Ultracold Bosonic Atoms in Disordered Optical Superlattices

R. Roth and K. Burnett

Clarendon Laboratory, University of Oxford, Parks Road, Oxford OX1 3PU, United Kingdom

(Dated: November 16, 2018)

The influence of disorder on ultracold atomic Bose gases in quasiperiodic optical lattices is discussed in the framework of the one-dimensional Bose-Hubbard model. It is shown that simple periodic modulations of the well depths generate a rich phase diagram consisting of superfluid, Mott insulator, Bose-glass and Anderson localized phases. The detailed evolution of mean occupation numbers and number fluctuations as function of modulation amplitude and interaction strength is discussed. Finally, the signatures of the different phases, especially of the Bose-glass phase, in matter-wave interference experiments are investigated.

Quantum phase transitions of interacting bosonic many-body systems in disordered lattice potentials have been a topic of intense theoretical investigations in the past years. A rich variety of possible zero-temperature phases has been predicted such as the Mott-insulator phase, a Anderson localized phase, and a Bose glass phase. Recently, impressive experiments on the transition from a superfluid to a Mott-insulator demonstrated that ultracold bosonic atoms in optical lattices offer unique possibilities to explore the phase diagram of these systems. The degree of experimental control is remarkable: The geometry of the lattice potential can be designed and specified precisely, even disorder can be introduced in a controlled manner. The strength of the two-body interaction can be chosen by means of Feshbach resonances. Ultimately, the structure of the ground state can be examined in detail. This makes them a promising candidate to study the competition between disorder and interaction experimentally in an unprecedented way.

In this Letter we discuss the ground state phase diagram of an interacting bosonic many-body system in an optical superlattice, i.e., a quasiperiodic lattice composed of disordered unit cells. We study the dependence of the ground state on the interaction strength and the amount of disorder within the Bose-Hubbard model.

Consider a gas of \( N \) bosonic atoms in an one-dimensional lattice potential at zero temperature. For a sufficiently strong lattice it is convenient to describe the state of the system in a basis of localized “tight-binding” wave functions, i.e., the Wannier functions that result from a band-structure calculation. We assume that only the localized ground state of each lattice well contributes and excited vibrational states can be neglected. For a system with \( I \) lattice sites the many-body state can thus be represented in terms of number states \( |n_1, \ldots, n_I\rangle \) with occupation numbers \( n_i \) for the individual sites \( i = 1, \ldots, I \). A complete basis of the model space is formed by the set of number states \( |n_1^0, \ldots, n_I^0\rangle \) (\( \alpha = 1, \ldots, D \)) with all compositions of the occupation numbers. The dimension \( D = (N + I - 1)!/[N!(I - 1)!] \) of the number basis grows dramatically; for \( I = 8 \) lattice sites and \( N = 8 \) particles the dimension is 6435, for \( I = N = 10 \) it is already 92378.

Within the model space any state can be expanded in this number basis

\[
|\psi\rangle = \sum_{\alpha=1}^{D} C_\alpha |n_1^\alpha, \ldots, n_I^\alpha\rangle
\]

with expansion coefficients \( C_\alpha \). We introduce creation operators \( a_i \) and annihilation operators \( a_i^\dagger \), which create and annihilate, resp., a particle in the lowest vibrational state at site \( i \), and the corresponding occupation number operators \( n_i = a_i^\dagger a_i \).

The Hamiltonian of the interacting many-body system in second quantization is the so-called Bose-Hubbard Hamiltonian

\[
H = \sum_{i=1}^{I} \left[-J(a_i^\dagger a_{i+1} + a_{i+1}^\dagger a_i) + \epsilon_i n_i + \frac{V}{2} n_i(n_i - 1)\right].
\]

The first term describes the coupling between neighboring sites with a strength \( J \). We use cyclic boundary conditions, i.e., hopping between the first and the last site of the lattice is included. The last two terms of \( H \) give the on-site single-particle energy \( \epsilon_i \) and the on-site two-body interaction with a strength \( V \). Formally, the parameters are given by matrix elements of components of the coordinate space Hamiltonian calculated with the Wannier wave functions associated with the individual sites. The hopping strength \( J \), e.g., is the off-diagonal matrix element of the kinetic energy operator calculated in the Wannier basis. For an irregular lattice potential the on-site energies \( \epsilon_i \) depend explicitly on the site index \( i \); for simplicity we neglect the site-dependence of \( J \) and \( V \). Interactions between particles at different sites and long range hopping are also neglected.

To determine the ground state of the system we solve the eigenvalue problem of the Bose-Hubbard Hamiltonian numerically. The Hamilton matrix in the number basis is easy to calculate; the on-site energy and the two-body interaction form the diagonal and the hopping term generates a few off-diagonal matrix elements. Since the Hamilton matrix is very sparse and we are interested in
the lowest eigenstates only, an iterative Lanczos-type algorithm is most efficient to solve the eigenvalue problem. This enables us to treat systems with up to \( I = 12 \) and \( N = 12 \) on a standard PC without further approximations. Larger systems can be treated by Monte Carlo techniques \([6, 13]\). Two relevant ground state observables we consider in the following are the mean occupation number \( n_i = \langle \psi | n_i | \psi \rangle \) and number fluctuations \( \sigma_i^2 = \langle \psi | n_i^2 | \psi \rangle - \langle \psi | n_i | \psi \rangle^2 \) at the individual sites.

The interplay between the three terms of the Bose-Hubbard Hamiltonian \([3]\) generates a rich zero-temperature phase diagram. Its basic structure can be understood by analyzing the contributions of the different terms to the energy expectation value for particular states. The off-diagonal hopping term gives a negative contribution to the total energy if the state is a superposition of many number states. If only the hopping is present the coefficients of the ground state \([1]\) are related to the noninteracting case. Thus all number states contribute and number fluctuations \( \sigma_i \) are large. The particles can tunnel freely through the lattice and the system resembles a superfluid.

If a repulsive two-body interaction is included then number states with large occupation numbers at individual sites have high energy expectation values. The repulsion favors homogeneous distributions of the particles over all sites. The competition between hopping term and two-body interaction governs one kind of quantum phase transition present in these systems. For small interaction strengths \( V/J \) the hopping term dominates and the ground state is a superposition of many number states --- a superfluid. With increasing \( V/J \) those number states with large occupation numbers at some sites are gradually suppressed because of their large interaction energy.

For integer (commensurate) fillings \( N/I \) there is a unique number state with \( n_i = N/I \) at each site which minimizes the expectation value of the two-body interaction. For sufficiently strong interactions the ground state is given by just this number state. Therefore number fluctuations \( \sigma_i \) and also the expectation value of the hopping term vanish. This phase in which tunneling of the particles is inhibited by the repulsive interaction is called Mott insulator phase. Quantum Monte Carlo calculations for the infinite one-dimensional Bose-Hubbard model with \( N/I = 1 \) show that the superfluid to Mott-insulator transition occurs at \( (V/J)_{\text{crit}} \approx 4.65 \) \([1]\), which is confirmed by a renormalization group study \([10]\) and a strong-coupling expansion \([3]\). Mean-field models predict a much larger critical interaction strength \([4, 11]\).

How does disorder affect the phase diagram of the Bose-Hubbard model? Most of the theoretical investigations on disorder induced effects concentrate on infinite lattices with completely random on-site energies. More relevant for cold bosonic atoms in optical lattices are quasiperiodic structures, i.e., lattices composed of disordered unit cells. As simplest example we discuss an one-dimensional optical superlattice with a sinusoidal modulation of the on-site energies \( \epsilon_i \). A unit cell consists of \( I = 8 \) lattice sites and the \( \epsilon_i \) vary in the interval \( [\Delta, 0] \) as shown in Fig. 1. Experimentally this modulation can be realized using a superposition of two optical standing waves with appropriate wavelengths --- a so-called two-color lattice. This allows the independent control of the tunneling strength \( J \) and the disorder amplitude \( \Delta \). The sinusoidal modulation already shows the relevant fundamental features but is only the most simple realization of disorder, more complex superlattices were already generated experimentally \([3]\).

Let us start from a noninteracting superfluid in a regular lattice \( (\Delta/J = 0, V/J = 0) \) and increases the disorder amplitude \( \Delta \) gradually. The mean occupation number \( \bar{n}_i \) of the site with lowest \( \epsilon_i \) in each unit cell will increase. For sufficiently strong disorder the ground state will be composed of number states which have non-zero occupation only at the deepest well of each unit cell. This mechanism is similar to Anderson localization in an infinite system with completely random on-site energies \([12]\) and we will adopt the name for simplicity. However, in contrast to the Anderson localized phase in a random lattice the ground state is still a superposition of several number states with considerable number fluctuations \( \sigma_i \). Therefore, this state appears almost like a superfluid state in a regular lattice with \( I \) times the lattice spacing.

The disorder induced localization is strongly affected by repulsive interactions which drive the system towards even distributions of particles over all sites. To study the detailed interplay between interactions and disorder we diagonalize the Hamiltonian numerically for an isolated \( I = 8 \) unit cell. This assumes that the exchange of particles between different unit cells can be neglected. By direct comparison with two cell calculations this turns out to be a very good approximation for \( V/J > 0 \).

Figure 2 shows the mean occupation numbers \( \bar{n}_i \) and the number fluctuations \( \sigma_i \) for the sinusoidal superlattice with \( \Delta/J = 60 \) and commensurate filling \( (I = 8, N = 8) \) as function of the interaction strength \( V/J \). For vanishing interaction strength all particles are localized at the lowest energy site within the unit cell. However, with increasing \( V/J \) the mean occupation at this site is reduced rapidly and the particles are redistributed to sites with higher on-site energies. This rearrangement happens stepwise, i.e., first the two sites with second lowest
of successive rearrangements is called Bose-glass phase. The ground state is a pure number state. This region is referred to as the Mott insulator phase where the ground state is a (insulators). The labels identify the different phases: superfluid (SF), Mott insulator (MI), Bose glass (BG), and Anderson localized (AL).

How can these structures be observed experimentally? An experimentally quite simple approach is the imaging of matter-wave interference patterns after release from the trap and ballistic expansion. The crucial quantity that determines the presence or absence of an interference pattern is the phase coherence between atoms at different lattice sites. Small phase fluctuations at the individual sites, which imply phase coherence, are connected to large number fluctuations. To simulate the density interference pattern for a given ground state we approximate the wave function of an atom localized at a lattice site by a Gaussian wave-packet. The superposition of the wave packets after free expansion (neglecting interactions) results in a density interference pattern. To account for the phase fluctuations we calculate the incoherent average over typically 10000 sets of on-site phases, which are chosen randomly with a Gaussian distribution of width \( \sigma_{\phi,i} \).

Eventually, at \( V \approx \Delta \) a final rearrangement happens and all sites have equal \( \bar{n}_i = 1 \) and very small number fluctuations. This is the transition from the Bose glass to the Mott insulator phase where the ground state is a pure number state with \( n_i = 1 \) at each site.

Figure 3 summarizes the phase-diagram for the sinusoidal superlattice. The contour plot shows the square of the largest coefficient \( C_{\text{max}}^2 \) for the sinusoidal superlattice with \( I = 8, N = 8 \) as function of \( V/J \) and \( \Delta/J \). The dark shadings indicate that the ground state is a pure number state (insulators). The labels identify the different phases: superfluid (SF), Mott insulator (MI), Bose glass (BG), and Anderson localized (AL).

This boundary two stable configurations within the Bose-glass phase (BG) follow. At very small \( V/J \) and large disorder amplitudes the Anderson localized phase (AL) appears. The remaining regions resemble a (disordered) superfluid (SF).

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FIG. 2: Mean occupation numbers \( \bar{n}_i \) (a) and number fluctuations \( \sigma_i \) (b) for the sinusoidal superlattice with \( I = 8, N = 8 \), and \( \Delta/J = 60 \) as function of \( V/J \). The different rows correspond to the individual sites of a unit cell.

FIG. 3: Contour plot of the square of the largest coefficient \( C_{\text{max}}^2 \) for the sinusoidal superlattice with \( I = 8 \), \( N = 8 \), and \( \Delta/J = 60 \) as function of \( V/J \) and \( \Delta/J \). Dark shadings indicate that the ground state is a pure number state (insulators). The labels identify the different phases: superfluid (SF), Mott insulator (MI), Bose glass (BG), and Anderson localized (AL).
large number fluctuations and cause the reappearance of the vicinity of rearrangements certain lattice sites regain incoherent background remains as shown in panel (d). In all sites are small and the fringes vanish again; only the glass phase, e.g. at number fluctuations. In the stable regions of the Bose and increased incoherent background due to the reduced structure of the superfluid reappears with broader peaks result from folding with a Gaussian profile to mimic a restricted experimental resolution.

In summary, we have shown that ultracold atomic gases in optical superlattices are an ideal system to study the complicated interplay between interaction and disorder. As function of the interaction strength one can observe the detailed evolution of the ground state from an Anderson localized state through a Bose-glass to the Mott-insulator, which is accompanied by a characteristic vanishing and reappearance of interference fringes. The remarkable degree of experimental access to all relevant parameters allows a comprehensive study of these quantum phase transitions.

This work was supported by the Deutsche Forschungsgemeinschaft, the UK EPSRC, and the EU under the TMR network ERB-FMRX-CT-0002.

* Electronic address: robert.roth@physics.ox.ac.uk
† Electronic address: k.burnett1@physics.ox.ac.uk

FIG. 4: Matter-wave interference patterns for different combinations of $V/J$ and $\Delta/J$. The gray curves show the full interference pattern of the superlattice; the black curves result from folding with a Gaussian profile to mimic a restricted experimental resolution.

This gives rise to the short wave length oscillations which reflect the periodicity of the superlattice. The black curves are obtained by folding with a Gaussian profile to mimic a restricted experimental resolution. The remaining smooth pattern is largely determined by the structure within the unit cells.

In the absence of interactions and disorder we obtain the prominent interference pattern of the superfluid with pronounced peaks shown in Fig. 4(a). This structure dissolves if we enter the Anderson localized phase shown in panel (b) for $\Delta/J = 60$, depending on the experimental resolution one may detect the interference pattern of a lattice with $I$ times the fundamental lattice spacing. If we include interactions $V/J > 0$ and enter the Bose glass phase we observe a characteristic vanishing and reappearance of interference fringes which is correlated to the number fluctuations shown in Fig. 4(b). For weak interactions $V/J = 10$ the three-peak structure of the superfluid reappears with broader peaks and increased incoherent background due to the reduced number fluctuations. In the stable regions of the Bose glass phase, e.g. at $V/J = 30$, number fluctuations of all sites are small and the fringes vanish again; only the incoherent background remains as shown in panel (d). In the vicinity of rearrangements certain lattice sites regain large number fluctuations and cause the reappearance of interference fringes. Figure 4(e) depicts an example for $V/J = 42$, where every second lattice site has considerable fluctuations (compare Fig. 4) which create a distinctive fringe pattern. Eventually, if we enter the Mott insulator phase only the incoherent bump remains as shown in panel (f). To obtain complementary information on the spatial density distribution of these disordered states Bragg diffraction would be a useful tool.

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