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Permalink https://escholarship.org/uc/item/5dz2d781

Journal

Nature Materials, 15(12)

ISSN

1476-1122

Authors

Kyung, WS Huh, SS Koh, YY <u>et al.</u>

Publication Date 2016-12-01

DOI

10.1038/nmat4728

Peer reviewed

Enhanced superconductivity in surface electron doped iron-pnictide $Ba(Fe_{1.94}Co_{0.06})_2As_2$

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The transition critical temperature (T_C) in a FeSe monolayer on SrTiO₃ is enhanced up to 100 K¹⁻⁴. High T_C is also found in bulk iron chalcogenides with similar electronic structure⁵⁻⁷ to that of monolayer FeSe, which suggests that higher T_C may be achieved through electron doping, pushing the Fermi surface (FS) topology towards leaving only electron pockets. Such observation, however, has been limited to chalcogenides and is in contrast with the iron pnictides for which the maximum T_C is achieved with both hole and electron pockets forming considerable FS nesting instability^{8–11}. Here, we report angle-resolved photoemission (ARPES) characterization revealing a monotonic increase of T_C from 24 to 41.5 K upon surface doping on optimally doped Ba(Fe_{1-x}Co_x)₂As₂. The doping changes the overall FS topology towards that of chalcogenides through a rigid downward band shift. Our findings suggest that higher electron doping and concomitant changes in FS topology are favorable conditions for the superconductivity, not only for iron chalcogenides but also for iron pnictides.

An unconventional superconductivity in iron-based superconductor (IBS) was first discovered in iron pnictides, when additional charge carriers were doped into antiferromagnetic mother compounds^{12,13}. Regardless of the carrier type, for each type there is an optimum doping level for the T_C with the T_C decreasing away from the optimum doping level. The maximum T_C was found to occur when a good nesting condition is satisfied among hole and electron pockets at the Brillouin zone (BZ) center and corner, respectively^{8,9}. This led to a belief that the FS nesting instability was an important ingredient for the superconductivity^{8–11}.

The discovery of a relatively high $T_C \sim 37$ K in an iron chalcogenides AFe₂Se₂ (A=alkali metal)^{5,6} came as a surprise due to a largely different FS topology: no hole pockets at the zone center, leaving only electron pockets at the zone corner without any nesting condition. The overall

electronic structure of such chalcogenides resembles that of over-electron-doped iron pnictides. Furthermore, the striking discovery of superconductivity above 65 K in electron doped monolayer FeSe on $SrTiO_3^{1-4,14,15}$ and a recent report of 40 K (20 K) superconductivity in intercalated (surface doped) bulk FeSe^{7,16,17} consistently strengthen the notion of higher T_C with increased electron doping and following changes in the FS topology.

While these findings may have brought new insights into the superconducting mechanism, however, such observation - increasing T_C with electron doping with changes in FS topology, is so far only limited to chalcogenides. It thus poses a challenging task in revealing the true nature of superconductivity in IBS; whether pnictides and chalcogenides have different superconducting mechanisms or such enhanced superconductivity simply has not been realized in pnictides. Finding out which is the case would provide key information on the main factors behind the superconductivity in IBS, thus calls for similar experiments on pnictides. Unfortunately, bulk doping of iron pnictide superconductors usually involves changes in other parameters affecting the superconductivity and electronic structure, such as the arsenic (As) height relative to the Fe-plane^{18–20}.

To achieve electron doping without much affecting the underlying local structures or parameters affecting the superconductivity, we applied surface electron doping^{21–23} to the prototypical pnictide system, optimally doped Ba(Fe_{1-x}Co_x)₂As₂ (x = 0.06)²⁴ (see Methods). We observe monotonic enhancement of T_C upon electron doping of optimally doped Ba(Fe_{1-x}Co_x)₂As₂ (OP). Our results imply that the superconductivity in pnictides also favors higher electron doping at the expense of the nesting condition as in chalcogenides. Such similarity between pnictides and chalcogenides demands further studies towards a unified picture for the entire IBS family.

Surface electron doping was carried out by deposition of potassium (K) on the sample surface. Figure 1 shows the electronic structure of pristine (left, OP) and surface electron doped Ba(Fe_{1.94}Co_{0.06})₂As₂ (right, OPD), respectively. The band structure in Fig. 1a does not show any significant change except a rigid downward band shift, as determined by comparing the band dispersions of OP and OPD along the Γ -M high symmetry line (indicated by the black and yellow dashed lines in Fig. 1a). The electronic structure of pnictides has been found to be highly sensitive to the change in the As height^{25,26}. Even a change in the height leas than 0.1 Å should result in recognizable modification in the dispersion²⁵. The observed rigid band shift without modification of the band dispersion thus implies that K deposition indeed does not alter the As height which plays the key role in the IBS physics^{18–20}.

In the measured Fermi surfaces in Fig. 1b, it is seen that the hole pocket shrinks almost to the hole-electron Lifshitz transition point while the electron pocket enlarges. These observed changes in the FS topology are mostly due to the rigid band shift. The band shift was determined by monitoring the electron band bottom position at M that gradually shifts to a higher binding energy with the increasing doping level. The maximum achievable band shift is around 14 meV as the band shift saturates when the K coverage reaches up to 1 monolayer (ML) (see Fig. S1 in the Supplementary Information). Another noticeable change in the FS topology is the disappearance of the surface states from the surface reconstruction associated with Ba atoms (the weak intensity at (0.5,0.5) of OP in Fig. 1b). The states are found to completely disappear around 0.5 ML of K coverage which was estimated from the core level spectra from both surface Ba and deposited K (see Fig. S2).

With the new Fermi surface topology, the next step is to investigate how the T_C changes upon the electronic structure change associated with the surface electron doping. As the system has a doping level away from the optimal value, the T_C for OPDs should decrease considering the phase diagram of bulk Ba(Fe_{1-x}Co_x)₂As₂. However, as summarized in Fig. 2, the superconducting gap size as well as the T_C turn out to increase in OPDs. Figures 2a-d show symmetrized energy distribution curves (EDCs) from various surface doping levels (0, 0.33, 0.5, and 0.67 ML) taken at different temperatures. The EDCs are from the momentum points where the electron band crosses the Fermi level. The symmetrized EDCs in Fig. 2a-d show a clear gap feature at the lowest temperature which increases with the doping level. Fitting the spectra with a Dynes function²⁷ gives a doping dependent gap size at 10 K as plotted in Fig. 2e. Starting from Δ =4.8 meV (± 0.8) for the pristine system which is consistent with the reported value⁹, the gap size increases up to 7.2 meV (± 1.1) for 0.67 ML case.

As indicated by the gap size, the T_C determined from the temperature dependent gap profile also increases in OPDs. The temperature dependent gap opening, plotted in Figs. 2f-h, shows enhanced T_C's, essentially following the Bardeen-Cooper-Schrieffer mean-field temperature dependence^{28,29}. Both the T_C and gap size gradually increase, from T_C = 24.0 K and Δ = 4.5 meV (± 0.6) for OP to T_C = 41.5K and Δ = 6.8 meV (± 0.8) for 0.67 ML OPD. These results give 2 $\Delta/(k_BT_C)$ ratios of 4.35 for OP and 3.77, 3.86 and 3.8 for 0.33, 0.5 and 0.67 ML OPDs, respectively. The temperature dependence as well as similar values of $2\Delta/(k_BT_C)$ ratio indicate that the gaps in OPDs is also of superconducting origin. The back bending dispersion observed at low temperatures, which is typically due to the Bogoliubov quasiparticles, further supports the superconducting origin of the gaps in OPDs (see Fig. S3d-g in Supplementary Information).

Our observation of the T_C enhancement in OPDs via surface doping is summarized in Fig. 3. The coverage is converted into effective bulk doping level in order to compare the results with the bulk Ba(Fe_{1-x}Co_x)₂As₂ phase diagram (see Supplementary Information S4), and is labeled in white text. T_C 's in OPDs are overlaid on the phase diagram with red square marks for the corresponding effective bulk doping levels. The observed doping dependent T_C upon surface doping (red dashed line) is in a clear contrast with the known doping dependence of the bulk doping (blue dashed line). The difference in the doping dependence of T_C should be attributed to the Co induced impurity effects in over-doped bulk sample (OV) compared to that in OPD. This also suggests that T_C in the bulk could have gone up for OV without the impurity potential generated by Co atoms and that the intrinsic optimal doping level might be higher than 6% Co in Ba(Fe_{1-x}Co_x)₂As₂. It is interesting to note that the Co concentration level of 6 % needed for the highest T_C in Codoped BaFe₂As₂^{30,31}, suggesting a strong impurity effect from Co-doping.

This may also provide an important implication for the gap symmetry in Ba(Fe_{1-x}Co_x)₂As₂ . Since superconductivity with an s₊₋ gap symmetry is expected to be suppressed by impurity effects, the relatively high T_C in Ba(Fe_{1-x}Co_x)₂As₂ has been viewed as either lack of or weak pair-breaking role of Co atoms. These observations were used to propose s_{++} as the superconducting gap symmetry in Ba(Fe_{1-x}Co_x)₂As₂ system³². However, our results on suppressed superconductivity in OV from impurity effects indicate that the gap symmetry is more consistent with the s_{+-} .

Another important aspect to consider is the nesting instability. As seen in the insets of Fig. 3, the Fermi surface topology of OPD resembles that of OV. As a result, the associated nesting instability of OPD is significantly reduced compared to that of OP, which can be seen from the charge susceptibility estimated from the auto-correlation of the ARPES data³³ (the inset in the upper-right corner of Fig. 3). A higher T_C with less nesting instability in OPD implies that the FS nesting instability may not play an essential role for the superconductivity even for iron pnictides.

The observed T_C above 40 K in OPD has never been achieved in bulk doped BaFe₂As₂ systems³⁴, and the observed doping dependent T_C behavior in OPD is on par with that of chalcogenides: higher T_C with higher electron doping with corresponding changes in the electronic structure and the FS topology. Our results provide a guideline towards the unified understanding of the superconducting mechanism for entire IBS family, and calls for a new theoretical and experimental investigations on the role of inter-band scattering³⁵ in the IBS superconductivity.

Methods

Angle-resolved photoemission spectroscopy

The ARPES measurements were performed at the Beamlines (BLs) 10.0.1 and 4.0.3 of the Advanced Light Source, Lawrence Berkeley National Laboratory. Surface electron doping was carried out by evaporation of Na/K on the sample surfaces using commercial SAES alkali metal dispensers. Spectra were acquired with Scienta R4000 (BL 10.0.1) and R8000 (BL 4.0.3) electron analyzers. The overall energy resolution and used photon energy were 8 meV and 49 eV for BL 10.0.1, and 13 meV and 62 eV for BL 4.0.3, respectively. The samples were cleaved and doped at 50 and 10 K, respectively, in an ultra-high vacuum better than 4×10^{-11} Torr. All measurements were performed within an hour for each cleaved sample to avoid the aging effect on the Na/K evaporated sample surface. Data shown in Figs. 1-3 were collected on 7 different samples.

Sample synthesis and characterization

Single crystals of Ba(Fe_{1-x}Co_x)₂As₂ (x = 0.06 and 0.16) were grown using a self-flux method as described in Ref. 24. The actual Co composition was determined by an inductively coupled plasma technique. T_C of the optimally doped samples (x = 0.06) is 24 K, which was determined from the resistivity and magnetic susceptibility measurements. Superconductivity was not observed in the overdoped samples (x = 0.16).

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Acknowledgements This work is supported by IBS-R009-G2, IBS-R009-G1 and the Basic Science Research Program (No. 2012-008233) funded by Korean Federation of Science and Technology Societies. The Advanced Light Source is supported by the Office of Basic Energy Sciences of the U.S. DOE under Contract No. DE-AC02-05CH11231.

Author Contributions Y.K.K. conceived the work. W.S.K. and Y.K.K. performed ARPES measurements with the support from J.D.D and S.K.M, and analyzed the data. Samples were grown and characterized by K.Y.C., M.N., and H.E. All authors discussed the results. Y.K.K, S.K.M, and C.K. led the project and manuscript preparation with contributions from all authors.

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Competing financial interests The authors declare no competing financial interests.

Figure 1 Electronic structures of pristine (OP) and surface electron doped (OPD) optimal $Ba(Fe_{1-x}Co_x)_2As_2$. ARPES intensity plot along the Γ-*M* direction (a) of OP (left) and OPD (right). White solid lines in panel a indicate energy distribution curves (EDC) at the *M*-point which reveal the downward band shift. The dashed lines mark the band dispersion of OP (black) and OPD (yellow), respectively. OP band dispersion is overlaid on the OPD data with a 14 meV downward shift. b, ARPES intensity maps at the Fermi level of OP (left) and OPD (right). While both Γ and *M* pockets have a similar size in OP, the FS of OPD shows a much larger electron pocket at the *M*-point than the hole pocket at the Γ-point.

Figure 2 Surface doping and temperature dependence of the superconducting gap. Temperature dependent symmetrized ARPES spectra measured at the k_F point of the electron pocket around *M* for pristine OP (**a**), 0.4 ML of K covered (**b**), 0.6 ML (**c**) and 0.8 ML cases (**d**). Overlaid blue and red solid lines represent fitting results with Dynes function for OP and OPDs, respectively. **e**, Doping dependence of the gap (left) and the electron band bottom position shift with respect to OP case (right) at 10K. Temperature dependent gap behaviors of 0.4 ML (**f**), 0.6 ML (**g**) and 0.8 ML (**h**) OPDs. OP is plotted in (**h**) in blue. Black dotted lines in **f-h** indicate BCS spectral function²⁹ drawn by fitting each data. Error bars are estimated from the standard error of the fitting.

Figure 3 Summary of T_C enhancement and FS topology change upon surface doping. T_C of surface doped Ba(Fe_{1-x}Co_x)₂As₂ is marked as the red rectangle on the phase diagram

of bulk Ba(Fe_{1-x}Co_x)₂As₂. FSs of OP, OPD and OV are shown as insets. The surface dosing level was estimated from the electron pocket size with respect to that of OP and OV. The inset on the upper-right corner depicts the charge susceptibility calculated from ARPES intensity at E_F with autocorrelation method³³. Blue and red dashed lines high-light the distinct trends of T_C in bulk- and surface-doped case, respectively. Error bars represent the standard error in the fitting procedure.







