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Suppression of the superconducting transition of RFeAsO$_{1-x}$F$_x$ (R=Tb, Dy, and Ho)

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A suppression of superconductivity in the late rare-earth RFeAsO$_{1-x}$F$_x$ materials is reported. The maximum critical temperature ($T_c$) decreases from 51 K for R=Tb to 36 K for HoFeAsO$_{0.9}$F$_{0.1}$, which has been synthesized under 10 GPa pressure. This suppression is driven by a decrease in the Fe-As-Fe angle below an optimum value of 110.6°, as the angle decreases linearly with unit-cell volume ($V$) across the RFeAsO$_{1-x}$F$_x$ series. A crossover in electronic structure around this optimum geometry is evidenced by a change in sign of the compositional $dT_c/dV$, from negative values for previously reported large R materials to positive for HoFeAsO$_{0.9}$F$_{0.1}$.

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Rare earth (R) oxypnictides RFeAsO (Ref. 1) were recently discovered to superconduct when doped, with critical temperatures surpassed only by the high-$T_c$ cuprates. Several families of superconducting iron pnictides have subsequently been discovered. 2 These all have layered structures containing AsFeAs slabs with Fe tetrahedrally coordinated by As. The main types are the 1111 materials based on RFeAsO or MFe$_2$As$_2$ ($M$ = Ca, Sr, Ba), the 122 phases MFe$_2$As$_2$, and the 111 AFeAs ($A$ = Li, Na) family. The related binaries FeX ($X$ = Se, Te) are also superconducting.

The electron-doped 1111 materials RFeAsO$_{1-x}$F$_x$ and RFeAsO$_{1-x}$ materials remain prominent as they have the highest $T_c$’s, up to 56 K, and allow lattice and doping effects to be investigated through variations in the $R^{3+}$ cation size and the anion composition. A strong lattice effect is evident at the start of the rare-earth series, as $T_c$ rises from 26 K for LaFeAsO$_{1-x}$F$_x$ to 43 K under pressure, 3 4 and to a near constant maximum 50–56 K in the RFeAsO$_{1-x}$F$_x$ and RFeAsO$_{1-x}$ series for $R$ = Pr to Gd, 5–10 but whether lattice effects ultimately enhance or suppress superconductivity for the late R’s has been unclear. The late rare-earth RFeAsO$_{1-x}$F$_x$ materials and the oxygen-deficient RFeAsO$_{1-x}$ superconductors require high-pressure synthesis, leading to significant challenges as single phase samples are difficult to prepare, and accurate analyses of cation stoichiometries and O and F contents are difficult. To investigate the effect of the lattice for later R, we have synthesized multiple samples of RFeAsO$_{0.9}$F$_{0.1}$ ($R$ = Tb, Dy, and Ho) under varying high-pressure conditions. Here we report superconductivity in HoFeAsO$_{0.9}$F$_{0.1}$ for which the maximum $T_c$ of 36 K is markedly lower than in the previous R analogs. This is part of a systematic suppression of superconductivity by the smaller, late R cations. HoFeAsO$_{0.9}$F$_{0.1}$ also shows a reversal in the sign of the compositional $dT_c/dV$ ($V$=unit-cell volume) compared to the early R materials, confirming that the decreasing R size has a significant effect on the bands contributing to the Fermi surface.

Polycrystalline ceramic RFeAsO$_{1-x}$F$_x$ samples ($R$=Tb, Dy, and Ho) were synthesized by a high-pressure method and investigated by powder x-ray diffraction, magnetization, and conductivity measurements. 11 Initial results for RFeAsO$_{1-x}$F$_x$ ($R$=Tb and Dy) were published elsewhere. 12 Both materials were found to be superconducting with maximum $T_c$’s of 46 and 45 K, respectively. Little difference in superconducting properties between samples with nominal compositions of $x$=0.1 and 0.2 were observed, and the $x$=0.2 materials were generally of lower phase purity, and so the $x$=0.1 composition was used in subsequent syntheses. The best samples typically contain ~80% by mass of the superconducting phase with residual nonsuperconducting $R_2$O$_3$ and RAs phases also present. The sample purity and superconducting properties are not sensitive to synthesis pressure over a range that moves to higher pressures as $R$ decreases in size; $R$ = Tb and Dy superconductors were respectively prepared at 7–10 and 8–12 GPa, heating at 1050–1100 °C. Repeated syntheses of TbFeAsO$_{1-x}$F$_x$ gave several samples with higher $T_c$’s than the above value, the highest value is $T_c$(max)=51 K (Fig. 1). Further DyFeAsO$_{1-x}$F$_x$ samples did not show higher transitions than before, so we conclude that $T_c$(max) in this system is 45 K.

Tetragonal HoFeAsO$_{0.9}$F$_{0.1}$ was obtained from reactions at 10 GPa pressure and the properties of six HoFeAsO$_{0.9}$F$_{0.1}$ samples prepared under varying conditions are summarized.

FIG. 1. Resistivity and (inset) susceptibility data for an optimum sample of TbFeAsO$_{0.9}$F$_{0.1}$, showing a sharp superconducting transition at $T_c$=51 K. The sample was prepared at 7 GPa and 1050 °C.
in Table I. Crystal structure refinements and phase analysis were carried out by fitting powder x-ray diffraction data (Fig. 2). Magnetization measurements demonstrate that all six HoFeAsO$_{1-x}$F$_x$ samples are bulk superconductors with $T_c$'s of 29–36 K (Fig. 3). Resistivities show smooth high-temperature evolutions without apparent spin-density wave anomalies. The transitions to the zero resistance state have widths of less than 4 K.

Although all of the samples in Table I have the same starting composition, small variations in synthesis pressure and temperature result in a dispersion in $x$ around the nominal 0.1 value for the HoFeAsO$_{1-x}$F$_x$ phase and corresponding variations in superconducting properties. $T_c$ increases to a maximum value, $T_c$ (max), at the upper solubility limit of $x$ in RFeAsO$_{1-x}$F$_x$ systems, and this is consistent with the observation that the superconducting phases in samples 1, 3, and 4, which are heated at high temperatures or for longer times and so are likely to have a slightly lower F content, have lower $T_c$'s (average 32.1 K) than the other three samples, made under nominally identical “optimum” conditions, which have average $T_c$ = 34.8 K. Sample 6 shows the highest $T_c$ = 36.2 K and the lowest proportion of the HoFeAsO$_{1-x}$F$_x$ phase and a correspondingly low diamagnetic volume fraction. This demonstrates that the sample is at the upper limit of the superconducting composition range and so gives a realistic $T_c$ (max) for the HoFeAsO$_{1-x}$F$_x$ system.

Although the doping values $x$ for the high-pressure RFeAsO$_{1-x}$F$_x$ samples are not known precisely, comparing ensembles of samples with similar phase purities made under similar conditions reveals a clear suppression of superconductivity by lattice effects for heavier R. For example, all of our TbFeAsO$_{1-x}$F$_x$ superconductors have higher $T_c$'s (five TbFeAsO$_{1-x}$F$_x$ samples, $T_c$ = 45–51 K) than all of the HoFeAsO$_{1-x}$F$_x$ materials (in Table I). The $T_c$ (max) values of 51, 45, and 36 K for RFeAsO$_{1-x}$F$_x$ with R = Tb, Dy, and Ho, respectively, thus represent the trend correctly.

Figure 4 shows a plot of the maximum critical temperatures, $T_c$ (max), against unit-cell volume for many reported RFeAsO$_{1-x}$F$_x$ and RFeAsO$_{1-x}$F$_x$ systems and our above materials. $T_c$ (max) rises slowly as cell volume decreases for R = La to Pr and then shows a broad maximum, between R = Pr and Tb in the RFeAsO$_{1-x}$F$_x$ materials, before falling rapidly as R changes from Tb to Dy to Ho. This trend is not seen in the reported RFeAsO$_{1-x}$F$_x$ superconductors, where $T_c$ (max) remains approximately constant, apparently because they have larger cell volumes than their RFeAsO$_{1-x}$F$_x$ analogs (see Fig. 4).

The size of the R$^{3+}$ cation tunes the electronic properties through variations in the geometry of the FeAs slab. A trend between the As-Fe-As (or equivalent Fe-As-Fe) angle and $T_c$ has been reported for the early R materials. The upper panel of Fig. 4 shows representative reported values for optimal RFeAsO$_{1-x}$F$_x$ superconductors including our R = Tb, Dy, and Ho materials. This demonstrates that the angle decreases monotonically with R size and so does not show a universal correlation with $T_c$ (max). The $T_c$ (max) variation in the RFeAsO$_{1-x}$F$_x$ series is described by a simple cos($\phi - \phi_0$) function, shown in Fig. 4, where the value of the As-
Fe-As angle corresponding to the global maximum $T_c$, $\phi_{\text{max}}=110.5^\circ$, is close to the ideal 109.5$^\circ$ value for a regular FeAs$_4$ tetrahedron. All five of the Fe 3$d$ bands are partially occupied and contribute to the Fermi surface of the iron arsenide superconductors through hybridization with As 4$s$ and 4$p$ states. Decreasing the tetrahedral angle through 109.5$^\circ$ marks the crossover from tetragonal compression to elongation of the FeAs$_4$ tetrahedra. In a crystal-field model, this reverses the splittings of the FeAs$_4$ tetrahedra. All five of the Fe-3$d$-orbital sets and so a significant change in the real electronic structure is likely to occur near 109.5$^\circ$.

Evidence for the above crossover also comes from a discovered change in the sign of the compositional $dT_c/dV$ near optimum doping in the FeAs$_{1−x}$F$_x$ systems. The unit-cell parameters and volume for the six HoFeAsO$_{1−x}$F$_x$ samples in Table I show a positive correlation with $T_c$. In Fig. 5, in contrast to early $R=$La (Ref. 19) and Sm (Ref. 7) analogs, where lattice parameters and volume decrease with increasing $T_c$. The $T_c$, $V$ points for near-optimally doped $R=$La, Sm, and Ho FeAs$_{1−x}$F$_x$ superconductors are shown in Fig. 4 together with the derived $dT_c/dV$ and $dT_c/dV$ for a single FeAs$_{1−x}$F$_x$ system follows the overall trend in $dT_c/dV$ for different $R$'s, changing from a negative value at large $R=$La to a small positive slope at $R=$Ho.

The compositional $dT_c/dV$ for a given FeAs$_{1−x}$F$_x$ system reflects two competing effects of variations in the fluoride content $x$ on the lattice volume. F$^−$ is slightly smaller than O$^{2−}$ so the anion substitution effect gives a negative contribution to the compositional $dT_c/dV$, independent of $R$. The concomitant effect of doping electrons into the Fe $d$ bands tends to expand the lattice (and increase $T_c$), but the magnitude of this positive $dT_c/dV$ term depends on the nature of the bands at the Fermi surface. The observed shift from negative to positive $dT_c/dV$ as $R$ changes from La to Ho shows that the decreasing size of the $R^{3+}$ cation leads to significant changes in the Fermi surface, with volume-expanding (antibonding) bands more prominent for smaller $R$. Calculations have confirmed that the electronic structure near the Fermi level is sensitive to such small changes in the As $z$ coordinate (equivalent to changing the Fe-As-Fe angle). Small changes in the contributions of the $d$ bands are likely to be particularly important in a multigap scenario for superconductivity, as evidenced in gap measurements of TbFeAsO$_{0.9}$F$_{0.1}$ and other iron arsenide materials.
Samples were synthesized from stoichiometric amounts of Fe₂O₃, FeF₂, and Fe, using a Walker multianvil module within a 1000 ton press. The products were dense, black, sintered poly-crystalline pellets. Powder x-ray diffraction data were collected using a Quantum Design physical property measurement system for Rietveld analysis. ac magnetic susceptibility was measured on a Bruker AXS D8 diffractometer using Cu Kα radiation. Both derivatives are negative for LaFe₁₋ₓAsₓO₁₋₀.₁₇F₀.₁₇ and we thus predict a positive pressure-induced $dT_c/dV$ (pressure suppression of superconductivity) for HoFe₁₋ₓAsₓO₁₋₀.₁₇F₀.₁₇ due to variations in doping level $x$ at constant $T_c$ and unit-cell volume $V$ due to variations in doping level $x$ at constant $T_c$. Both derivatives are negative for LaFe₁₋ₓAsₓO₁₋₀.₁₇F₀.₁₇ and we thus predict a positive pressure-induced $dT_c/dV$ (pressure suppression of superconductivity) for HoFe₁₋ₓAsₓO₁₋₀.₁₇F₀.₁₇ due to variations in doping level $x$ at constant $T_c$ and unit-cell volume $V$ due to variations in doping level $x$ at constant $T_c$.

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$^{19}$Samples were synthesized from stoichiometric amounts of RAs, Fe₂O₃, FeF₂, and Fe, using a Walker multianvil module within a 1000 ton press. The products were dense, black, sintered poly-crystalline pellets. Powder x-ray diffraction data were collected on a Bruker AXS D8 diffractometer using Cu Kα₁ radiation. Data were recorded at $10° \leq 2θ \leq 100°$ with a step size of 0.007° for Rietveld analysis. ac magnetic susceptibility was measured from 3 to 50 K with a field of 0.5 Oe oscillating at 117 Hz using a Quantum Design SQUID magnetometer. Electrical resistivity was measured by a four-probe method between 1.7 and 300 K using a Quantum Design physical property measurement system and an APD cryogenics closed cycle refrigeration unit with an in-house built sample stage.


$^{21}$HoFe₂O₅F₀.₁ has a tetragonal structure (space group $P4/nmm$) results from fit shown in Fig. 2; goodness of fit $\chi^2 = 1.60$, residuals; $R_{wp}=3.94\%$, $R_p=3.02\%$; cell parameters $a = 3.8282(2) \AA$, $c=8.2654(7) \AA$; atom positions $[x, y, z]$ and isotropic temperature (U) factors; Ho $[\frac{1}{4}, \frac{1}{4}, 0.1454(4)]$, $0.044(2) \AA^2$; As $[\frac{1}{4}, \frac{1}{4}, 0.6659(5)]$, $0.029(2) \AA^2$; Fe $[\frac{5}{4}, \frac{1}{4}, \frac{1}{2}]$, $0.014(2) \AA^2$; O₁ $[\frac{1}{4}, \frac{1}{4}, 0.0]$, $0.26(2) \AA^2$. The secondary Ho₂O₃ phase is in a high-pressure $B$-type rare-earth oxide modification, space group $C2/m$, $a=13.841(2) \AA$, $b=3.4984(5) \AA$, $c=8.608(1) \AA$, $\beta=100.08(1)^\circ$.


$^{26}$The compositional $dT_c/dV$ quantifies the changes in $T_c$ and unit-cell volume $V$ due to variations in doping level $x$ at constant $T_c$ and unit-cell volume $V$ due to variations in doping level $x$ at constant $T_c$.