Superconductivity in CeCo$_2$ nanoparticles

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Abstract

Both Ce and Co are essentially nonmagnetic in Pauli-paramagnetic CeCo$_2$, which undergoes a superconducting transition near 1 K. When made into 58-A˚ nanoparticles, the compound becomes paramagnetic. Meanwhile, based on heat capacity measurements, the nanoparticles remain to be nonsuperconducting down to 0.4 K but exhibit a low-temperature Kondo anomaly with $C/T \sim 350$ mJ/mol K$^2$ at 0.4 K. Such intriguing effects are consequences of the competition between superconducting gap and electronic spectrum’s mean level spacing.

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1. Introduction

When the physical dimension of a given material is reduced towards nanoscale, various physical properties including superconducting and magnetic characteristics can often be drastically altered. More recently, a size-induced crossover from magnetic ordering to a Kondo magnetism was observed in CeAl$_2$, Ce$_3$Al and Ce$_3$Al$_{11}$ [1]. This study was carried out, therefore, on another Ce-based compound, CeCo$_2$. Bulk CeCo$_2$ undergoes a superconducting transition near 1 K. Its extremely low magnetic susceptibility indicates that both Ce and Co are essentially nonmagnetic [2]. The zero magnetization of Ce indicates an electronic state $\langle [Xe]4f^{10}5d^{1}6s^{2} \rangle$ of Ce$^{4+}$ without localized 4f electrons, eventhough a large electronic specific heat coefficient $\gamma \approx 34$ mJ/mol K$^2$ seems to suggest a tendency to localization.

2. Experimental details

Experimentally, bulk CeCo$_2$ was first synthesized under argon by arc-melting thoroughly...
mixed Ce (99.95%) and Co (99.95%) in a 1:2 atomic ratio. The expected cubic Laves-phase crystal structure was confirmed by X-ray diffraction (XRD) (Fig. 1). Nanoparticles were then fabricated on a liquid-nitrogen cooled surface by flash evaporation of bulk ingots in a helium atmosphere. High-resolution transmission electron microscopy (HRTEM) was employed to directly observe the nearly spherical particles and their size distribution, yielding an estimated average size of 58 Å (Fig. 2). According to the XRD spectra, the structure and lattice constant \(a\) (7.171 Å) is practically the same as those of the parent bulk material, except some line broadening.

3. Results and analysis

The main phase of the nanoparticles appears to be paramagnetic. To more relevantly elucidate the difference in electronic properties between bulk and nanoparticle CeCo2, a calorimetric study was made at 0.4–15 K, using a thermal-relaxation micro-calorimeter in a \(^3\)He cryostat. The temperature dependence of specific heat for CeCo2 samples is shown in Fig. 3. For bulk CeCo2, a well-defined superconducting transition occurs at \(T_c\sim 1\) K as previously reported. The normal-state data can be fitted by \(C/T = \gamma + \beta T^2\), which yields the electronic specific heat coefficient \(\gamma = 37\) mJ/mol K\(^2\), and a Debye temperature \(\Theta_D = 200\) K based on the lattice specific heat coefficient \(\beta = 0.00075\) J/
To ascertain the lack of a superconducting transition and the Kondo origin of the low-temperature specific heat anomaly, further calorimetric measurements were made in magnetic fields \( H \) from 500 G up to 4 T. Even if the superconducting transition spreads over a wide temperature range owing to particle size distribution, the specific heat near 1 K should be suppressed as field increases to the critical field \( H_{c2} \sim 0.275 \) T for CeCo\(_2\). To avoid the confusion from the suppression of Kondo singlets under magnetic field, specific heat data for \( H = 0, 0.2 \) and 0.4 T are compared in Fig. 4. However, apart from a slight shift of magnetic effects on Kondo singlets, no change to reflect superconductivity was observed.

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**References**