Influence of a single disorder parameter on the conduction mechanisms in manganite thin films

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We have systematically studied the transport properties of colossal magnetoresistance (CMR) manganite films at temperatures of up to 550 K by changing parameters influencing the amount of disorder in the system. Independent of the type and amount of disorder, the resistivity can always be described using a $T^{\alpha}$-power law in the ferromagnetic-metallic phase and a thermally activated behavior in the polaronic-insulating phase. A linear correlation between both the value of the $\alpha$ coefficient and the polaron formation energies $E_p$ as a function of the metal-insulator transition temperature $T_{MI}$ has been found. Our results indicate the possibility of describing the transport properties in CMR manganites in terms of a single disorder parameter.

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The mixed-valence perovskite manganese oxides are being intensively studied for their striking properties including colossal magnetoresistance (CMR).1–3 Their strong sensitivity to an applied magnetic field, together with the ferromagnetic-paramagnetic transition point, makes these materials attractive for use in applications as magnetic field sensors. Interest in CMR manganites is not, however, confined to possible applications. Their phase diagram is rich and complex, with different orderings [ferromagnetic-metallic (FM), ferromagnetic-insulating, antiferromagnetic, charge ordered] all occurring as single-stabilized or coexisting phases.4–6 Several experiments7 have revealed the tendency of manganites to show coexistence of a FM and a paramagnetic insulating (PI) phase.8–12 In this phase-separation scenario, the disorder plays a very important role. In fact, as widely reported in the literature (Refs. 4–6 and references therein), although a first-order transition is known to separate the two FM and PI phases, the presence of small amount of disorder prevents the systems from being totally FM or totally PI13–17 while, with further increase of disorder, it has been theoretically predicted that the FM-PI transition should again become first order.18 As pointed out by Dagotto,19 these studies point out the sensitivity of manganites to disorder, indicating that a disorder strength axis should be incorporated into their phase diagrams and careful investigations should be performed to study its influence on these compounds.20,21

Experimentally, disorder is a difficult quantity to define and control. Different experimental parameters (low-temperature residual resistivity, saturation magnetization, etc.) have been tentatively associated with the disorder present in a system, but none of them is able to afford an absolute determination of this quantity, especially on a nanometric scale. This experimental limitation calls for systematic studies, in which different parameters influencing the disorder can be varied in a controlled way, to investigate the effects on the physical properties of the system. The aim of this Brief Report is to investigate the metal-insulator transition (MIT) in CMR manganites as a function of different types of disorder. In particular, we have systematically studied the low-temperature (below the MIT temperature $T_{MI}$ defined as the temperature at which a peak in the resistivity is observed) and high-temperature (above $T_{MI}$) transport properties of CMR manganite films by changing various parameters affecting disorder. These include the oxygen content (i.e., the doping level), the substrate induced epitaxial strain, the divalent cations, and small deviations from stoichiometric composition. All of the experimental findings strongly support the idea that it is indeed possible to correlate the transport properties in CMR manganites with a single, “universal” disorder parameter.

Several substrates are suited to the epitaxial growth of manganite films. In this study, we used (100)SrTiO$_3$ (STO), (100)LaAlO$_3$ (LAO), (100)NdGaO$_3$ (NGO), and (100)MgO (MgO). The samples investigated in this work, La$_{0.7}$Ba$_{0.3}$MnO$_3$ (Lbmo) and Li$_{0.7}$Sr$_{0.3}$MnO$_3$ (Lsmo) thin films, were deposited by pulsed-laser deposition and by molecular-beam epitaxy (MBE), respectively. Details on the fabrication procedures and the structural characterizations are reported elsewhere.22,23 In brief, the main difference among the Lbmo samples is oxygen content. This results in disorder in the electrical doping arising from the disordered oxygen vacancies. The main difference among the Lsmo samples is the variations in their heavy cation stoichiometry. In the Lbmo and Lsmo films grown on different substrates, differences in disorder arise from different lattice mismatches with the substrates and result in elastic deformations of the unit cell, which alter the Mn-O orbital arrangement and their overlap. Some Lsmo films were grown in the form of superlattices on (111) STO substrates using a layer-by-layer MBE technique. In these samples, the Mn atomic planes alternate with either LaO$_3$ or SrO$_3$ blocks, removing the structural disorder arising from the random distribution of Sr ions within the films.

For the Lbmo films grown on STO, the oxygen content is varied by changing the time or the temperature of the post-annealing procedure. The heavy-atom stoichiometry (La:Ba:Mn=0.7:0.3:1) of these samples has been carefully analyzed to be sure that the main difference in the disorder is related to the oxygen vacancies.25 The resistivity vs temperature (up to 550 K) curves for three 20-nm-thick Lbmo films are reported in Fig. 1 (the annealing procedure, along with
the structural and the transport characterization of these samples, is reported in detail elsewhere\textsuperscript{22}. They are representative of a larger number of Lbmo samples and show $T_{\text{MI}}$ values of 345, 272, and 215 K, corresponding to optimally doped, slightly underdoped, and heavily underdoped Lbmo films, respectively.

Although alternative scenarios, not necessarily related to polaronic localization concepts, have been proposed,\textsuperscript{16} the conductivity in the PI phase, above $T_{\text{MI}}$, is generally thought to be dominated by the hopping motion of self-trapped, small, or correlated polarons. According to the literature,\textsuperscript{25,26} the polaronic resistivity $\rho_{\text{PI}}$ is given by the formula $\rho_{\text{PI}}(T) = T_{\text{d}} \exp(E_g/k_B T)$, where $E_g$ could be related to the polaronic binding energy $E_p$ through the formula $E_g = E_p/2$.\textsuperscript{27} On the other hand, in the FM phase, at temperatures below $T_{\text{MI}}$, although much effort has been spent to understand the transport properties of CMR manganites, there is still no agreement on the expected dependence of $\rho(T)$. To obtain a satisfactory fit of the experimental data, several mechanisms have been proposed to be at work in these compounds. These include the combination of the electron-electron and the single-magnon-induced spin-flip scattering ($T^2$-power law), the possibility, due to the half-metal character of CMR manganites, of two-magnon scattering ($T^{9/2}$ dependence), the reappearance of minority spin states at the Fermi energy and their Anderson localization,\textsuperscript{28,29} the scattering with thermally excited magnons ($T^5$ dependence), the importance of spin-wave scattering phenomena ($T^{7/2}$ dependence), and the interaction with acoustic phonons ($T^5$ dependence).

As recently shown,\textsuperscript{28} in the FM phase, the resistivity $\rho(T)$ can be described using a generic $T^n$-power law, which can simulate different scattering processes, helping to reveal the main active one.\textsuperscript{28} More precisely, in the FM phase, the $\rho(T)$ curves of CMR manganites are better fitted by the formula $\rho_{\text{FM}}(T) = \rho_0 + AT^n$ using $\rho_0$, $A$, and $\alpha$ as free fitting parameters.

![FIG. 1. Resistivity vs temperature behavior of three 20-nm-thick Lbmo films; the curves correspond to three samples showing $T_{\text{MI}}$ values of (a) 345 K, (b) 272 K, and (c) 215 K. The metallic ferromagnetic $\rho_{\text{FM}}$ and the polaronic $\rho_{\text{PI}}$ fitting curves (continuous line at low and high temperatures, respectively) are also reported for all of the samples.](image)

Table I. Fitting parameters for the low-temperature ferromagnetic resistivity $\rho_{\text{FM}}(T) = \rho_0 + AT^n$ and the high-temperature thermal-activated polaronic resistivity $\rho_{\text{PI}}(T) = \rho_\infty T \exp(E_g/k_BT)$. The data refer to the Lbmo films reported in Fig. 1.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Sample</th>
<th>$T_{\text{MI}}$ (K)</th>
<th>$\rho_0$ (m$\Omega$ cm)</th>
<th>$A$ ($10^{-6}$)</th>
<th>$\alpha$</th>
<th>$\rho_\infty$ (m$\Omega$ cm)</th>
<th>$E_g$ (meV)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>PLS345</td>
<td>345</td>
<td>0.13</td>
<td>0.79</td>
<td>2.38</td>
<td>86</td>
<td>85.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>PLS272</td>
<td>272</td>
<td>1.14</td>
<td>0.80</td>
<td>2.89</td>
<td>318</td>
<td>131.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>PLS215</td>
<td>215</td>
<td>4.72</td>
<td>1.74</td>
<td>3.24</td>
<td>366</td>
<td>143.6</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

In analyzing the resistivity data of all the investigated samples, we have, therefore, used the formula $\rho_{\text{FM}}(T) = T \rho_\infty \exp(E_g/k_BT)$ in the temperature range above $T_{\text{MI}}$, with $\rho_\infty$ and $E_g$ as free fitting parameters, and the $\rho_{\text{FM}}(T)$ expression proposed by Mercene et al. for temperatures below $T_{\text{MI}}$. We have varied the fitting temperature range in units of 10 K for both the FM and the PI regions, keeping the lowest- and highest-temperature fitting extremes fixed, respectively. As the temperature range increases, the statistical error on the fitting parameters monotonically decreases, while the $\chi^2$ value remains quite unchanged, until a critical range is reached at which both the $\chi^2$ and the statistical errors abruptly change (the first over 2 orders of magnitude, the latter by a factor of 4–5). The fitting parameters obtained by this procedure for the Lbmo films in Fig. 1 are reported, as an example, in Table I.

The analysis of the curves in Fig. 1 allows us to point out the first important effect about the influence of the disorder on the transport properties of the CMR manganites. If these properties are mainly driven by the coexistence of FM and PI phases, the resistivity $\rho(T)$ should be written as a linear combination of $\rho_{\text{FM}}$ and $\rho_{\text{PI}}$. More specifically, the resistivity behavior should be fitted by the formula $\rho(T) = f\rho_{\text{FM}} + (1-f)\rho_{\text{PI}}$, where $\rho_{\text{FM}}$ is the resistivity in the FM phase, $\rho_{\text{PI}}$ is the polaron hopping term, and $f$ represents the volume fraction in the FM metallic region.\textsuperscript{32} Once the FM and the PI resistivity behaviors have been fitted, as previously described, the phase-separation distribution function $f$ can be easily calculated. In Fig. 2, this function is reported for the three Lbmo samples shown in Fig. 1.

The optimally doped Lbmo film shows an $f$ function continuously varying from the two expected values (1 and 0 for the FM and the PI regime, respectively).\textsuperscript{22,32} As the disorder due to the oxygen vacancies increases, however, the $f$ function shows a significant discontinuity (even more evident in the heavily underdoped Lbmo sample). This clearly indicates that the formula $\rho(T) = f\rho_{\text{FM}} + (1-f)\rho_{\text{PI}}$ is no longer valid. We have observed similar behaviors of the $f$ function when other types of disorder influence the system. As an example, the behavior of the $f$ function is reported in the case of an optimally oxygen-doped Lbmo film deposited on MgO (curve d in Fig. 2). For this sample, the Curie temperature $T_C$ is higher than 300 K, while the $T_{\text{MI}}$ temperature is about 200 K, very reduced with respect to the bulk value because of the disorder induced by the substrate strain. From the data in Fig. 2, it is clear that with increasing disorder, an increasing temperature range separating the two phases appears and
one cannot describe the transition from one regime into the other using a trivial superimposition of the FM and PI resistivities. This can be related to the restoring of a first-order FM-PI transition with increasing disorder, as theoretically predicted by Salafranca and Brey,\textsuperscript{18} or to the influence of the disorder on the size of the FM and PI clusters, shrinking them at very small length scale (nanometers or less) and requiring more complicated quantum mechanical approaches.

From the data in Fig. 1, it is also possible to notice a clear dependence of the measured $T_{\text{MI}}$ values with the amount of disorder present in the system. On the other hand, Mercone et al.\textsuperscript{20} already pointed out that for Sr- and Ca-based manganite thin films, the values of the $\alpha$ coefficient depend on the disorder present in the system, evaluated in terms of the value of the residual resistivity. We have, therefore, systematically analyzed the FM transport properties of a large amount of CMR Sr-, Ca-, and Ba-based manganite thin films with different oxygen contents, thicknesses, substrate induced epitaxial strains, and small deviations from the optimal stoichiometric composition. In Fig. 3, the $\alpha$ values obtained for all the investigated samples are shown as a function of the normalized $T_{\text{MI}}/T_{\text{MI}}^{\text{bulk}}$ values, where $T_{\text{MI}}^{\text{bulk}}$ are the MIT temperatures measured in thick films or bulk materials and are equal to 345, 380, and 270 K, respectively, for the Ba-, Sr-, and Ca-based compounds. Independent of the type of disorder present in the system, the $\alpha$ coefficients appear to be strongly related to the metal insulator-transition temperature $T_{\text{MI}}$.

Even if the source of the disorder is different, increasing the amount of the latter, the metal-insulator temperature $T_{\text{MI}}$ decreases and the $\alpha$ coefficient linearly increases for $T_{\text{MI}} > 200$ K. In the inset in Fig. 3, the $\alpha$ vs $T_{\text{MI}}$ curves at three different stages of the oxygenation (namely, the samples are subsequently postannealed for three different times) are reported for two Lbmo films deposited on STO. For these samples, the assumption that the only changing parameter is the oxygen content is strictly verified, and the slopes of both of these curves are the same as that shown in the main figure. At high temperatures above $T_{\text{MI}}$, in the polaronic scenario, the disorder should also play an important role in the transport properties of CMR manganites. Using the expression of $\rho_{\text{PI}}$, we have fitted the high-temperature (from $T_{\text{MI}}$ up to 550 K) $\rho(T)$ curves of a large part of the films in Fig. 3, obtaining the $E_g$ values plotted as a function of $T_{\text{MI}}$ in Fig. 4.

The $E_g$ values are almost constant for samples characterized by low values of $T_{\text{MI}}$ (inset in Fig. 4). Once again, the $k_B T$ thermal energy is also plotted as a continuous line. The two lines, describing the $E_g$ vs $T_{\text{MI}}$, are just guides for the eyes.

**Fig. 2.** (Color online) Distribution function $f$ vs temperature behavior for three 20-nm-thick Lbmo films. The curves correspond to the three samples shown in Fig. 1, with $T_{\text{MI}}$ values of (a) 345 K, (b) 272 K, and (c) 215 K. The $f$ function for an optimally oxygenated Lbmo film grown on MgO substrate is also reported (curve d, with a $T_{\text{MI}}$ value of about 200 K).

**Fig. 3.** (Color online) $\alpha$-coefficient behavior as a function of the metal-insulator-transition temperature $T_{\text{MI}}$ for Lbmo films grown on STO (black squares), NGO (red circles), MgO (green up triangles), and LAO (blue down triangles) substrates. The $\alpha$-coefficient values are also reported for Lsmo films (cyan diamonds) and an Lcmo film (magenta left-triangle) on STO substrates. In the inset, the evolution of the $\alpha$ coefficient at different stages of oxygenation, for two Lbmo films grown on STO substrates, is reported. The dotted lines have the same slope in both graphs.

**Fig. 4.** (Color online) The activation energy $E_g$ versus the metal-insulator transition temperature $T_{\text{MI}}$ for Lbmo (black squares), Lsmo (cyan diamonds), and Lcmo (magenta left triangle). The $k_B T$ thermal energy is also plotted as a continuous line. The two lines, describing the $E_g$ vs $T_{\text{MI}}$, are just guides for the eyes.
independent of the type of disorder, for $T_{MI}$ values larger than 200 K, all the obtained $E_g$ values follow a general linear behavior as a function of $T_{MI}$. As the disorder in the system becomes smaller with increasing $T_{MI}$ values, the $E_g$ values (or, in other terms, the formation energy of a polaron) decrease. For (LaMnO$_3$)$_2$-(SrMnO$_3$)$_3$ superlattices grown on (111) STO substrates, in which the ordered sequence of LaO$_3$-Mn-LaO$_3$-Mn-SrO$_3$-Mn blocks (with La:Sr:Mn ratio equal to that of the LSMO films) removes the disorder associated with a random distribution of Sr ions, the derivative $\Delta p/\Delta T \approx 0$ for all the investigated temperatures. This is clear evidence that $E_g \propto k_B T$ (i.e., the thermal energy is larger than the polaronic formation energy). Recently, a linear correlation has been theoretically predicted between the Curie temperature $T_C$ and the squared variance $\sigma^2$ of the disorder distribution. Our data (see, for instance, Fig. 4) are in agreement with this model if one assumes that the variance of the trapping-carrier potential distribution is proportional to the order $E_g$. This assumption can be intuitively explained considering that, as the disorder increases, the carriers flow in a system where the local trapping potential can be very different, negligible in the case of oxygen octahedrally coordinated Mn atoms and sizable for Mn atoms near one or more oxygen vacancies. Our experimental finding, however, seems to indicate that the MIT temperature $T_{MI}$ and not the Curie temperature $T_C$ is the right parameter to be associated with the amount of disorder present in the system.

In conclusion, in the limit of small disorder and independent of the type of disorder present, we have found that the phase-separation scenario is verified and the resistivity can be described as a superimposition of FM metallic and PI thermally activated resistivities. As the disorder increases, such a simple assumption is no longer valid, and more complicated models are needed to satisfactorily describe the transition between the two phases. Independent of the type and amount of disorder, in the FM phase, the resistivity can always be described using a generic $T^n$-power law. A linear correlation between the value of the $\alpha$ coefficient and the metal-insulator transition temperature $T_{MI}$ has been found. In the high-temperature PI regime, the disorder also appears to influence the resistivity behavior. Low-disorder films (showing larger $T_{MI}$ values) are characterized by smaller polaron energies. A linear relationship between the polaron formation energies $E_g$ and the $T_{MI}$ values has been found, again independent of the type of disorder. Our experimental results show that it is possible to describe the transport properties in CMR manganites by a single disorder parameter and that the MIT temperature $T_{MI}$ is a good candidate to play such a role.

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