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CaB$_6$: A New Semiconducting Material for Spin Electronics

H. J. Tromp, P. van Gelderen, P. J. Kelly, G. Brocks, and P. A. Bobbert

Faculty of Applied Physics and MESA+ Research Institute, University of Twente, P.O. Box 217, 7500 AE Enschede, The Netherlands

Faculty of Sciences and Research Institute for Materials, University of Nijmegen, P.O. Box 9010, 6525 ED Nijmegen, The Netherlands

Department of Applied Physics and COBRA Research School, Eindhoven University of Technology, P.O. Box 513, 5600 MB Eindhoven, The Netherlands

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Ferromagnetism was recently observed at unexpectedly high temperatures in La-doped CaB$_6$. The starting point of all theoretical proposals to explain this observation is a semimetallic electronic structure calculated for CaB$_6$ within the local density approximation. Here we report the results of parameter-free quasiparticle calculations of the single-particle excitation spectrum which show that CaB$_6$ is not a semimetal but a semiconductor with a band gap of $0.8 \pm 0.1$ eV. Magnetism in La$_x$Ca$_{1-x}$B$_6$ occurs just on the metallic side of a Mott transition in the La-induced impurity band.

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CaB$_6$. From our results we shall conclude that, contrary to what is currently being assumed, the parent material is actually a semiconductor with quite a large band gap. This finding has far-reaching consequences for understanding the basic properties of the doped, ferromagnetic phase and opens up the prospect of a range of novel applications.

The starting point for our GW study is an LDA calculation for CaB$_6$ performed with a plane wave basis and using norm-conserving pseudopotentials to describe the interaction between the valence electrons and the ionic cores [14]. Using the experimentally determined structure, we reproduce essentially perfectly the energy bands calculated by Massidda [8] using an all-electron method. The results are shown in Fig. 1(a). There are ten valence bands (bonding orbitals derived from the boron 2$s$ and 2$p$ levels) well separated from the conduction bands (antibonding states) with the exception of an overlap of about 0.3 eV in a small region around the bonding states) with the exception of an overlap of about 0.3 eV in a small region around the X point of the highest occupied and lowest unoccupied bands. The occurrence of such small band overlap (or the presence of a comparably small band gap) is an important criterion for the stability of an excitonic insulator phase [5]. The effective masses in units of the free electron mass for the bands near X, $m^\perp_\mathrm{e} = 0.215 \pm 0.004$ and $m^\parallel_\mathrm{e} = 0.50 \pm 0.02$ for the electrons and $m^\perp_\mathrm{h} = 0.196 \pm 0.003$ and $m^\parallel_\mathrm{h} = 1.8 \pm 0.2$ for the holes, are close to values reported earlier [5,7,9]. We use the LDA electronic wave functions and eigenvalues as input for the GW calculations for which we adopt the space-time approach suggested by Rojas et al. [15] in which all operators are represented on grids in real and reciprocal space, in the time and energy domains; details of our implementation have been given by van der Horst et al. [16]. By varying the size of these grids we estimate that the calculated QP energies are converged within 0.1 eV. The densest grids we used were a (12 x 12 x 12) real-space grid and a (6 x 6 x 6) k-grid. The Green’s function is constructed including the LDA wave functions and energies of the lowest 300 bands.

The results of the GW calculations are plotted in Fig. 1(b). Throughout the Brillouin zone, the QP corrections to particular LDA bands are rather uniform so that the dispersion of the GW bands is very similar to the LDA band dispersion and the effective masses differ only slightly from the values obtained from the LDA calculation. They are reduced on average by less than 10%, to $m^\perp_\mathrm{e} = 0.196 \pm 0.003$ and $m^\parallel_\mathrm{e} = 0.48 \pm 0.02$ for the electrons and $m^\perp_\mathrm{h} = 0.174 \pm 0.003$ and $m^\parallel_\mathrm{h} = 1.7 \pm 0.2$ for the holes. The sign and size of the corrections to the energy bands depend on their wave function character and vary considerably from band to band. Of particular importance are the relative shifts of the bands at X near the Fermi level. The hole band and electron bands are moved, respectively, downwards and upwards in energy resulting in the opening of a sizable band gap of about 0.8 ± 0.1 eV. The downward and upward shifts can be understood from the bonding and antibonding character of the wave functions in the valence and conduction bands, respectively. This is quite analogous to the situation in silicon [17]. The largest shift in the occupied bands is calculated for the lowest valence band which is lowered in energy by about 1.5 eV. Given the similarity between the LDA band structures of CaB$_6$ and SrB$_6$ [8], we expect a GW calculation to yield similar results for these two materials.

Our finding that bulk CaB$_6$ is a semiconductor is consistent with the large value of the low temperature resistivity and with its increase with decreasing temperature recently reported by Ott et al. [2] and by Vonlanthen et al. [18]. The temperature dependence of the resistivity of the “stochiometric” sample (labeled Ca$_{1+\delta}$/B$_6$ in Ref. [18]) can be interpreted as that of a doped semiconductor. In the saturation range, around room temperature, all the impurities are ionized, the number of charge carriers in the bands is temperature independent, and the resistivity has a weak temperature dependence. Below $T = 230$ K the impurity charge carriers gradually freeze out and their number decreases exponentially. One might tentatively associate the 84 meV activation energy found for this process by Vonlanthen with an impurity binding energy [19,20]. At temperatures below ~50 K most of the charge carriers are frozen out and the resistivity is determined by hopping between impurity sites. Assuming nearest neighbor hopping, the latter process can be described by an activation energy that is easily an order of magnitude smaller than the impurity binding energy [21,22]. The La-doped samples correspond to a high doping regime, where the impurity concentration is on the metallic side of a Mott transition in an impurity band (see below). For these samples, therefore, a metallic-like resistivity is observed over the whole temperature range. We do not attempt to explain the decrease in resistivity observed below $T = 0.4$ K [2,18].

FIG. 1. Energy bands for CaB$_6$ in (a) the LDA approximation, and (b) the GW approximation. The Fermi energy is indicated by the dotted line at 0 eV.
Our result that CaB$_6$ is a semiconductor is also consistent with recent angle-resolved photoemission experiments by Denlinger et al. on SrB$_6$ [23], in which a gap of a size similar to what we calculate was found. Using the fact that photoemission experiments are sensitive to the surface electronic structure and assuming that the bulk is a semimetal, the authors interpreted their results in terms of an electron-rich surface region (of thickness 6 nm) in which the structure differs from that of the bulk leading to the formation of a large band gap. This surface region has to be large enough to give the bands a bulk-like dispersion. While we cannot exclude the importance of surface states, our results indicate that the photoemission spectrum can be interpreted without invoking such a special surface region. The optical data of Ref. [18] cannot be explained in a simple way, neither on the basis of the (semimetal) LDA nor of the (semiconductor) GW band structures. The imaginary part of the calculated dielectric function shows a steep rise only at around 2 and 3 eV, respectively, since transitions between the highest valence and lowest conduction bands are only weakly allowed, whereas the experimental dielectric function shows such a rise below 1 eV.

The result for the stoichiometric phase has important implications for the models proposed to explain the ferromagnetism observed in the doped phase. A low density electron gas is expected to show a ferromagnetic phase; Ceperley [3] and Ortiz et al. [4] report critical values for the electron gas parameter of this phase of $r_s = 80$ and $r_s = 20$, respectively. In a solid this electron gas parameter has to be rescaled because the background dielectric constant and the effective masses rescale the potential and kinetic energies of the electron gas and thus change the density at which one expects the ferromagnetic phase to occur [5,9]. Within GW one calculates the dielectric response function at the random phase approximation level [12,15–17]. Similar to Ref. [9], using our calculated values for the effective masses and static dielectric constant of 5, we obtain a scaled density parameter $r_s$ of 1.5. This is at least an order of magnitude smaller than the values reported by Ceperley [3] and Ortiz et al. [4] which makes the low density electron gas an unlikely candidate for the observed ferromagnetism. Within the effective mass approximation we estimate an exciton binding energy of about 0.07 eV. The excitonic binding energy is an order of magnitude smaller than the calculated QP band gap. The excitonic insulator model requires them to be comparable in size [5], so it is unlikely that this model can be applied to CaB$_6$.

Instead we note that the ferromagnetism occurs for an impurity concentration which is just on the metallic side of a Mott transition in the impurity band: $n^{1/3}a_H = 0.4$, where $n$ is the dopant concentration $7 \times 10^{19}$ electrons cm$^{-3}$ and $a_H = 10$ Å is the Bohr radius of an isolated effective mass impurity. Some support for the possible role of an impurity band may be found in the very recent experimental studies on doped hexaborides reported by Terashima et al. [24]. He found that some of his La-doped samples were paramagnetic, exhibiting the Curie-Weiss behavior which is to be expected if the dopant concentration were below Mott’s critical value. In other samples no indication of saturation of the magnetic moment even in the highest magnetic field reported (10 kOe) was found. Such behavior might be expected for a Stoner model of weak ferromagnetism with partly filled narrow bands on the metallic side of a Mott transition. This model might also be capable of explaining the different values reported for the magnetic moment per dopant atom [1,2,24] if there were a significant deviation from the nominal stoichiometry. Since the effective valence of an impurity atom in a semiconductor is very sensitive to the local environment, it is important to know where the La goes and if all of it actually occupies Ca sites as assumed. In the same context, one should determine the abundance of vacancies on the boron sublattice and whether they have donor or acceptor character. This is particularly relevant in view of the observation of ferromagnetic ordering in an undoped CaB$_6$ sample with an apparent Ca deficiency [18]. Experimental difficulties in making the samples are apparent from the attribution of de Haas–van Alphen signals in samples on the metallic side of a Mott transition to Al inclusions [24].

Starting from the assumption that the magnetism occurs mainly in the impurity band, we are currently attempting to determine the effective exchange interaction between impurities from total energy calculations, in order to estimate the Curie temperature, and to determine the impurity-state related parameters which govern the physical behavior of the doped system such as the hopping matrix elements between impurity states, the charge and spin fluctuation parameters (Hubbard $U$ and Stoner $I$, respectively), as well as the impurity binding energy, going beyond the effective mass approximation. The position of the impurity state with respect to the bottom of the conduction band is particularly difficult to estimate reliably because it requires taking into account simultaneously the central cell potential and the long-range Coulomb interaction. One way to assess the importance of dopant atoms experimentally would be to use a field-effect device to inject charge into undoped CaB$_6$ [25].

Irrespective of the origin of the high Curie temperature in the doped material, the existence of a large gap for the undoped material means a new class of magnetic semiconductors [26] is available. Magnetic semiconductors have attracted a lot of attention recently in the context of spin electronics. The size of the magnetization in doped hexaborides is not high, but it is not obviously inferior to the materials used in Refs. [27,28]. The doped hexaborides possess the unique characteristic of having a Curie temperature sufficiently high to allow room-temperature operation of semiconducting spin devices, something which has only very recently been achieved at low temperatures [27,28]. With the hexaborides it should be possible to inject a spin-polarized current from the doped into the
undoped material in the ballistic regime and study the spin dynamics as a function of temperature, and of current density without the complication of having to apply an external magnetic field [27,28] or without the problems encountered when attempting to inject spins from a low resistivity ferromagnetic metal into a conventional semiconductor in the diffusive regime [29]. It should also be possible to make a field-effect device to modulate a spin-polarized current in the doped hexaboride material and achieve gain. If a $p$-type hexaboride with some of the Ca replaced by a mono-valent ion were also found to be ferromagnetic, it should even be possible to make the spin analogs of bipolar devices.

Both Ca and B are light elements so that the spin-orbit coupling is small. Since the lowest conduction band and highest valence band are both singly degenerate, the intrinsic spin-flip scattering should be weak with spin-flip scattering lengths comparable to what has recently been observed in carbon nanotubes [30]. This should also hold for the impurity states if the latter can be described within an effective mass model. Because of the small size of the spin-orbit coupling, because the magnetic moment is so tiny, and because the hexaborides are cubic, the material should be magnetically extremely soft with a very small intrinsic magnetocrystalline anisotropy. This could be important for sensor applications.

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Note added.—After submission of the manuscript, evidence for the existence of a band of partly localized, partly itinerant defect states and thus implicitly for the existence of a band gap has emerged from NMR spin-lattice relaxation measurements [31] and from thermopower measurements [32].

[20] This behavior is consistent with an impurity concentration of (at least) $\sim 10^{17}$ cm$^{-3}$. With a band gap of 0.8 eV, the intrinsic regime, where the number of charge carriers that are thermally excited across the band gap exceeds the number of impurity charge carriers, then starts at a very high temperature of $\sim 1500$ K.
[22] Alternatively, Mott’s variable range hopping might play a role in this regime. The details of this hopping process depend upon the nature and distribution of the impurities, the amount of compensation, etc. See, e.g., Ref. [21].
[23] J. D. Denlinger et al., cond-mat/0009022.