Suppression of Conductance in a Topological Insulator Nanostep Junction

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We investigate quantum transport via surface states in a nanostep junction on the surface of a 3D topological insulator that involves two different side surfaces. We calculate the conductance across the junction within the scattering matrix formalism and find that as the bias voltage is increased, the conductance of the nanostep junction is suppressed by a universal factor of 1/3 compared to the conductance of a similar planar junction based on a single surface of a topological insulator. We also calculate and analyze the Fano factor of the nanostep junction and predict that the Fano factor saturates at 1/5, five times smaller than for a Poisson process.

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Experimental demonstration of topological phases in both two-dimensional (such as HgTe) and three-dimensional (such as Bi$_2$Se$_3$) compounds with strong spin-orbit interaction has generated a plethora of interest in the physics community. These compounds are insulating in the bulk (since they have an energy gap between the conduction band and the valence band) but their surfaces support gapless topological excitations. These surface states are topologically protected against non-magnetic defects by time-reversal symmetry. These surface states are protected in spite of such an abrupt defect. These atomic sized steps are usually modeled as delta function potential barriers. In this article we investigate quantum transport through a nanostep junction involving two different side surfaces of a 3D topological insulator. We predict that the conductance of the nanostep junction is suppressed in the large-energy limit by a universal factor of $1/3$ as compared to the conductance of a similar junction based on a single surface of a 3D topological insulator (or a similar junction in graphene). Figure (a) shows a schematic of the nanostep junction considered. The junction is divided into three regions. In region I ($x < 0$ and $z = 0$) and in region III ($x > 0$ and $z = L$) the surface states lie in the $x$-$y$ plane, while in region II ($x = 0$ and $0 \leq z \leq L$) the surface states lie in the $y$-$z$ plane. A dc bias voltage is applied between region I and III and a top gate $V_p$ controls the carriers in region II. Figure (b) shows a schematic of the analogous planar junction, where in all three regions the surface states lie in the $x$-$y$ plane and a top gate $V_p$ is applied to region II. The first junction [Fig. (a)] is referred to as a step junction, and the second junction [Fig. (b)] as a planar junction in the rest of this article. We use the conceptually transparent scattering matrix formalism to calculate the transport properties of these junctions. For concreteness, we use typical parameter values of the 3D topological insulator Bi$_2$Se$_3$ when illustrating our results.

The low-energy effective Hamiltonian for Bi$_2$Se$_3$ in the basis of four hybridized states of Se and Bi $p_z$-orbitals denoted as \{ $|p_1^+, \uparrow\rangle$, $|p_2^-, \uparrow\rangle$, $|p_1^+, \downarrow\rangle$, $|p_2^-, \downarrow\rangle$ \} can be written as [11]:

$$H(k) = \epsilon_0(k) + \begin{bmatrix} M(k) & A_{1k} \end{bmatrix} \begin{bmatrix} A_{2k} \\ A_{1k}^* \end{bmatrix} + \begin{bmatrix} B_{1k} \end{bmatrix},$$

where $k_z = k_x \pm ik_y$, $\epsilon_0(k) = C + D_1k_z^2 + D_2k_z^2$, $M(k) = M - B_1k_z^2 - B_2k_z^2$, and $k_{+} = k_z^2 + k_y^2$. Here $\uparrow$ ($\downarrow$) stands for up (down) spin and + (−) stands for

FIG. 1: Schematics of the proposed junction. (a) The nanostep junction. As the name suggests the height $L$ of the junction is $\sim 10$ nm. (b) Similar junction, involving only one side surface of the topological insulator. See the text for further details.
even (odd) parity. From this three-dimensional Hamiltonian, there exists a straightforward procedure to obtain the effective Hamiltonian describing the surface states \([11][12]\). The surface states in the \(x-y\) plane, for example, are obtained from the three-dimensional wavefunctions for these surface states (which are exponentially damped in the \(z\)-direction, with finite skin depth \(\lambda\)) using Eq. (1), followed by imposing the boundary conditions of vanishing wavefunctions at the two boundaries \((z = 0\) and \(z = L\)). For three-dimensional topological insulators \((L \gg \lambda)\) the surface states at the two boundaries are decoupled and the effective Hamiltonian describing the carriers in regions I and III is then given by \([12]\):

\[
\mathcal{H}^\parallel = \epsilon_0^y + \hbar v_F^y (\sigma_x k_y - \sigma_y k_x),
\]

where \(\epsilon_0^y = C + \frac{B_z}{B_0} M\), \(\hbar v_F^y = A_2 \sqrt{1 - \frac{B_z^2}{B_0^2}}\) represents the Fermi velocity in the \(x-y\) plane and \(\sigma_x, \sigma_y\) and \(\sigma_z\) denote the usual Pauli matrices.

Analogously, we obtain the effective Hamiltonian describing the carriers in region II as

\[
\mathcal{H}^{\perp} = \epsilon_0^{\perp} + eV_x + \hbar v_F^{\perp} (\sigma_y A_1 k_z - \sigma_z k_y),
\]

where \(\epsilon_0^{\perp} = C + \frac{B_z}{B_0} M\) and \(\hbar v_F^{\perp} = A_2 \sqrt{1 - \frac{B_z^2}{B_0^2}}\) solves the Hamiltonian \([2]\), we obtain the eigenstates in region I and region III as

\[
\Psi_I^{\parallel(III)} = \frac{1}{\sqrt{2}} \begin{bmatrix} 1 \\ i e^{i\phi} \end{bmatrix} e^{ik_y y} e^{\pm ik_x x},
\]

with corresponding energy eigenvalues given by \(\epsilon = \epsilon_0^{\parallel} + \hbar v_F^{\parallel} \sqrt{k_x^2 + k_y^2}\) and \(\tan(\phi) \equiv k_y/k_x\). Similarly, in region II we obtain:

\[
\Psi_I^{\parallel} = \frac{1}{\sqrt{2(1 + \sin(\gamma))}} \begin{bmatrix} \mp i \cos(\gamma) \\ 1 + \sin(\gamma) \end{bmatrix} e^{ik_y y} e^{\pm ik_z z},
\]

with corresponding energy eigenvalues \(\epsilon = \epsilon_0^{\parallel} + eV_x + \hbar v_F^{\parallel} \sqrt{k_y^2 + (A_1^2/A_2)^2 k_z^2}\) and \(\tan(\gamma) \equiv A_2 k_y/(A_1 k_z)\). The \(+(-)\) labels of the wavefunction indicate right (left) traveling carriers in regions I and III, and downwards (upwards) traveling carriers in region II. It should be noted that in general \(\epsilon_0^{\parallel} \neq \epsilon_0^{\perp}\), which implies that the Dirac cone describing the surface states in the \(y-z\) plane is shifted by an energy of \(\epsilon_0 \equiv \epsilon_0^{\parallel} - \epsilon_0^{\perp}\) with respect to the Dirac cone describing surface states in the \(x-y\) plane. Furthermore, the Dirac cone describing the excitations in region II has elliptic cross section \((A_1 \neq A_2)\). These features are in good agreement with recent electronic structure calculations of similar systems \([13]\).

Considering electrons incident from left to right, the total wavefunction in the different regions can be written as:

\[
\begin{align*}
\Psi_I &= \Psi_I^{\parallel} + r \Psi_I^{\parallel} \quad &\text{if } x \leq 0, \ z = 0, \\
\Psi_{II} &= a \Psi_{II}^{\parallel} + b \Psi_{II}^{\parallel} \quad &\text{if } 0 \leq z \leq L, \ x = 0, \\
\Psi_{III} &= t \Psi_{III}^{\parallel} \quad &\text{if } x \geq 0, \ z = L.
\end{align*}
\]

The reflection and transmission coefficients \(r\) and \(t\) can be obtained by imposing the boundary conditions under which the current normal to the boundary is conserved \([14][16]\). We then find for the transmission probability \(T \equiv t^* t\) of an electron incident on the step junction at a given angle of incidence \(\phi\):

\[
T_{\text{step}}(\phi) = \frac{\cos^2(\phi) \cos^2(\gamma)}{\cos^2(\phi) \cos^2(\gamma) \cos^2(k_z L) + \sin^2(k_z L)}
\]

with

\[
\sin(\gamma) = \kappa \sin(\phi),
\]

\[
\kappa = \left(\frac{\epsilon - \epsilon_0^{\parallel}}{\epsilon - \epsilon_0^{\perp}}\right) = \frac{\varepsilon - \epsilon_0^{\parallel}}{\tilde{\varepsilon} - \epsilon_0^{\parallel}}
\]

Eq. (8) is obtained by using conservation of energy and conservation of momentum along the \(y\)-direction.

The zero-temperature conductance \(G_{\text{step}}\) across the
The conductance of the step junction is thus suppressed by a factor of 1/3 compared with planar junctions. We at-

FIG. 3: (Color online) Transmission (a) $T_{\text{step}}(\phi)$ [Eq. (7)] for the step junction and (b) $T_{\text{plane}}(\phi)$ [Eq. (10)] for the planar junction as a function of angle of incidence $\phi$ for $L = 100$ nm and $\bar{\epsilon} = 0.25$ eV. Parameters used are the same as in Fig. 2. The dashed red lines mark the envelopes of the transmission probabilities.

The transmission probability of the analogous planar junction [see Fig. 2(b)] with a top gate in the middle region is given by (12):

$$G_{\text{plane}} = \frac{G_0}{\cos^2(k'_x L) + \sin^2(k'_x L) \frac{1 - \sin(\phi) \sin(\gamma')^2}{\cos(\phi) \cos(\gamma')^2}}.$$  

(10)

Here $k'_x$ represents the $x$-component of the momentum in region II, the energy dispersion is given by $\epsilon = \epsilon_0^x + eV_p + \hbar v_F \sqrt{k_x^2 + k'_x^2}$ and $\gamma' \equiv \tan^{-1}(\frac{v_F}{k_x^2})$. Figure 2(b) shows the conductance $G_{\text{plane}}$ as a function of energy $\epsilon$ for different values of $L$. As before, the conductance reaches a minimum when $\bar{\epsilon} = eV_p$, and then increases to reach its saturation value $G/G_0 = 1$. For larger energies, the conductance of the step junction is thus suppressed by a factor of 1/3 compared with planar junctions. We attribute this suppression to the fact that the carriers in the step junction have to change their plane of propagation in region II [18].

We now analyze in more detail the difference between the conductance of the step and the planar junction by comparing the denominators in Eqs. (7) and (10). Figure 3 shows the transmission probabilities $T_{\text{step}}(\phi)$ and $T_{\text{plane}}(\phi)$ as a function of the angle of incidence $\phi$. From Fig. 3(a) we see that for the step junction there is a cut-off angle of incidence, which arises from the finite energy and velocity mismatch. This critical angle can be expressed as $\phi_{c,\text{step}} = \sin^{-1}\left(\frac{\sqrt{\delta - 1}}{2\sqrt{\delta}}\right)$. We also see that the conductance of both junctions includes contributions from many resonant modes. Here, a resonant mode is defined as a mode with an angle of incidence for which the transmission $T = 1$. The various minima of these resonant modes form an envelope, as shown by the dashed (red) lines in Fig. 3. These envelope functions are obtained from the transmission expressions Eqs. (7) and (10) by setting $k_x L = (2n+1)\frac{\pi}{4}$ and $k'_x L = (2n+1)\frac{\pi}{2}$, respectively, with $n$ integer. When the number of resonant modes is large ($n \gg 1$) a lower bound for the integrated transmission is obtained by integrating over the envelope function. Under these conditions the conductance $G_{\text{step}}$ of the step junction [Eq. (9)] becomes

$$G_{\text{step}}/G_0 \overset{n \gg 1}{\to} \frac{\int_0^{\pi/2} d\phi \cos^3(\phi) \cos^2(\gamma)}{\left(1 - \frac{\delta}{1 + \delta}\right)^2}.$$  

(11)

Similarly, we find for the planar junction

$$G_{\text{plane}}/G_0 \overset{n \gg 1}{\to} \frac{\sqrt{\delta(3\delta - 1) + (\delta - 1)^2 \tanh^{-1}(\sqrt{\delta})}}{2 \delta^{3/2}},$$  

(12)

where $\delta \equiv \frac{\bar{\epsilon}}{eV_p}$. The suppression of the conductance $G_{\text{step}}$ in the vicinity of the saturation value thus depends on the shift of the Dirac point energies and the ratio of the Fermi velocities in region I and II [14]. As final remarks, we note that the effect of the elliptical dispersion in the middle region of the step junction can be incorporated as an effectively wider barrier, $\tilde{L} = L\frac{\Delta n}{A_1}$ and $A_2 > 1$, compared to the planar junction. The minimum barrier width needed to observe the suppression in the conductance described above is given by the condition for the existence of the first resonant mode in the junction, $L = \pi/k_z$. In the case of Bi$_2$Se$_3$, this minimum width is $L \sim 5$ nm. For cleaved topological insulators, widths of $L \sim 1$ nm have been reported [20].

In the remaining part of this paper we investigate the Fano factor of the step junction, which is a measure for the noise suppression in the junction relative to Poisson noise [3]. Within the scattering matrix formalism the Fano factor $F$ is defined as

$$F = \frac{\int_0^{\pi/2} d\phi \cos(\phi) T(1-T)}{\int_0^{\pi/2} d\phi \cos(\phi) T},$$  

(13)

where $\phi$ is the angle of incidence of the carriers and $T$ represents the transmission of the junction. Substituting
we find that the Fano factor of the step junction is given as

$$F_{\text{step}} \rightarrow \frac{1}{5} + \frac{12}{175} \kappa^2,$$

where $\kappa$ as defined earlier.

Figure 4 shows the calculated $F_{\text{step}}$ and $F_{\text{plane}}$ for different values of the junction width $L$. As the energy of the incident carriers increases, both Fano factors reach a maximum around $\tilde{\epsilon} = 0.03$ eV, where $\tilde{\epsilon} = \epsilon_0 + eV_p$ and $\epsilon = eV_p$ respectively. For higher energies the Fano factor of the step junction oscillates around its saturation value $1/5$, which is five times smaller than the Fano factor expected for a Poisson process, $F = 1$. On the other hand, the Fano factor $F_{\text{plane}}$ for the planar junction vanishes as the energy of the incident carriers increases. This can be explained by noticing that the transmission $T_{\text{plane}} \rightarrow 1$ as $\tilde{\epsilon}$ increases (see Fig. 2(b)). This remarkable difference in the Fano factor for the two junctions again suggests that there exists an additional scattering mechanism for the step junction that does not exist in the planar junc-

In conclusion, we have proposed and analyzed quantum transport through a nanostep junction on the surface of a 3D topological insulator in the ballistic limit. Our results show that the conductance in a nanostep junction is suppressed by up to a factor of $1/3$ compared to similar junctions based on a single surface of a 3D topological insulator or graphene. Although the suppression depends on the ratio of the Fermi velocities and the difference in Dirac point energies of the different side surfaces of the 3D topological insulator, the saturation values of the conductance and Fano factor themselves $G_{\text{step}} \rightarrow 2/3$ and $F_{\text{step}} \rightarrow 1/5$ are universal. We also predict oscillating behavior of the Fano factor around its saturation value. Experimental demonstration will provide further insight into the scattering mechanisms involved in topological insulator nanostep junctions.

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For topological insulators with strong spin orbit interactions, a change in the plane of propagation is accompanied by a change in the spin due to the helical nature of the surface states. Although our model does not take spin explicitly into account, it is implicitly included in the Hamiltonian (1).

Note that the lower bound Eq. (11) becomes exact in the limit $\kappa \to 0$.

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Note that the approximation $n \gg 1$ gives a lower bound on the conductance and an upper bound on the Fano factor.

As has been done for shot noise in graphene, see e.g. L. DiCarlo et al., Phys. Rev. Lett. 100, 156801 (2008).