Variation of shear moduli across superconducting phase transitions

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We study how shear moduli of a correlated metal change across superconducting phase transitions. Using a microscopic theory we explain why for most classes of superconductors this change is small. The Fe-based and the A15 systems are notable exceptions where the change is boosted by five orders of magnitude. We show that this boost is a consequence of enhanced nematic correlation. The theory explains the unusual temperature dependence of the orthorhombic shear and the back-bending of the nematic transition line in the superconducting phase of the Fe-based systems.

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I. INTRODUCTION

An important topic in high-temperature superconductivity is to understand the interplay between superconducting and nematic orders. The issue arises naturally for the Fe-based systems for which the two orders are ubiquitously present [1–12]. The relevance of nematicity to understand the pseudogap state of the cuprates is currently under active investigation as well [13–21].

One reason for this interplay can be fluctuations of the two orders, and the effect of nematic fluctuations on superconductivity has been studied theoretically [22–28]. Experimentally, two different trends have been reported. In NaFe1−xCox, an increase in $T = 0$ penetration depth near a nematic quantum critical point (QCP) has been inferred [29]. But for FeSe1−xSx, the superconducting transition $T_c$ is unaffected by the nematic QCP [30–32]. A second cause of the above interplay can be a third degree of freedom such as antiferromagnetic fluctuations which can enhance nematic correlation, but which are themselves suppressed in a singlet superconductor [33]. What is less examined is the effect of the superconducting order itself on the nematic properties of electrons in solids. The goal of the current paper is to study the last from a microscopic point of view.

For such a study a shear strain of a suitable symmetry is an appropriate nematic order parameter, even if the nematic transition is driven by electronic spin and orbital fluctuations [34,35]. This is because, due to electron-strain coupling, the nematic transition at temperature $T_k$ itself manifests as a structural instability. Consequently, tracking the change in the shear elastic constant $c_s(T)$ across $T_k$ is a practical method to study the interplay. For simplicity we restrict our study to the case where $T_k > T_c$.

More concretely, for $T \sim T_k$, the free energy per unit volume involving the shear strain $u_s$ and the superconducting order parameter $\Delta$ can be written as

$$F = (c_s/2)u_s^2 + (a/2)|\Delta|^2 + (b/4)|\Delta|^4 + (\lambda/2)u_s^3|\Delta|^2.$$  (1)

Here $\Delta$ has dimension of energy, while $(a, \lambda)$ have that of density of states (DOS), $a = a_0(T - T_k)$, and $b > 0$. The fourth term, which captures the interplay, describes how the shear elastic constant is modified across $T_k$. In the above we assumed that $\Delta$ belongs to a one-dimensional irreducible representation of the unit cell point group, and that there is no second nearly critical symmetry channel for superconductivity [4,5,36].

From Eq. (1) it follows that $c_s(T)$ itself is continuous at $T_k$, but its temperature derivative jumps at $T_k$ with the jump given by $(dc_s/dT)_{T_k} - (dc_s/dT)_{T_k^-} = \lambda a_0/b$. In other words, $c_s(T)$ has a kink at $T_k$ which encodes information about the interplay parameter $\lambda$. The magnitude of this kink can be quantified by $\delta c_s/|e_m^0|$, where $\delta c_s \equiv \lambda \delta^2_0 \sim c_i^0 - e_m^0$. Here $c_i^0$ is the zero-temperature elastic constant in the superconducting phase, $e_m^0$ is inferred from the $T = 0$ extrapolation of $c_s(T)$ in the metal phase, and $\Delta_0 \equiv \Delta(T = 0)$.

A literature search reveals that in most known classes of superconductors the ratio $\delta c_s/|e_m^0|$ is “small” and is of order $10^{-6}$. Examples include conventional Bardeen-Cooper-Schrieffer (BCS) systems [37,38], cuprates such as La2−xSrxCuO4 at various dopings (see Figs. 7 and 8 in Ref. [39]), and heavy fermion systems UPt3 and URu2Si2 [40,41]. From an Ehrenfest-type thermodynamic argument it is known that $\delta c_s/|e_m^0|$ is related to the ratio between the superconducting condensation energy and the Fermi energy, which is typically small [42,43]. This provides a simple way to understand this small ratio without a microscopic analysis.

However, there are two classes of superconductors, namely, the Fe-based [33,44–47] and the A15 systems [48–50], for which this ratio is “large” with $\delta c_s/|e_m^0| \sim 10^{-1}$. Clearly, this increase of $\delta c_s/|e_m^0|$ by five orders of magnitude compared to the standard behavior cannot be understood purely from thermodynamics, and a microscopic approach is needed. With this motivation, here we develop such a microscopic theory of the coupling $\lambda$ that encodes the interplay between the two orders.

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Our main results are the following. First, we show that in systems with negligible nematic correlation \( \lambda/N_\ell \) is small, where \( N_\ell \) is DOS at Fermi level. This is due to a cancellation of the low-energy electronic contribution that is not imposed by symmetry. We show that this cancellation is related to the general property that the quadrupolar charge susceptibility of an electronic system remains approximately unchanged between its metallic and superconducting phases. This explains the small ratio of \( \delta c_{\ell}/|e_n| \) for most superconductors. Second, we show that for systems with large nematic correlation length \( \xi \gg l \), where \( l \) is the interatomic distance, the parameter \( \lambda \) is boosted by \( (\xi/l)^4 \). This accounts for the five orders of magnitude increase in \( \delta c_{\ell}/|e_n| \) seen in the A15 and the Fe-based systems. Together, these two results provide a broad and unifying principle to understand \( \delta c_{\ell}/|e_n| \) across various families of superconductors. Third, we show that the sign of \( \lambda \), that controls cooperation or competition between the two orders, is nonuniversal and that it depends on the band structure.

II. MICROSCOPIC THEORY

Our main message can be illustrated by considering a one-band metal in a tetragonal lattice. The relevant elastic constant can be written as

\[
c_s(T) \equiv c_s - \alpha^2 \chi_n(T). \quad (2)
\]

Here \( c_s \) is the modulus of the bare elastic medium, which we assume to be temperature independent, and \( \alpha \) is the electron-strain interaction energy, such that in the presence of a finite strain the electron dispersion changes as \( \epsilon_k \rightarrow \epsilon_k + \alpha u_s h_k \). To be concrete we take \( u_s \) to be the orthorhombic strain that transform as \( (x^2 - y^2) \), in which case \( h_k \sim \cos k_x - \cos k_y \). The precise nature of the shear mode and the associated form factor is unimportant. Likewise, the spatial symmetry of \( \Delta \) (i.e., \( s, p, \) or \( d \) wave) plays no role, and we take it as \( s \) wave for simplicity. The quantity \( \chi_n \equiv \lim_{\omega \rightarrow 0} \chi_n(\omega, \alpha = 0) \), where \( \chi_n(\omega, 0) \) is the static nematic susceptibility of the electrons. Thus, the role of the lattice variables is simply to probe the electronic properties, in particular how \( \chi_n \) changes across \( T_c \).

At this point it is convenient to distinguish the two situations discussed in the following subsections.

A. Away from nematic instability

When the system is far away from nematic/orthorhombic instability the nematic correlation length is negligible, and therefore \( \chi_n^{s/m}(\omega, 0) \approx \Pi_n^{s/m}(\omega, 0) \), where \( \Pi_n^{s/m}(\omega, 0) \) is the bare nematic susceptibility. We added superscripts \( (s, m) \) to denote superconducting and metallic phases, respectively. In the superconducting phase the bare nematic susceptibility is

\[
\Pi_n^s(\omega, 0) = -\frac{2}{\beta V} \sum_{\omega_n, k} f_{k+q}(\omega_n) G_k(\omega_n) - f_{k+q}(\omega_n) G_k(\omega_n),
\]

where \( \beta \) is inverse temperature, \( V \) is volume, \( f_{k+q}(\omega_n) \equiv (h_k + h_{k+q})/2 \) is the nematic form factor, \( G_k(\omega_n) = -(\omega_n + \epsilon_k)/(\omega_n^2 + E_k^2) \), \( f_k(\omega_n) = \Delta/(\omega_n^2 + E_k^2) \), and \( E_k = \sqrt{\epsilon_k^2 + \Delta^2} \). An overall factor two is due to spins. The equivalent expression for \( \Pi_n^m(\omega, 0) \) is obtained by setting \( \Delta = 0 \).

Equations. (1) and (2) give

\[
\lambda = \lambda_0 \equiv -\frac{2a^2}{\beta V} \sum_{\omega_n, k} h_k^2 \left[ 2G_k^0(\omega_n) \right]^2 G_k^0(-\omega_n) + G_k^0(\omega_n) G_k^0(-\omega_n)^2,
\]

with \( G_k^0(\omega_n) \) being the bare Green’s function.

FIG. 1. Diagrammatic representation of the coupling \( \lambda \) that controls the interplay between superconducting and nematic orders; see Eq. (1). \( \lambda \) is a four-point function with two particle-hole (open circles) vertices with nematic form factor \( h_k \) and two particle-particle (closed circles) vertices; see Eq. (3). Solid lines are electron Green’s functions. \( k = (k, \omega) \) denote momentum and frequency.

The cancellation of the low-energy electronic contribution is important, and consequently it is useful to understand better its physical origin. Clearly, the cancellation is not dictated by any symmetry. Instead, it is a consequence of the property that the bare quadrupolar charge susceptibility of electrons remains nearly unchanged across a metal to superconductor transition. This can be demonstrated by the following calculation.

The frequency sum in the expression for \( \Pi_n^s(\omega, 0) \) gives

\[
\Pi_n^s(\omega, 0) = \frac{1}{V} \sum_k h_k^2 \frac{\partial}{\partial \epsilon_k} \left[ \frac{\epsilon_k}{E_k} \tanh \frac{E_k}{2T} \right].
\]
If we neglect the energy dependence of the $B_{1u}$ density of states $N_{B_{1u}}(\varepsilon)$, which is appropriate for the low-energy electronic contribution, after the energy integral we get

$$\Pi_n(0,0)_{\text{low}} = \Pi_n^m(0,0)_{\text{low}} = 2N_{B_{1u}}(0). \quad (5)$$

In the above the subscript “low” implies the low-energy contribution. In other words, from the perspective of the low-energy electrons $\Pi_n^m(0,0)$ is independent of $\Delta$. This property is reminiscent of that of the uniform charge susceptibility $\partial n / \partial \mu$, where $n$ is the electron density and $\mu$ the chemical potential. It is known that the Thomas-Fermi screening length, which is controlled by the uniform charge susceptibility, remains practically unchanged when a metal turns into a superconductor [51]. The above discussion implies that if $\Pi_n^m(0,0)$ is expanded around $\Pi_n^m(0,0)$ in powers of $|\Delta|^2$, order by order the prefactors would be zero if we neglect the energy dependence of $N_{B_{1u}}(\varepsilon)$. The coupling $\lambda_0$ in Eq. (3) is related to the prefactor at order $|\Delta|^2$ in this expansion. The above low-energy cancellation has the following consequences. First and most importantly, we conclude that for superconductors with negligible nematic correlation $\delta c_i/c^m_i \sim (T_F/E_F)^2$, where $E_F$ is the Fermi energy. This follows from the estimate $N_{B_{1u}}(0) \sim N_F/E_F^2$, and by estimating the electron-photon interaction energy $\alpha$ as the geometric mean of the typical electronic and elastic energy scales, i.e., $(\alpha^2 N_F/c_i) \sim 1$ [52]. For renormalized Fermi liquids such as the heavy fermions, in Eq. (3) the bare $G_{ik}^{\alpha}(i\omega_n)$ has to be replaced by the quasiparticle propagator $G_{ik}(i\omega_n) \sim (i\omega_n/Z - \epsilon_k)$, which gives $\lambda_0 \sim Z^2 \alpha^2 N_F/E_F^2$, where the tilde implies renormalized quantities. Since $E_F \sim Z E_F$, and $N_F \sim N_F/Z$, we get $\delta c_i/c^m_i \sim Z(T_E/E_F)^2$. In other words, compared to conventional superconductors, $\delta c_i/c^m_i$ for heavy fermions is further reduced by a factor of $Z$. Thus, the above estimate, backed by a microscopic calculation, explains the order of magnitude of $\delta c_i/c^m_i$ reported for most known superconductors, the Fe-based and the A15 systems being exceptions. Second, the sign of $\lambda_0$, which governs whether the two orders cooperate or compete, is nonuniversal, and it depends on the sign of $N_{B_{1u}}(0)$. Third, due to the absence of the low-energy contribution the coupling $\lambda \sim \lambda_0$ is nearly temperature independent. This is consistent with the weak $T$ dependence of $\chi_n$ of several Fe-based systems at doping away from the nematic instability [53–55].

B. Near a nematic instability

The above considerations need modification if the system is in the vicinity of a nematic instability and the nematic correlation length $\xi \gg l$, where $l$ is the interatomic distance. For the sake of simplicity we assume that the nematic instability is a Pomeranchuk transition, i.e., spontaneous deformation of the Fermi surface. Accordingly, we postulate the presence of an interaction $H_4 = -(g/2) \sum_i O_i(-\gamma) O_i(\gamma)$, with $g > 0$ having a dimension of inverse DOS, and where $O_i(\gamma) \equiv \frac{1}{\sqrt{2}} \sum_{k,i} f_k u_i^{\gamma} c_{ki,\sigma}^{\dagger} c_{ki,\sigma}$ is the quadrupolar charge operator. Such a phenomenological interaction has been widely used to study nematic instability in metals [8,22,25,27,35,56]. In this case the increase of the nematic correlation length $\xi(T)$ with lowering temperature can be described using random phase approximation, and the nematic susceptibility can be written as $\chi_n(q,0) = \Pi_n^{\alpha}(q,0) / [1 - g\Pi_n^{\alpha}(q,0)]$, where $i = (s,m)$. As in the case away from the nematic instability, we have $\lambda \propto [\partial^2 \chi_n(q,0)/\partial |\Delta|^2]|_{\Delta=0}$, and taking into account that $\partial \Pi_n^{\alpha}(0,0)/\partial |\Delta| = 0$ due to gauge invariance, we conclude

$$\lambda = \lambda_{\text{renorm}} = \lambda_0(\xi/l)^4, \quad (6)$$

where $(\xi/l)^4 = 1/[1 - g\Pi_n^m(0,0)]$. From the above equation we deduce the following. (1) Close to a nematic instability $g\Pi_n^m \sim 1$, or equivalently $\xi \gg l$. Elastoresistivity measurements in Fe-based systems have shown an increase of $\chi_n$ by a factor 100 [2]. Since, $\chi_n \sim (\xi/l)^4$, we get $\xi/l \sim 10$. Therefore $\lambda$ and eventually $\delta c_i/c^m_i$ can be boosted by at least four orders of magnitude, even though the bare coupling $\lambda_0$ is small. Note that the identification that electronic nematic correlation is significant in the A15 systems is an important conclusion of our study. The behavior of $c_1(T)$ below $T_c$ in the A15 systems was understood in Ref. [57] using a model [58] with a particular dispersion that disagrees with later band structure results [59]. No such special dispersion is assumed in our theory. (2) In the metal phase the nematic susceptibility $\chi_n^m(T) \propto (\xi(T)/l)^4 \sim N_F \lambda(T - T_0)$. Here $T_0$ is the nematic transition temperature of the electron-only subsystem, with $T_0 = T_n - \alpha^2 \Delta N_F/c_0 \lesssim T_n$. This implies that the renormalized $\lambda$ has power-law temperature dependence with $\lambda_{\text{renorm}} \propto (\xi(T)/l)^4 \propto 1/(T - T_0)^2$. This is to be contrasted with case (a) where the bare coupling $\lambda_0$ has weak logarithmic $T$ dependence.

The enhancement of $\lambda$ implied by Eq. (6) has the following two consequences.

1. $c_1(T)$ across superconducting $T_c$

Since $\chi_n^m(T) \propto 1/(T - T_0)$ while $\lambda_{\text{renorm}} \propto 1/(T - T_0)^2$ has a stronger $T$ dependence, it is clear that, for $\lambda_0$ above a positive threshold, the softening of $c_1(T)$ in the metal phase will turn into a hardening in the superconducting phase. This can be illustrated from the following phenomenological modeling. We write $c_1(T)/c_0 = 1 - a_0 P(T)/(1 - b_0 P(T))$, where $a_0 \equiv \alpha^2 N_F/c_0$ and $b_0 \equiv gN_F$ are constants, and $P(T)$ is the dimensionless bare nematic polarization. In the metallic phase we postulate $P(> T_c) = \Lambda/(T + T_1)$, with $T_1 > T_c$ such that $P(T)$ is weakly $T$-dependent around $T_c$. As noted above, in the superconducting phase the bare polarization has an additional term proportional to $\alpha^2 \Delta(T)^2$. We assume the mean-field scaling $\Delta(T)^2 = \Delta_0^2(1 - T/T_c)$, and we write the bare interplay coupling $\lambda_0$ in terms of a dimensionless parameter $t_2 \equiv \lambda_0 \alpha^2 N_F/(\alpha^2 N_F)$. This implies $P(\leq T_c) = \Lambda/(T + T_1) - t_2/(T - T_1)$. It follows that, for sufficiently large and positive $t_2 > \Lambda T_1/(T + T_1)^2$, the elastic constant $c_1(T)$ starts hardening immediately below $T_c$, as seen in electron and hole doped BaFe$_2$As$_2$ [33,44,46,47]. On the other hand, for $t_2 < 0$ (or equivalently $\lambda_0 < 0$) the elastic softening enhances in the superconducting phase. It is likely that this latter trend is relevant for FeSe$_{1-x}$S$_x$ at large doping where $T_c > T_2$ [60].

These two trends are illustrated in Fig. 2, for which we use $a_0 = 0.22$, $b_0 = 49.8$, $T_1/\Lambda = 50$, $T_2/\Lambda = 0.2$, while $t_2 = 1.3 \times 10^{-4}$ and $t_2 = -0.2 \times 10^{-4}$ for the red (dark) and green (light) lines, respectively. For intermediate values of $t_2$, the $T$
dependence of $c_s(T)$ interpolates between these two limiting behaviors.

2. Back-bending of $T_s(x)$ in the superconducting phase

As noted above, for $\lambda_0$ greater than a positive threshold the shear modulus $c_s(T)$ hardens for $T < T_c$ (red/dark line in Fig. 2). An immediate consequence of this behavior is the back-bending of the nematic/orthorhombic transition line $T_s(x)$ in the superconducting phase, as shown in Fig. 3. Here $x$ is a hypothetical tuning parameter that, in practice, can be related to doping or pressure. To illustrate the back-bending we consider the same model of $P(T)$ as above, and we introduce an $x$ dependence to the temperature scales $T_s(x)/\Lambda = 49.02 + 1.3x$ and $T_c(x)/\Lambda = 0.22 - 2.44(x - 0.6)^2$, and to the parameter $t_2(x) = 3 \times 10^{-3}[T_s(x)/\Lambda]^2$. Thus, in this model $T_s(x)$ has a domelike structure, and the $T_s(x)$ is linearly decreasing with $x$. The two transition lines meet at $x = 0.6$, and if the interplay is ignored $T_s(x)$ continues the trend (dashed lines Fig. 3) in the superconducting phase. However, once the interplay is taken into account, the hardening of $c_s(T)$ for $T < T_c$ implies that there cannot be a nematic transition for $x > 0.6$ in the superconducting phase. Moreover, since the hardening increases with lowering $T$, it necessarily implies that $T_s(x)$ back-bends in the superconducting phase, as reported in electron-doped BaFe$_2$As$_2$ [61].

III. SUMMARY

To summarize, we examined the thermodynamic signatures of the interplay between superconducting and nematic instabilities. In particular, we studied microscopically the properties of the coupling $\lambda$ between the two orders; see Eq. (1). This is related to how the shear elastic constant $c_s(T)$ changes across a superconducting transition. We explained why in most systems $\lambda$ (in suitable unit) is small and nearly temperature independent, which leads to $\delta c_s/[c_s^m] \sim 10^{-6}$ as seen in most classes of superconductors. The situation is different if, due to an imminent nematic instability, the nematic correlation length $\xi \gg l$, where $l$ is the interatomic distance. In this case $\lambda \propto [\xi(T)/l]^4$ has strong $T$ dependence, and it can be boosted by several orders of magnitude. This leads to large $\delta c_s/[c_s^m] \sim 10^{-1}$, as seen experimentally in the Fe-based and A15 superconductors. If the bare coupling $\lambda_0$ is above a positive threshold, it leads to hardening of $c_s(T)$ for $T < T_c$ and to the back-bending of the nematic transition line in the superconducting phase, as seen in doped BaFe$_2$As$_2$. Finally, we predict that the nematic susceptibility $\chi_{ns}(T)$ of the A15 systems will show a Curie-Weiss-type increase with lowering $T$. This can be verified using electronic Raman response and elastoresistivity techniques.

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