

Helical spin-density waves in Fe/Cr trilayers with perfect interfaces

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Despite the presence of only collinear, commensurate (C) and incommensurate (I) spin-density waves (SDWs) in bulk Cr, the interfacial steps in Fe/Cr multilayers are now believed to stabilize a helical (H) SDW within the Cr spacer. Yet HSDWs were first predicted in an Fe/Cr trilayer with perfect interfaces when the orientation of the Fe moments does not favor C ordering: if the number of Cr monolayers is even (odd) and the Fe moments are pointing in the same (opposite) direction, then a CSDW does not gain any coupling energy. Under these circumstances, a simple model verifies that H ordering is indeed favored over I ordering provided that the Fermi surface mismatch is sufficiently small or the temperature sufficiently high. © 1999 American Institute of Physics. [S0021-8979(99)67508-9]

Recent neutron-scattering measurements¹ have led to the surprising result that helical (H) spin-density waves (SDWs) are present in Fe/Cr multilayers. It has been well established for many years² that H SDWs are not stable in bulk Cr alloys, where only collinear, commensurate (C), and incommensurate (I) SDWs appear. For example, pure Cr enters an I SDW state below its Néel temperature of 310 K while CrMn with a Mn concentration above 0.3% enters a C SDW state. Prior to the recent neutron-scattering measurements, Slonczewski³ predicted that steps at the interfaces of Fe/Cr multilayers would stabilize a H SDW. But even before Slonczewski's work, Stoeffler and Gautier⁴ argued that under the right conditions, a H SDW would be stable in an Fe/Cr/Fe trilayer with perfect interfaces. In this article, we use a simple model to verify that a H SDW is indeed stable in a perfect Fe/Cr trilayer for the right Fe orientations, temperature, and material parameters.

Measurements on Fe/Cr wedges⁵ and first-principles calculations⁶ have found that Fe and Cr moments are antiparallel at a perfect Fe–Cr interface. Take the coupling energy at each such interface to be $A\mathbf{S}_{\text{Fe}} \cdot \mathbf{S}(z)$, where $A > 0$ is the antiferromagnetic coupling constant, \mathbf{S}_{Fe} is the Fe moment, and $\mathbf{S}(z)$ is the Cr moment in a trilayer with interfaces normal to the z axis. Then for an even (odd) number N of Cr monolayers, coupling energy would be gained by a C SDW when the Fe moments are antiparallel (parallel). Indeed, the properties of Fe/Cr wedges, where the top Fe moments are unconstrained, may be predicted from a simple model⁷ which adds the coupling energy E_{coup} at the two interfaces to the bulk free energy of the Cr spacer. As predicted by this model and implied⁸ by the NIST measurements,⁵ a C SDW obtains a lower free energy than an I SDW for small N or high temperatures—precisely the conditions for the interfacial coupling energy to dominate over the bulk free energy of the Cr spacer.

But if the top and bottom Fe moments are constrained by external conditions to be parallel (antiparallel) for even (odd) N , then the coupling energy gained by a C SDW at one interface would be lost at the other. Under these circum-

stances, a HSDW may be more stable than either a C or I SDW⁹. All three possible spin configurations¹⁰ are sketched in Fig. 1 for $N=10$ and parallel Fe moments. Stoeffler and Gautier⁴ conjectured that, in order for the SDW to avoid forming nodes, a H SDW may be favored over an I SDW under these circumstances. However, pure Cr naturally enters an I state with 27 MLs between nodes. So more work is needed to find the appropriate conditions for the formation of a H SDW.

All possible SDW states of Cr alloys are produced by the nearly perfect nesting^{11,12} of electron and hole Fermi surfaces which are roughly octahedral in shape. The hole Fermi surface is slightly larger than the electron Fermi surface. Consequently, the nesting wave vectors $Q_{\pm} = (G/2)(1 \pm \delta)$ differ from $G/2$, where $G = 4\pi/a$ is the smallest reciprocal lattice vector for a body-centered-cubic (bcc) lattice with constant a . But to achieve the lowest overall free energy,¹³ the ordering wave vectors of the SDW $Q'_{\pm} = (G/2)(1 \pm \delta')$ lie slightly closer to $G/2$ than the nesting wave vectors with $0 \leq \delta' < \delta$.

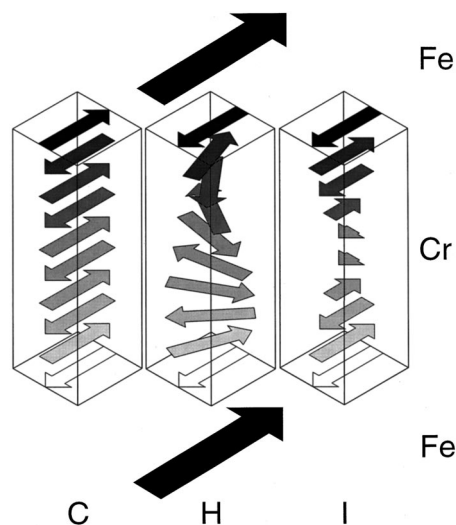


FIG. 1. A sketch of C, H, and I SDWs coupling parallel Fe moments for $N=10$.

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If the Bloch wave functions are approximated by delta functions at every lattice site and \mathbf{Q}' is taken along the z axis, then I and H SDWs may be written as

$$\mathbf{S}_I(z) = \hat{m} \alpha_s g (-1)^{2z/a} \cos\left(\frac{2\pi}{a} \delta' z - \theta\right), \quad (1)$$

$$\mathbf{S}_H(z) = \alpha_s g (-1)^{2z/a} \left\{ \hat{x} \cos\left(\frac{2\pi}{a} \delta' z - \theta\right) + \hat{y} \sin\left(\frac{2\pi}{a} \delta' z - \theta\right) \right\}, \quad (2)$$

where α_s is a constant, \hat{m} is the polarization of the I SDW, θ is an arbitrary phase, and $g(T)$ is the order parameter. At low temperatures in bulk Cr, $\alpha_s g(0) \approx 0.6 \mu_B$. For an I SDW, the distance between nodes is $1/\delta'$ MLs. For a H SDW, this is the distance for a π twist. Keep in mind that a H SDW can be smoothly generated from a C SDW by simply twisting one end. But an I SDW cannot be smoothly transformed into a C SDW.

By doping pure Cr with Mn or Fe, both δ and δ' are diminished. Above some critical impurity concentration, which depends on temperature, $\delta' \rightarrow 0$ and the SDW becomes commensurate. In this limit, Eqs. (1) and (2) reduce to C SDWs with the same amplitude.¹⁴

The energy mismatch between the electron and hole Fermi surfaces is given by $z_0 = 4\pi \delta v_F / \sqrt{3} a$, where v_F is the Fermi velocity. We also introduce the Néel temperature $T_N^* \approx 100$ meV of a perfectly nested alloy with $\delta=0$ and $z_0=0$. For pure Cr, $z_0 \approx 5T_N^*$. If the Fermi surfaces are modeled as octagons, then the change in the bulk SDW free energies below T_N may be evaluated within the random-phase approximation^{13,15} and are denoted by $\Delta F_I(g, \delta', T, z_0)$ and $\Delta F_H(g, \delta', T, z_0)$. When $\delta' = 0$ both free energies reduce to the free energy of a C SDW.

Adding the coupling energy at the two interfaces to the free energy of a Cr spacer with thickness $L = (N-1)a/2$, we obtain the free energy of an Fe/Cr trilayer per cross-sectional area a^2 :

$$E_{I,H} = A[\mathbf{S}_{Fe}^I \cdot \mathbf{S}_{I,H}(0) + \mathbf{S}_{Fe}^H \cdot \mathbf{S}_{I,H}(L)] + \Delta F_{I,H} a^2 L. \quad (3)$$

This assumes the SDW to be rigid, with the same amplitude and wave vector throughout the spacer. To determine the lowest-energy configuration, we minimize this free energy with respect to g , δ' , and θ for both the I and H phases. It is straightforward to show that the energies E_I and E_H only depend on the single dimensionless coupling constant $\gamma = A \alpha_s S_{Fe} / (V/N) \rho_{eh} T_N^*$, where ρ_{eh} is the density-of-states of the nested Fermi surfaces. Since the interfacial coupling is linear in the SDW amplitude, it always induces some SDW ordering within the spacer and the paramagnetic phase is never stable within this model.

For any nonzero γ , the interfacial coupling with the parallel (even N) or antiparallel (odd N) Fe moments applies a torque which transforms a C SDW into a H SDW. In the H phase, the angle between neighboring Fe and Cr moments approaches 180° for large γ or high temperatures, when the

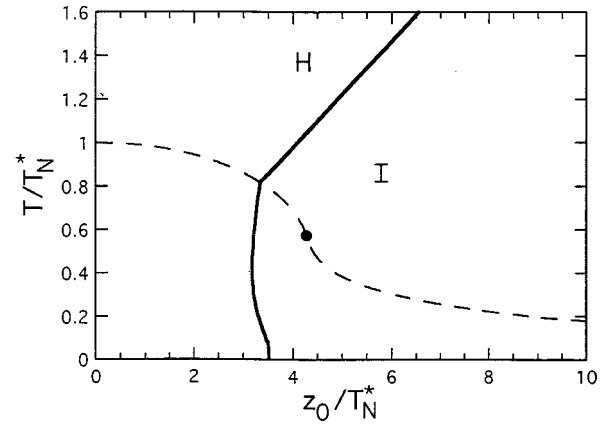


FIG. 2. The IH phase boundary (solid) for an Fe/Cr trilayer with energy mismatch z_0 , $N \rightarrow \infty$, and Fe moments that frustrate C ordering. For bulk Cr, the Néel temperature is given by the dashed curve, with the triple point labeled by a solid circle.

interfacial coupling dominates over the spacer's free energy. As $\gamma \rightarrow 0$, the H SDW evolves into a C SDW with moments rotated 90° away from the Fe moments.

Since the C SDW is unstable for $\gamma > 0$ and appropriately chosen Fe moments, the phase boundary plotted in Fig. 2 for $N \rightarrow \infty$ separates the H and I SDW phases. The dashed curve in Fig. 2 denotes the paramagnetic phase boundary of bulk Cr while the solid dot denotes the bulk triple point. To the right of this point, a bulk Cr alloy enters the I phase; to the left, it enters the C phase. Recall that z_0 can be controlled by doping: it is increased by doping with V and decreased by doping with Mn or Fe.

When $z_0/T_N^* > 3.35$, the IH phase boundary for large N lies above the bulk Néel temperature. Under this condition and for fixed Fe moments that frustrate C ordering, $T_{IH}(N \rightarrow \infty)$ is implicitly given by the relation

$$\sum_{n=0}^{\infty} \text{Re} \left\{ \frac{1}{(n + 1/2 + iz_0/8\pi T_{IH})^m} \right\} = 0, \quad (4)$$

with $m=5$. By contrast, the IC phase transition temperature $T_{IC}(N \rightarrow \infty)$ for perfect interfaces and free Fe moments that can choose the lowest-energy orientation is given by the same condition with $m=3$.⁷ For a fixed z_0 , T_{IH} is always larger than T_{IC} . Below the bulk Néel temperature, the IH phase boundary is solved by expanding the energies E_I and E_H in powers of δ' . Along the IH phase boundary for large N , both the I and H SDWs have a half-period of $1/\delta' = (N-1)$ MLs. Therefore, the I SDW contains only a single node while the H SDW undergoes a single π twist between $z=0$ and $z=L$. In the limit of large N , these phase boundaries are independent of the coupling constant γ . As indicated by Fig. 2, the H phase is re-entrant in a narrow range of z_0/T_N^* between 3.19 and 3.35. When $z_0/T_N^* < 3.19$, the I phase is never stable and the trilayer with parallel (even N) or antiparallel (odd N) moments always supports the H phase.

With decreasing thickness or increasing γ , the interfacial coupling grows and the IH phase boundary shifts to

favor the H phase. For example, when $\gamma=2$ and $z_0/T_N^* = 5$, T_{IH}/T_N shrinks from 3.17 to 1.89 as N decreases from ∞ to 10.

So we have verified the conjecture of Stoeffler and Gautier⁴ that the H SDW phase may be stabilized for perfect interfaces, provided that the Fe moments frustrate C ordering. But in contrast to those authors, we find that the H phase is stable only over a restricted range of temperatures and thicknesses. As the mismatch z_0 between the Fermi surfaces increases, the bulk free energy of an I SDW becomes progressively lower than that of the C and H SDWs. Consequently, the range of stability of the H phase is more restricted for large z_0 . When z_0 is sufficiently small (below $3.19T_N^*$), the H phase is stable for any temperature, thickness, and interfacial coupling $\gamma>0$.

The stability of a H SDW may be tested in an Fe/CrMn trilayer with nearly atomically flat Fe whiskers. When the Fe moments frustrate C ordering, the Cr moments associated with a H SDW (with components normal to the Fe moments) may be measured either electromagnetically or through the magnetic response of an Fe film wrapped around the trilayer.

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- ¹⁴In bulk Cr, the phase θ of the C SDW is constrained so that the rms moments of the I and C SDWs are the same for the same order parameter g . But the energy of the trilayer is minimized with respect to the phase θ so that the *amplitudes* of the C, H, and I SDWs are now identical. This requires a charge modulation of the trilayer with some electrons transferred from the Fe layers to the Cr spacer within a coherence length from the Fe–Cr interface.
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