the structural phase transition at $T_\gamma$ ($\approx 78$ K). $T_c$ decreases with increased cooling rate, and is accompanied by a sharp decrease in the normal state electronic specific heat. This reduction is up to $\approx 50 \%$ at our maximum cooling rate ($\sim 100$ K/min). We suggest that this reduction in $\gamma$ is due to phase separation of superconducting (metallic) and insulating regions, caused by the fast cooling effectively applying negative pressure to the material and thus driving it closer to the first order antiferromagnetic insulating state.

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