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Suppression of Superconductivity by Twin Boundaries in FeSe

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Low-temperature scanning tunneling microscopy and spectroscopy are employed to investigate twin boundaries in stoichiometric FeSe films grown by molecular beam epitaxy. Twin boundaries can be unambiguously identified by imaging the 90° change in the orientation of local electronic dimers from Fe site impurities on either side. Twin boundaries run at approximately 45° to the Fe-Fe bond directions, and noticeably suppress the superconducting gap, in contrast to the recent experimental and theoretical findings in other iron pnictides. Furthermore, vortices appear to accumulate on twin boundaries, consistent with the degraded superconductivity there. The variation in superconductivity is likely caused by the increased Se height in the vicinity of twin boundaries, providing the first local evidence for the importance of this height to the mechanism of superconductivity.

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The response of superconductivity to crystal defects is crucial to two forefront technological issues, namely the sharpness of the superconducting transition and the critical current. Many early studies have revealed a slight enhancement in the superconducting critical temperature T_c near twin boundaries (TBs) of certain conventional superconductors such as In, Sn and Nb [1]. Meanwhile, TBs tend to pin vortices and so enhance the critical currents in the cuprate high- T_c superconductor $\text{YBa}_2\text{Cu}_3\text{O}_{7-\delta}$ (YBCO) [2, 3]. The general interplay of TBs and superconducting properties remains unresolved.

In the recently discovered iron-based compounds, the tetragonal-to-orthorhombic distortion above T_c typically generates a maze of TBs upon cooling [4], which serves as a test bed for twinning-plane superconductivity. Local susceptometry measurements with a scanned superconducting quantum interference device (SQUID) show an enhanced superfluid density along TBs in underdoped $\text{Ba}(\text{Fe}_{1-x}\text{Co}_x)_2\text{As}_2$ [5, 6], compatible with SQUID magnetometry images where vortices avoid pinning on TBs [7]. On the other hand, doping-dependent TB imaging with polarized light, combined with bulk critical current determination in $\text{Ba}(\text{Fe}_{1-x}\text{Co}_x)_2\text{As}_2$, shows a tremendous enhancement of critical current at the doping level where TBs are densest, leading to a claim that vortices are pinned on TBs [8]. However, in the absence of direct vortex imaging, this latter observation is also consistent with the possibility that the critical current is enhanced by vortex trapping between the TBs. Bitter decoration in $\text{Ba}(\text{Fe}_{1-x}\text{Ni}_x)_2\text{As}_2$ shows vortices clustered along lines in some regions of the sample, leading to a claim of TB pinning [9]. But the absence of simultaneous twin boundary imaging again leaves open the possibility that

the aligned vortices are pinned on domains between parallel TBs.

These experiments on iron-based superconductors have used magnetic imaging techniques, whose resolution is limited to approximately the penetration depth $\lambda \sim 325$ nm [10]. Because pinning may occur on the vortex core length scale, $\xi \sim 3$ nm [11], it can be challenging in some cases to determine from magnetic imaging alone whether a vortex is pinned on or near the TB. Scanning tunneling microscopy/spectroscopy (STM/STS), which can image both TBs and vortices on the ξ length scale, can address this issue with $\times 100$ better resolution [12]. Additionally, in most cuprates and iron pnictides, chemical doping plays an essential role in superconductivity; thus its possible variation across TBs may complicate the understanding of the twinning-plane superconductivity [13]. As an alternative, the stoichiometric and structurally simple PbO-type β -FeSe superconductor provides a unique system for addressing the variations in superconductivity near TBs [14].

Here we report on STM/STS studies of TBs in stoichiometric and superconducting FeSe films grown by molecular beam epitaxy (MBE). This allows for a direct probe of the superconducting order parameter near TBs at the nanometer length scale. Sparse Se atoms at near-surface Fe sites produce local dimer-like scattering signatures. TBs are identified by the 90° rotations of the electronic dimers on either side, and are seen to roughly orient along the diagonals of the Fe unit cells. We observe that (1) TBs considerably suppress the superconducting gap within the coherence length, and (2) vortices tend to be pinned on TBs. Both observations demonstrate that TBs locally weaken the superconductivity in FeSe.

All STM/STS tunneling experiments presented here were carried out at 4.5 K on a commercial ultrahigh vacuum (UHV) low temperature STM apparatus (Unisoku), which is connected to an MBE system for *in situ* sample preparation. The base pressure for both systems is better than 10^{-10} Torr. MBE growth of stoichiometric FeSe films has been described in detail elsewhere [15, 16], and in the supplement [17]. Prior to data collection, a polycrystalline PtIr tip was cleaned by electron-beam heating in UHV, and then calibrated on an MBE-grown Ag film on a Si(111) substrate. Spectroscopic measurements were made by disrupting the feedback circuit, sweeping the sample voltage, and extracting the tunneling conductance dI/dV using a standard lock-in technique with a small bias modulation of 0.1 mV at 987.5 Hz.

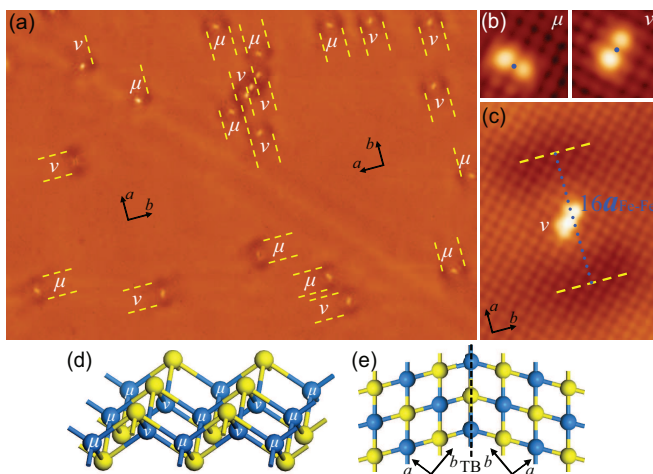


FIG. 1. (color online) (a) STM topography of FeSe film with extra Se atoms appearing as bright atomic-scale dumbbells ($V = 10$ mV, $I = 0.1$ nA, 100 nm \times 70 nm). (b) Zoom-in on two orthogonally oriented atomic dumbbells, labeled μ and ν ($V = 6$ mV, $I = 0.1$ nA, 2 nm \times 2 nm). (c) Larger Zoom-in of a single excess Se atom ($V = 10$ mV, $I = 0.1$ nA, 6 nm \times 8 nm). The blue dots mark the subsurface Fe atoms. The depressions straddling each excess Se (marked by dashed yellow lines) and the TB likely stem from quasiparticle scattering. (d) Schematic crystal structure of β -FeSe showing the inequivalent μ and ν Fe sites, and (e) diagram illustrating a TB with Fe (blue) and Se (yellow) spheres.

Figure 1(a) depicts a constant-current topographic image of the as-grown FeSe films. The localized defects ($< 0.05\%$) correspond to individual excess Se atoms [16], which are intentionally introduced and act as scatterers for electrons and give rise to unidirectional electronic nanostructures in FeSe [15]. A more detailed examination shows that each excess Se explicitly breaks four-fold (C_4) rotational symmetry in two independent ways, at two different length scales. First, at the atomic length scale, we observe two orthogonal dumbbell-like features (insets), labeled as μ and ν . Both

atomic dumbbells are centered at subsurface Fe atoms [Fig. 1(b)], with their bright ends positioned on two adjacent Se atoms in the topmost layer, suggesting that the excess Se substitutes into the uppermost Fe layer. Two inequivalent Fe positions, denoted by μ and ν in Fig. 1(d), lead to the two orthogonal atomic dumbbells observed. Second, at the much larger length scale of $\sim 16a_{\text{Fe-Fe}} \simeq 4.4$ nm [Fig. 1(c)], the C_4 symmetry is broken by unidirectional depressions in density of states which straddle each excess Se (yellow dashes). In contrast to the persistence of atomic dumbbells up to 2.5 eV imaging bias, the larger unidirectional features exist only in a narrow energy range (approximately ± 20 meV), which supports a purely electronic origin. Note that in Fig. 1(a) a faint stripe occurs along the upper left to lower right diagonal. Across this stripe, the Se-induced unidirectional nanostructures (electronic dimers) are found to rotate by 90° . This closely resembles the TB-induced 90° rotation of $\sim 8a_{\text{Fe-Fe}}$ unidirectional nanostructures in slightly Co-doped $\text{Ca}(\text{Fe}_{1-x}\text{Co}_x)_2\text{As}_2$ [18]. We therefore argue that the observed faint stripe along the diagonal of Fig. 1(a) represents a TB, across which the a and b crystalline axes interchange. Here a - and b - correspond to the two Fe-Fe bonding directions, as defined in Fig. 1(e). Note that these larger electronic dimers always respect the crystalline a axis, irrespective of the stochastic distribution of atomic μ and ν dumbbells. These observations not only provide a way to distinguish TBs, but also support the fundamental role that electronic dimers play in scattering mechanisms [19, 20], and by implication, transport anisotropy in iron pnictides [21].

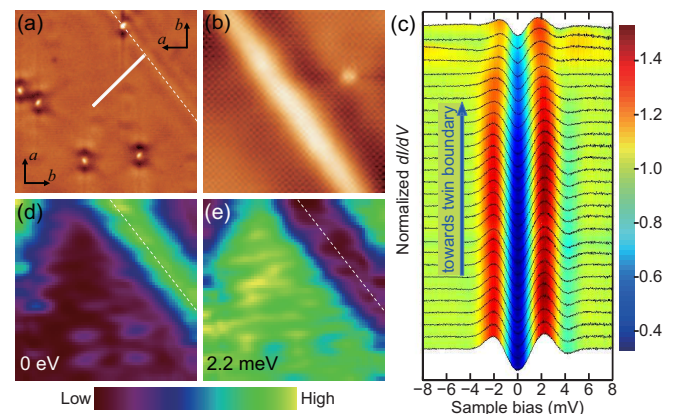


FIG. 2. (color online) (a) STM topography with a TB indicated by a white dashed line ($V = 10$ mV, $I = 0.1$ nA, 50 nm \times 50 nm). (b) Atomically-resolved topography of a TB ($V = 10$ mV, $I = 43$ pA, 12 nm \times 12 nm). (c) Normalized dI/dV spectra taken at equal separations (1 nm) along the white solid line (normal to the TB) in (a). (d, e) Differential conductance maps recorded simultaneously with image (a) at energies of (d) zero and (e) 2.2 meV, respectively. Tunneling gap is set at $V = 10$ mV and $I = 0.1$ nA.

To find the effect of TBs on superconductivity, we use STS to map the superconducting gap in the vicinity of another TB [Fig. 2(a)]. Using the atomically-resolved STM image in Fig. 2(b), we note that the TB runs nearly along one of the Se-Se nearest-neighbor directions in the topmost layer, or equivalently one diagonal of the undistorted single-Fe unit cells. Fig. 2(c) shows a series of differential conductance dI/dV spectra, normalized to the normal-state conductance spectrum above T_c (10 K), taken along a trajectory approaching the twin boundary. All curves exhibit superconducting gaps with clear coherence peaks. However the gap magnitude Δ , half of the energy between the coherence peaks, decreases when approaching the TB, suggesting that TBs tend to weaken the superconductivity in FeSe. This is further supported by dI/dV maps at zero energy [Fig. 2(d)] and at one of the coherence peaks at ~ 2.2 meV [Fig. 2(e)] on the same region as Fig. 2(a). The TB enhances the zero-bias conductance (ZBC, inversely correlated with the superfluid density) and suppresses the coherence peaks. Our observations consistently support the suppression of superconductivity by TBs in FeSe. This contrasts with the enhanced superfluid density along TBs in underdoped $\text{Ba}(\text{Fe}_{1-x}\text{Co}_x)_2\text{As}_2$ by SQUID measurements as well as the recent theoretical prediction [5, 22].

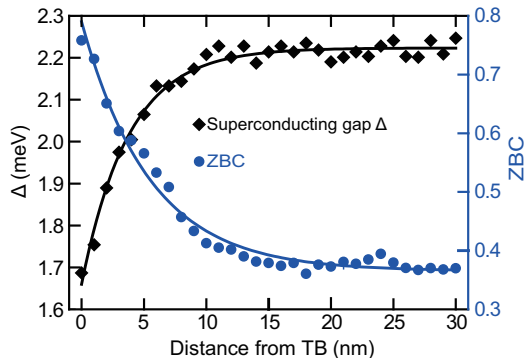


FIG. 3. (color online) Superconducting gap Δ (black diamonds) and ZBC (blue circles) plotted as a function of distance from the TB. The blue solid line depicts an exponential decay, while the black one is a guide to the eye.

Figure 3 presents the extracted superconducting gap Δ and ZBC from Fig. 2(c) as a function of distance d off the TB. As compared to $\Delta_0 = 2.2$ meV on TB-free regions, the superconducting gap shrinks by $\sim 25\%$ to $\Delta_{\text{TB}} = 1.66$ meV on TBs. Also, $\text{ZBC}(d)$ decays with distance d from the TB as $\text{ZBC}(d) = \text{ZBC}(\infty) + A\exp(-d/\xi)$. Here $\text{ZBC}(\infty)$ and ξ are the constant background and superconducting coherence length, respectively. Based on the exponential fitting, we extract a coherence length of $\xi = 5.5 \pm 0.3$ nm at 4.5 K. The coherence length $\xi(0) \sim 5.1$ nm at zero temperature can be calculated from self-consistent BCS

gap function and $\xi(T) \propto 1/\Delta(T)$ [23] with $T_c \simeq 9.3$ K [16]. We note that anisotropic vortices have been recently demonstrated in FeSe and can be intuitively understood by direction-dependent changes in ξ with extrema along the a - and b -directions [15]. In this work, ξ is measured along one diagonal of the undistorted Fe unit cells, and thus $\xi \sim 5.1$ nm roughly represents an average of ξ_a and ξ_b , which is comparable to the estimated coherence length of 4.5 nm from transport measurements [14]. Our STM images therefore demonstrate directly for the first time the coherence-length-scale effect of a TB on superconductivity in the new Fe-based superconductors.

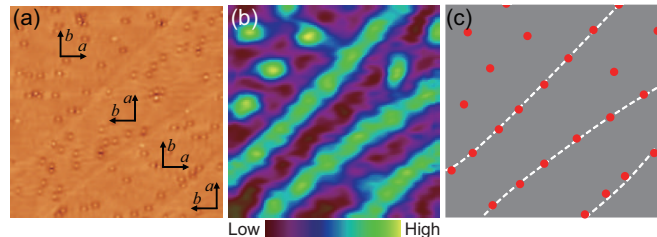


FIG. 4. (color online) (a) A $150 \text{ nm} \times 150 \text{ nm}$ topographic image with three TBs ($V = 10$ mV, $I = 0.1$ nA). (b) Simultaneous ZBC map showing the vortices at 2 T. Tunneling gap is set at $V = 10$ mV and $I = 0.1$ nA. (c) Schematic illustrating both TBs (white dashes) and vortices (red circles).

The suppressed superconductivity and thus reduced superfluid density along TBs should lead to a decrease in energy when vortices are positioned on TBs. To search for such TB flux pinning, we image vortices with an applied magnetic field normal to the FeSe ab -plane. Fig. 4(a) shows a topographic image with three TBs, where we record the ZBC map at 2 T, illustrated in Fig. 4(b). Previously, a pronounced ZBC peak, which originates from quasiparticle bound states [24, 25], has been found in the vortex cores of FeSe [15]. Therefore the yellow regions with enhanced ZBC signify individual isolated vortices. The observed average flux per vortex is $\sim 2.05 \times 10^{-15}$ Wb [17], consistent with single magnetic flux quantum, $\Phi_0 = 2.07 \times 10^{-15}$ Wb. The schematic depiction of vortices and twin boundaries in Fig. 4(c) illustrates that vortices are preferentially pinned on TBs [17] as long as the distance separating the neighboring TBs is not too large. This observation confirms that TBs locally suppress the superconductivity in FeSe.

Now we consider possible explanations for the suppressed superconductivity by TBs in FeSe. Variation in chemical doping across TBs can be reasonably excluded [13] because the superconductivity develops in FeSe without any external doping, in sharp contrast to iron pnictides [26]. We thus consider that the phenomenon likely stems from the structural changes around TBs. Indeed, in iron-based superconductors, the tetrahedral geometry, both the tetrahedral angle α , and

the anion-height h_{anion} (pnictogen or chalcogen) above the Fe layer, appear to be key parameters controlling the superconducting transition temperature T_c [26–30]. For each FeSe_4 tetrahedron spanning a TB, two out of four Se anions must be mirror-symmetric with respect to the twinning plane [Fig. 1(e)], which will distort the FeSe_4 tetrahedra and thus change α . However, some previous studies have demonstrated that α does not significantly affect T_c in iron chalcogenides [27, 28]. We therefore suggest that the tetrahedral distortion can't bear sole responsibility for the observed suppression of superconductivity around TBs in FeSe. Then we examine the Se height h_{Se} around TBs. High-pressure electrical resistivity measurements revealed an enhanced T_c as h_{Se} is reduced [29]. In all our topographic images, up to 1 eV [17], TBs appear brighter than surrounding areas. This consistency over wide energy range strongly suggests a local increase in h_{Se} , although an electronic effect leading to the false appearance of increased height due to the STM normalization artifact can't be completely ruled out. We therefore suggest that superconductivity is suppressed and perhaps even quenched by the increased h_{Se} at the TB. The well-identified superconducting gaps near TBs [Fig. 2(c)] may arise from the proximity effect between on- and off-TBs regions.

Finally we tentatively explain the contrasting roles of TBs in $\text{Ba}(\text{Fe}_{1-x}\text{Co}_x)_2\text{As}_2$ and FeSe. As has been noted previously, T_c of the iron-based superconductors appears to reach maximum at $h_{\text{anion}} \simeq 1.38 \text{ \AA}$ [26, 29, 30]. Away from this value, T_c will abruptly decrease. In FeSe, $h_{\text{Se}} \simeq 1.45 \text{ \AA} > 1.38 \text{ \AA}$ [29], so the increased h_{Se} must suppress T_c at TBs. However, in $\text{Ba}(\text{Fe}_{1-x}\text{Co}_x)_2\text{As}_2$, $h_{\text{As}} \simeq 1.34 \text{ \AA}$ appears smaller than 1.38 \AA [31]. Assuming that h_{As} increases around TBs of $\text{Ba}(\text{Fe}_{1-x}\text{Co}_x)_2\text{As}_2$ as well, one can expect enhanced superfluid density there, in line with SQUID experiments [5, 6]. Moreover, h_{anion} may play a more important role in FeSe than in $\text{Ba}(\text{Fe}_{1-x}\text{Co}_x)_2\text{As}_2$. The increased h_{Se} at FeSe TBs favors the double-stripe (π , 0) magnetic order, and suppresses the (π , π) spin fluctuations which are necessary for superconductivity [32]. The present study therefore provides evidence linking h_{anion} to local Δ and thus to the mechanism of superconductivity in iron-based compounds.

Our detailed STM/STS study of TBs in MBE-grown FeSe films has provided fundamental new information on the nature of superconductivity in iron-based materials. First, we have explicitly shown by direct imaging that each Fe-site impurity produces a local electronic dimer of size $\sim 16a_{\text{Fe-Fe}}$, oriented along the orthorhombic a -axis. Scattering from these dimers, although never previously directly visualized in real space, has been controversially suggested as the root cause of the transport anisotropy in iron-based superconductors [19, 20]. Second, we have shown by spatially resolved spectroscopy that TBs suppress the superconductivity within a superconducting coherence length ξ . This provides a quantitative measure

of the coherence length, $\xi \sim 5.1 \text{ nm}$. Third, we show that magnetic vortices are preferentially pinned to the TBs. This supports the suppression of superconductivity at the TBs, and can inform engineering work to optimize vortex pinning for increased critical current. Finally, we show increased h_{Se} at the FeSe TBs. This suggests an explanation for the contrast between TB behavior in FeSe vs. $\text{Ba}(\text{Fe}_{1-x}\text{Co}_x)_2\text{As}_2$, and indeed provides the first local evidence for the importance of chalcogen/pnictogen height h_{anion} to the very nature of the superconducting mechanism in iron-based materials.

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