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SmB$_6$ electron-phonon coupling constant from time- and angle-resolved photoelectron spectroscopy

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SmB$_6$ is a mixed valence Kondo system resulting from the hybridization between localized $f$ electrons and delocalized $d$ electrons. We have investigated its out-of-equilibrium electron dynamics by means of time- and angle-resolved photoelectron spectroscopy. The transient electronic population above the Fermi level can be described by a time-dependent Fermi-Dirac distribution. By solving a two-temperature model that well reproduces the relaxation dynamics of the effective electronic temperature, we estimate the electron-phonon coupling constant $\lambda$ to range from 0.13 ± 0.03 to 0.04 ± 0.01. These extremes are obtained assuming a coupling of the electrons with either a phonon mode at 10 or 19 meV. A realistic value of the average phonon energy will give an actual value of $\lambda$ within this range. Our results provide an experimental report on the material electron-phonon coupling, contributing to both the electronic transport and the macroscopic thermodynamic properties of SmB$_6$.

The electronic transport properties of SmB$_6$ have been the subject of intense studies since the first report of its mixed valence nature [1] and the observation of a Kondo gap opening when cooling below $T_K \sim 50$ K [2]. This Kondo gap opens as a result of the interaction between the delocalized $d$ electrons and the $f$ electrons acting as localized magnetic impurities [3]. Despite the observation of a gap opening at the Fermi level by spectroscopic measurements, transport experiments show signs of residual conductivity [4]. The origin of this residual conductivity has puzzled the scientific community until the recent discovery of low-temperature metallic surface states [5], of potential, albeit debated, topological character [6–14].

The advent of topological insulators (TIs) has fueled the fast development of time- and angle-resolved photoelectron spectroscopy (tr-ARPES) [15–21]. This technique has been successfully exploited to access the unoccupied electronic states [22–24], as well as the temporal evolution of both the chemical potential ($\mu$) and the electronic temperature ($T_e$) after optical excitation [16–19].

In this Rapid Communication we report on the out-of-equilibrium electronic properties of SmB$_6$ as revealed by tr-ARPES. This study is motivated by the possibility to address the scattering mechanisms in SmB$_6$, as similarly reported for Bi-based binary TIs [15,16,18–20]. Ishida and co-workers have pioneered this out-of-equilibrium approach to the study of SmB$_6$, reporting a shift of the chemical potential ($\Delta \mu$) lasting up to hundreds of $\mu$s after optical excitation, for $T < T_K$ [25]. By assessing the out-of-equilibrium dynamics of $T_e$, here we provide insights on the temporal evolution of the time-dependent Fermi-Dirac (FD) distribution. A minimal two-temperature model (2TM) is applied to mimic the relaxation dynamics of $T_e$. By considering a coupling to phonon energies corresponding to the lowest-energy Sm modes at 10 meV [26,27] or 19 [28] to 20 meV [27], we estimate an interval for the possible values of the electron-phonon coupling constant $\lambda$: 0.13 ± 0.03 to 0.04 ± 0.01. This range is mostly determined by the fact that among the phonon modes detected for this material, those derived from the B$_6$ cage, i.e., those at energies >20 meV, weakly contribute. This finding can be of relevance to account for the details of the electronic transport and thermodynamical properties of SmB$_6$ [29].

In addition to the temporal evolution of the FD function, we reveal a difference in the effect of the optical excitation on the $d$ and $f$ states. In particular, the depletion of intensity which follows the optical excitation is mainly located in the $f$ bands. The electrons, which are excited in the $f$ state above the Fermi level ($E_F$), successively relax towards $E_F$ where intensity is observed over a broad momentum range. This suggests the transient population of empty $f$ states above $E_F$ [30].

Here, tr-ARPES experiments are performed at the T-ReX Laboratory, Elettra (Trieste, Italy); more details about the setup can be found in Refs. [17,31]. The photoelectrons are collected and analyzed by a SPECS Phoibos 225 hemispherical spectrometer, with energy and angular resolution set in the present experiment to 30 meV and 0.2° [17], respectively. The overall temporal resolution is equal to 250 fs. In the following, two data sets are analyzed with an absorbed fluence equal to 120 ± 25 and 75 ± 15 $\mu$J/cm$^2$, corresponding to an absorbed energy density equal to 30 ± 6 and 19 ± 4 J/cm$^3$, calculated by considering a penetration depth of 40 nm, as estimated from optical studies [32]. For the calculation of the absorbed fluence and energy density, a reflectivity $R = 0.5$ has been considered [32].

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Single crystals of SmB$_6$ are grown via the optical floating zone technique, as described in Ref. [33]. They are cleaved in UHV at room temperature and transferred to a variable temperature cryostat. Measurements are performed at an equilibrium temperature of $\sim$120 K. At this temperature the Kondo gap is fully closed and the material transport properties after optical excitation, for the highest absorbed energy density, resulting from the difference between the ARPES data 300 fs after and 500 fs before the arrival of the optical excitation. The color scale indicates with red (blue) the positive (negative) signal variation. The first noticeable feature, which characterizes the out-of-equilibrium electronic properties of SmB$_6$, is the different response of the two sets of bands to the optical excitation. A depletion of intensity (blue) is visible in the two nondispersive $f$ bands states, whereas it is not observed along the dispersive $d$ band. We ascribe this effect to the higher density of states (DOS) of the $f$ state, which seems to dominate the optical absorption processes.

Since the experiments are performed at $T > T_K$ and $E_F$ is crossed by the dispersive $d$ band, we expect the material response to the optical excitation to be metallic. Hence, at short time scales immediately after optical excitation, electrons thermalize due to electron-electron scattering and relax towards $E_F$ where their distribution is described by a time-dependent FD function [15–17,34–36]. This process is assumed to occur within the pump pulse duration [35,36]. Figure 1(d) shows that, after thermalization, electrons occupy a broad momentum region above $E_F$, thus suggesting the possible existence of unoccupied nondispersing $f$-like states above $E_F$ [30]. The aim of our work is to evaluate the electron-phonon coupling constant from the temporal evolution of $T_e$, thus in the following we will focus only on the out-of-equilibrium dynamics of the time-dependent effective FD distribution, without entering in the details of the dispersion of the unoccupied states.

In order to estimate the time scale over which the electronic temperature relaxes, we now turn our attention to the temporal evolution of the ARPES signal. Figure 1(e) shows the temporal evolution of the change in photoemission intensity integrated along the dashed green line in Fig. 1(d). In order
to quantitatively describe the characteristic relaxation times, traces are extracted from Fig. 1(e) in representative regions of the band structure, within the energies indicated by the colored rectangles. Figure 2(a) displays the resulting traces.

Region 1 (orange), at \( E - E_F \sim 0.125 \text{ eV} \), is characterized by a peak whose relaxation dynamics is comparable to our experimental temporal resolution. This prevents us from accessing the fast electronic dynamics responsible for the thermalization processes. At energies closer to \( E_F \) the dynamics slows down, as expected in a thermalized electron system \([17,21]\). The intensity relaxes to a plateau value larger than the equilibrium one. The full relaxation of the excited population is obtained through a second relaxation channel, having a time scale exceeding that achievable by the present experiment. From a single exponential fit to the traces, we observe that the relaxation dynamics in proximity of \( E_F \) has the same characteristic time \( \tau \approx 800 \pm 50 \text{ fs} \) both above (region 2, brown) and below (region 3, light blue) \( E_F \). This points to the fact that the dynamics is dominated by the thermal broadening of the FD distribution. The positive dynamics of region 4 (green), between the \( f \) multiplets, is delayed, and we ascribe this finding to a thermal broadening of the \( f \) states, rather than a purely electronic effect. This point will be clarified later within the frame of the 2TM.

In order to evaluate the evolution of the electronic temperature \( T_e \), as well as of the chemical potential shift \( \Delta \mu \), we fit a time-dependent FD function to the energy distribution curves (EDCs) extracted from Fig. 1(e) for all the delay times. Figure 2(b) shows selected EDCs at \(-400\), \(+300\), \(+2000\), and \(+5300\) fs optical excitation. Black dashed lines indicate the best fit. The inset shows a zoom at \( E_F \) of the EDCs at \(-400\) and \(+300\) fs.

FIG. 2. (a) Nonequilibrium dynamics as obtained by integrating the recorded intensity within selected energy regions along the \( d \)-band dispersion. The color code is the same of the rectangles shown in Fig. 1(d). Regions 2 and 3, located symmetrically around \( E_F \), display a similar characteristic time scale. Region 4, between the \( f \) states, is characterized by a small positive and delayed dynamics, different with respect to the negative dynamics of the \( f \) states in regions 3 and 5. (b) Energy distribution curves along the \( d \)-band dispersion at selected delay times before (\(-400\) fs) and after (\(+300\), \(+2000\), \(+5300\) fs) optical excitation. Black dashed lines indicate the best fit.

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Figures 3(a) and 3(b) show the dynamics of \( \Delta \mu \) and \( T_e \), respectively. Results are reported for both data sets, with excitation energy densities equal to \( 30 \pm 6 \text{ J/cm}^3 \) (black) and \( 19 \pm 4 \text{ J/cm}^3 \) (green). After optical excitation, both \( \Delta \mu \) and \( T_e \) relax with a single exponential behavior, with a
similar characteristic time $\tau = 800 \pm 50$ fs. The values of $\Delta \mu$ are small but comparable with the previous work of Ishida et al. [25]. However, we point out that in the present study we are not sensitive to the surface photovoltage effect which is expected to slow the $\Delta \mu$ relaxation dynamics for $T < T_K$ [25]. The fact that the relaxation of $T_e$ is well mimicked by a single decaying exponential justifies the choice of a minimal 2TM for extracting $\lambda$. The evolution of the electron and lattice temperatures ($T_e$) is described by the following rate equations [36,37]:

$$\frac{\partial T_e}{\partial t} = \frac{S(t)}{C_e} - \frac{3\lambda}{\hbar n \Omega^3} (n_e - n_l),$$

(1)

$$\frac{\partial T_l}{\partial t} = \frac{C_l}{C_e} \frac{3\lambda}{\hbar n \Omega^3} (n_e - n_l).$$

(2)

$S(t)$ describes the optical excitation with a Gaussian profile and absorbed energy density equal to $\sim 10 \pm 6$ and $\sim 19 \pm 41$ cm$^{-2}$, respectively. The error bar associated with the energy density propagates into an error bar on the free fitting parameters in the 2TM, including $\lambda$. $\Omega$ corresponds to the phonon frequency. From optics, neutron scattering, and symmetry analysis we expect only phonon modes at 10 meV (acoustic) [26,27], 19–20 meV [27,28] ($T_{1\alpha}$), and three higher energies vibrational and rotational modes of the B$_6$ cage at 89.6 meV ($T_{2\alpha}$) and 141.7 meV ($E_g$) and 158.3 meV ($A_{1\alpha}$) [26]. In the Eliashberg formalism, $\lambda$ results from the coupling of all the phonon modes, where the contribution from each mode is divided by its phonon energy. For this reason we expect the coupling to the high-energy $T_{1\alpha}$ modes to be weak. This hypothesis is well supported by analogy with the calculations performed on a similar compound, YB$_6$, which show that the electron-phonon coupling constant $\lambda$ is dominated by the low-energy $Y$ phonon modes, while the high-energy phonons associated with the $B_6$ modes only weakly contribute to $\lambda$ [38].

For these reasons, we have performed our analysis by considering the coupling to the low-energy Sm phonons, either with $\Omega = 10$ meV [26,27] or $\Omega = 19$ meV [28] to 20 meV [27], we obtain a value of $\lambda \Omega^2$ equal to $130 \pm 30$ or $270 \pm 70$ meV$^3$, respectively. From these we extract two extreme values for $\lambda$ equal to 0.13 $\pm$ 0.03 and 0.04 $\pm$ 0.01. Unfortunately, no theoretical or experimental estimations of $\lambda$ are available for SmB$_6$ in the literature. From a comparison with different hexaborides, we note that the range in which $\lambda$ falls for SmB$_6$ is slightly lower than those reported for LaB$_6$ ($\lambda = 0.17$–0.26 [43]), MgB$_6$ ($\lambda = 0.39$ [44]), and YB$_6$ ($\lambda = 0.86$ [45]).

Our estimation of $\lambda$ provides an insight into a fundamental physical property of SmB$_6$. The slightly smaller value, compared to other hexaborides, might reflect an intrinsic difference in the electron-phonon coupling. Nonetheless, it might also be ascribed to the fact that tr-ARPES is momentum selective. We point out that the $\lambda$ value is evaluated along the $\Gamma X$ high symmetry direction, and far from the zone boundary, owing to the small momentum window accessible with the available photon energy. We believe that our results represent a reference for future momentum integral measurements of $\lambda$ that might extend further the comparison between the electron-phonon coupling in different hexaboride compounds.

In conclusion, we have exploited tr-ARPES to investigate the out-of-equilibrium electronic properties of SmB$_6$. After optical excitation, electrons are transferred predominantly from the localized $f$ multiplets to the unoccupied density of states. After thermalization, electrons can be described by a time-dependent Fermi-Dirac distribution. The temporal evolution of the electronic temperature is described within a minimal two-temperature model. The phonon density of states is unknown for SmB$_6$, hence we can establish a range of values for $\lambda$. By assuming that the electron-phonon coupling, along the $\Gamma X$ direction of the surface BZ, is preferentially mediated by the two lowest-energy Sm modes at 10 meV [26,27] or 19 [28] to 20 meV [27], we estimate $\lambda$ to fall in the range 0.13 $\pm$ 0.03 to 0.04 $\pm$ 0.01.

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