Single-particle and collective mode couplings associated with 1- and 2-directional electronic ordering in metallic RTe$_3$ (R = Ho, Dy, Tb)

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The coupling of phonons with collective modes and single-particle gap excitations associated with one (1d) and two-directional (2d) electronically-driven charge-density wave (CDW) ordering in metallic RTe$_3$ is investigated as a function of rare-earth ion chemical pressure (R= Tb, Dy, Ho) using femtosecond pump-probe spectroscopy. From the $T$-dependence of the CDW gap $\Delta_{CDW}$ and the amplitude mode (AM) of the CDW, we find that while the transition to a 1d-CDW ordered state at $T_{c1}$ initially proceeds in an exemplary mean-field (MF) fashion, below $T_{c1}$, $\Delta_{CDW}$ is depressed and departs from the MF behavior. The effect is apparently triggered by resonant mode-mixing of the AM with a totally symmetric phonon at 1.75 THz. At low temperatures, when the state evolves into a 2d-CDW ordered state at $T_{c2}$ in the DyTe$_3$ and HoTe$_3$, additional much weaker mode mixing is observed.

Ordered electronic states in condensed matter physics are of fundamental importance as models for investigating the competition between different ground states and collective behavior of quantum systems. They are also of a practical interest because electronic ordering gives rise to phenomena such as superconductivity and colossal magnetoresistance which are all macroscopic manifestations of underlying quantum phenomena. One class of systems which has received renewed attention recently are two-dimensional (2D) layered metals with electronically-driven charge-density-wave (CDW) instabilities, partly because of the possible role that electronic ordering may play in high-temperature superconductivity in layered cuprates and (more recently) iron pnictides [1]. In weakly interacting systems, the instability is predominantly driven by a Fermi surface (FS) nesting, where a single wavevector $q_N$ connects multiple points along the FS, giving rise to an enhanced generalized susceptibility at this wavevector, which in turn leads to the formation of an electronic ordered CDW state which reduces the energy of the system. How this behavior evolves in strongly coupled systems such as cuprates is still the subject of intense investigations and is not clear.

Layered rare-earth tri-telluride compounds (RTe$_3$, where R is a rare-earth ion) shown schematically in Fig. 1(a) are interesting newly discovered examples of very weakly coupled electronically-driven [2] CDW systems whose properties can be tuned by chemical pressure. Initial electron diffraction [2] and subsequent high resolution x-ray diffraction [3, 4, 5] studies have revealed the ubiquitous presence of a weak lattice modulation at a primary modulation vector $q_{CDW}$, where FS nesting leads to the formation of a one-directional (1d) incommensurate CDW. More recently, ARPES confirmed the existence of imperfect FS nesting and revealed that as a result of the CDW, a gap forms in the Fermi surface in the $\Gamma - Z$ direction of the Brillouin zone. Quantum oscillations from the reconstructed FS have been observed in LaTe$_3$ [6]. Recent theoretical work suggests that there may be a competition between 1d “stripe order” and 2d “checkerboard order”, which is finely tuned by the strength of the electron-phonon coupling $\lambda$. Indeed, X-ray diffraction [7] and STM data [8] on the heavier rare-earth members of the series confirm the presence of a “rectangular” 2d-ordered CDW state at low temperatures (at $T_{c2} \approx 126$ K in HoTe$_3$ and 49 K in DyTe$_3$). In TbTe$_3$ there are also indications of possible 2d-ordering from scanning-tunneling microscope studies at 6 K [9], but no long range ordering was seen by X-ray diffraction.

In some layered chalcogenides, notably in NbSe$_2$ pressure leads to suppression of the CDW and emergence of superconductivity. Studies as a function of chemical pressure in tri-tellurides have shown that the 1d-CDW transition temperature $T_{c1}$ decreases with increasing R radius, but at the same time, another, coexisting 2d-ordered state appears in the heavier R members of the series, whose critical transition temperature $T_{c2}$ increases with increasing pressure (see Fig. 1(b)). So far no superconductivity was discovered, but all compounds show metallic resistivity down to the lowest temperatures, in spite of CDW gaps on the FS. For most of the series the local magnetic moments associated with rare earth ions order antiferromagnetically at temperatures below the CDW $T_c$’s [10].

Femtosecond pump-probe spectroscopy (FPPS) has recently been shown to be eminently suitable to the study of quasiparticle (QP) and collective excitations of electronically ordered systems [11, 12, 13, 14]. It allows the measurement of low-frequency modes with very high resolution which are inaccessible to Raman spectroscopy, as well as a direct measurement of the QP recombination kinetics across the CDW or superconducting gap. In this paper we use FPPS to investigate the evolution of the CDW gap and the coupling of the amplitude mode and single particle excitations with phonons in the 1d- and 2d-ordered states of three tri-tellurides for the first time: HoTe$_3$ and DyTe$_3$, which exhibit two CDW transitions,
and TbTe₃, for which there is only one transition.

FPPS involves the measurement of the transient reflectivity response after excitation by ultrashort (50 fs) laser pulses ¹²-¹⁴. The laser pulses excite electron-hole pairs which relax to states near the Fermi level in <50 fs by avalanche QP multiplication. When there is a gap for electronic excitations at low energy, such as is a CDW or superconducting gap, a relaxation bottleneck may form, and a non-equilibrium population of the QPs at the gap edge, which can be probed by excited state absorption with a probe laser pulse, thus effectively measuring QP density in real time. This QP density is usually assumed to be directly proportional to the transient change of reflectivity $\Delta R/R$ as a function of time delay $\Delta t$ of DyTe₃ at different temperatures. The oscillations are the coherently excited phonons and amplitude mode. The transient observed at short times is the single particle response. The data for the other members of the series are qualitatively the same.

The raw data on the transient reflectivity is shown in Fig. 1(c) for DyTe₃ (data on all three compounds are qualitatively similar). The QP response gives rise to the fast transient, while the oscillations are from the coherently excited phonons and the AM. The QP data are analyzed in the following way: the maximum value of $\Delta R/R(t)$ was used as a measure of QP density ($A_{QP}$), while the lifetime was obtained by fitting the falling slope of the fast transient with $\Delta R/R(t) = A \exp[-t/\tau_{QP}]$. The fast transient is then subtracted from the data to obtain the oscillatory responses, which are then analyzed separately.

The amplitude of the QP response $A_{QP}$ and the lifetime $\tau_{QP}$ for all three compounds is shown in Fig. 2 as a function of $T$. Their temperature dependence is very similar near $T_{c1}$. Fits to the data using a theoretical model ¹¹

$$A_{QP} \propto n_{pe}^* = \frac{\varepsilon_I/(\Delta(T) + k_BT/2)}{1 + \gamma \sqrt{\frac{2k_BT}{\pi\Delta(T)}} \exp(-\Delta(T)/k_BT)}$$

for the mean-field (MF) QP response using a BCS-like model

FIG. 1: (Color online). (a) The structure of RTe₃. (b) The phase diagram of RTe₃ showing the critical temperatures $T_{c1}$ and $T_{c2}$ for the 1d and 2d transitions respectively, as a function of lattice constant $a$. Chemical pressure increases with decreasing ionic radius of R (and a). (c) The raw data of the reflectivity $\Delta R/R$ as a function of time delay $\Delta t$ of DyTe₃ at different temperatures. The oscillations are the coherently excited phonons and amplitude mode. The transient observed at short times is the single particle response. The data for the other members of the series are qualitatively the same.

FIG. 2: (Color online). (a) The amplitude of the QP response as a function of temperature for TbTe₃, DyTe₃ and HoTe₃. The solid lines are the fits to the data using the predicted single-particle response for a BCS-like gap function under bottleneck relaxation conditions given by Eq. (11). (b) The relaxation time of the single particle response shows a divergence as $T_{c1}$ is approached from below.
B. Amplitude Deviation

Next, let us turn our attention to the AM and the phonons. To minimize problems with fast Fourier transform (FFT) artifacts in the data analysis, we fit the coherent phonon oscillations in two stages. First we use a set of three oscillators which are fit in time-domain, subtract them from the data, and then the residual time-trace containing weak oscillations is analyzed separately. As a typical example, the raw time-domain data and FFTs of the fitted time-trace and residual time-trace are shown in Fig. 3 for DyTe$_3$ at $T = 3.8$ K. In Fig. 4 we show the evolution of the observed modes as a function of temperature. Following the mode assignments of Lavagnini et al. [17], in the distorted phase there are 56 $A_1$ and 28 $B_1$-symmetry modes, all of which we can observe in principle. However, similarly as in Raman, many may be overlapping and we observe only a few. Many of the phonon modes are observed to shift in frequency at low temperatures. The color map (Fig. 4) shows also the linewidths and intensities of the most intense modes. At low $T$, the modes are very sharp and quite intense, but near $T_{c1}$, all modes virtually disappear. A mode at 2.2 THz - which we attribute to the AM of the CDW - is seen to soften significantly on approaching $T_{c1}$ from below. Resonant coupling of the AM with the mode at 1.75 THz is clearly seen in all three compounds. In addition, the mode near 2.6 THz is observed to show a frequency renormalization, which may be associated with the transition to bidirectional order at $T_{c2}$ in Ho and Dy tellurides. In TbTe$_3$ we see no further effect at low $T$, consistent with the absence of low-temperature CDW ordering in this compound.

In Fig. 4 we also show a model fit which describes the crossing of the AM with the 1.75 THz phonon. We use a simple model of two interacting vibrational modes, where the AM has a MF-like $T$-dependence $\nu_{AM} = \nu_0 * (1 - T/T_c)^\beta$ and $\nu_p = 1.75$ THz, with an interaction term (off-diagonal matrix element) $\delta$. The model is solved analytically, and the fits to the data in Fig. 4 give the same rather large value for the AM-phonon interaction in all three compounds, $\delta = 0.105 \pm 0.011$ THz (3.5 ± 0.5 cm$^{-1}$), and $\beta = 0.30(3)$. Remarkably, the temperature $T_{cr}$ at which the AM frequency crosses the 1.75 THz phonon is very close to $T^*$ for all three tellurides (compare Figs. 2 and 4). Furthermore, we see that the 2.6 THz phonon for all three compounds appears just below $T_{cr}$. From this systematic behavior we conclude that the anomalies in the QP density are related to the strong mixing of the AM with the 1.75 THz phonon. In the absence of a phonon mode assignment for the 1.75 THz mode, we cannot analyze the ionic displacements quantitatively, but we can qualitatively understand the observed effect as follows. Since the 1.75 THz phonon is clearly coupled to the AM, by symmetry this mode is also directly coupled to the charge excitations of the charge density wave. The strong mixing of the two modes will thus disturb the AM Te ion
low temperatures. The latter is particularly evident in DyTe
intermediate temperatures, and with the 2.6 THz phonon at
(whose frequency is 2.2THz at low
amplitude which coincides with
response. Judging from the fits to the data, the increase in
fatures of low-temperature ordering we see that the onsets
in spite of high resolution and excellent signal-to-noise i n
low
then be understood to arise from symmetry breaking be-
gap is renormalized by the 1.75 THz mode once it mixes
press the CDW gap $\Delta_{CDW}$ corresponding to the 1.75 THz phonon, which will in turn
displacements by introducing other displacements corre-
responding to the 1.75 THz phonon, which will in turn have the effect of reducing the AM amplitude, and de-
press the CDW gap $\Delta_{CDW}$. In other words, the CDW
gap is renormalized by the 1.75 THz mode once it mixes
with the AM. The appearance of the 2.6 THz phonon can then be understood to arise from symmetry breaking be-
low $T^*$. 

Summarizing the interplay between the different signa-
tures of low-temperature ordering we see that the onsets of 1d- and 2d-ordering are clearly seen in the QP re-
response. Judging from the fits to the data, the increase in amplitude which coincides with $T_{c2}$ is most likely associ-
ated with the opening of a second gap which accompanies the low-temperature transition to 2-directional ordering. High resolution XRD [3] and ARPES [8] in ErTe$_3$ inde-
deed suggest the opening of an additional gap along the $\Gamma \rightarrow X$ direction. In contrast, in the phonon spectrum, an AM is associated only with the 1d transition at $T_{c1}$, and in spite of high resolution and excellent signal-to-noise in
our data, we do not observe any soft mode which can be associated with $T_{c2}$.

However, the QP response at low $T$ in the three com-
ounds investigated here cannot be simply attributed to just the opening of a gaps at $T_{c1}$ and $T_{c2}$. The clear correlation between the temperature $T^*$ where the QP response departs from MF behaviour, the mode crossing temperature $T_{cr}$ and the appearance of the 2.6 THz phonon in all three compounds is unambiguous indication of systematic disruption of 1d-CDW order resulting from coupling of a phonon at 1.75 THz to the CDW, and the drop of amplitude of the QP response well below $T^*$ seen in Fig. 2 implies a renormalization of the gap. The increasing $T^*$ (or $T_{cr}$) with decreasing rare earth pressure is a direct consequence of the increasing $T_{c1}$, which shifts the crossing temperature $T_{cr}$ of the AM with the 1.75 THz phonon. Finally, we note that the strong soft mode behavior of the AM is clear indication that the transition at $T_{c1}$ in DyTe$_3$ and HoTe$_3$ is of second order. From the fits to the $T$-dependence of the QP response it would appear that the low-temperature phase transition is also second order, but since no soft mode is observed associated with this transition, this cannot be claimed with certainty. Nevertheless, none of the observed QP responses appear to show any temperature-hysteresis associated with either $T_{c1}$ or $T_{c2}$, apparently confirming this assignment. Absence of an additional AM develop-
below $T_{c2}$ is surprising by itself as these excitations have been observed in all systems studied so far, the AM is totally-symmetric and thus should be present in the coherent phonon spectra. 

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