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Electronic transport in graphene-based structures: An effective cross-section approach

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We show that transport in low-dimensional carbon structures with finite concentrations of scatterers can be modeled by utilizing scaling theory and effective cross sections. Our results are based on large-scale numerical simulations of carbon nanotubes and graphene nanoribbons, using a tight-binding model with parameters obtained from first-principles electronic structure calculations. As shown by a comprehensive statistical analysis, the scattering cross sections can be used to estimate the conductance of a quasi-one-dimensional system both in the Ohmic and localized regimes. They can be computed with good accuracy from the transmission functions of single defects, greatly reducing the computational cost and paving the way toward using first-principles methods to evaluate the conductance of mesoscopic systems, consisting of millions of atoms.

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Graphene, an effectively two-dimensional material consisting of a single sheet of carbon atoms, is regarded to be a potential candidate for a wide range of future electronic devices.1 To characterize phenomena affecting charge carrier transport in graphene-based systems, effective computational methods are required. Particularly important is the study of effects that induce a transport gap, turning graphene into a semiconductor.

The mechanisms behind experimentally measured transport gaps in graphene nanoribbons (GNRs) are currently actively debated. On one hand, it has been suggested that Coulomb blockade may significantly limit the conductance close to the Dirac point,2–4 through barriers formed by either edge roughness5 or charged impurities,6 although their role in limiting mobility has been questioned.6 On the other hand, as the phase coherence length is very long in graphene,7 also Anderson localization (AL) may induce a transport gap.8–14

This is supported by recent experimental results, which reveal the presence of resonant scattering,20 which is another potential source of AL. The scattering may be due to hydrogen atoms21 or hydrocarbons.22

In this Rapid Communication, we present numerical simulations of both Ohmic and localized systems, showing that pointlike scatterers can effectively be described through a formalism based on defining scattering cross sections \( \sigma_i(E) \) for the defects. The elastic mean free path \( l_\text{el}(E) \) is related to the scattering cross sections \( \sigma_i(E) \) of the different defect types and the corresponding defect densities \( n_i \) via \( l_\text{el}(E) = 1/\sum_i n_i \sigma_i(E) \) [note that in two dimensions, \( \sigma_i(E) \) is given in units of length]. The scattering cross-section approach provides a powerful means to estimate the conductance of a realistically sized GNR or carbon nanotube (CNT) with a finite number of pointlike defects. We limit our discussion to short-range scatterers.

For a specific defect type, the scattering cross section may directly be obtained from the transmission function \( T(E) \) of a conductor with one or several defects of the same type.23,24

They can be computed with good accuracy from the transmission functions of single defects, greatly reducing the computational cost and paving the way toward using first-principles methods to evaluate the conductance of mesoscopic systems, consisting of millions of atoms.

In systems belonging to the orthogonal Wigner-Dyson symmetry class (e.g., graphene with short-range disorder in the absence of a magnetic field), \( \xi(E) \) is related to \( l_\text{el}(E) \) and \( \sigma_i(E) \) through

\[
\xi(E) = \frac{T_0(E) + 1}{2n_i \sigma_i(E)} = \frac{T_0(E) + 1}{2n_i \sigma_i(E)}. \tag{3}
\]

An expression for the scattering cross section, valid in the localized regime, is obtained by combining Eqs. (2) and (3):

\[
\sigma_i(E) = \frac{W[T_0(E) + 1][\ln(T_0(E)/T(E))]}{2N}, \quad L \gg \xi(E). \tag{4}
\]
When estimating $\sigma(E)$, one has to take into account that even a single-defect system may be localized in part of the energy range. Thus the scattering cross section should be computed using both Eqs. (1) and (4), and at each energy point the smaller value should be selected as the better estimate.

We benchmark the formalism by comparing a single-defect based scattering cross section with transport results for systems with multiple defects. An unrelaxed monovacancy serves as a model defect and to exclude edge effects, we have chosen a (40,0)-CNT, with a circumference of about 10 nm, as a model system. Unrelaxed monovacancies may also be used to model adsorbate hydrogen atoms, as $sp^3$ hybridization creates a hole in the $\pi$ electron network, but also more detailed models for hydrogen adsorbates have been used.

We compute the transmission function by applying standard Green’s function based methods to a system formed by a device model, with hopping values obtained from Ref. 31. A nearest-neighbor distance of 1.42 nm is assumed, and the values are scaled to obtain a nearest-neighbor hopping energy of 9.6 $\times$ $10^{-3}$ meV, and the vertical bars indicate the localization lengths based on the scattering cross section shown in Fig. 1. (e) Distribution of $T(E_1)$ at $L = 300$ nm, marked by the arrow in (c). (f) Distribution of $\ln[T(E_2)]$ at $L = 1000$ nm, marked by the arrow in (d).
The predictions are based on Eq. (3) and the single-defect scattering cross section shown in Fig. 1, whereas the calculated values have been obtained from systems ten times as long as the predicted localization lengths, using Eq. (2). Each value corresponds to an ensemble of 200 defect realizations. At low defect density, \( \xi(E) \) exhibits clear peaks, in accordance with Fig. 1, but at higher densities the peaks corresponding to the DOS of a pristine CNT are smoothed out. However, even at the highest defect density shown, the scaling approach predicts the magnitude of \( \xi(E) \) correctly. Thus we are able to predict properties of mesoscopic systems, only using the information from a single-defect calculation.

Based on Kubo-Greenwood (KG) simulations, it has been proposed that topological defects, such as Stone-Wales defects and 555777 defects, exhibit fingerprint-like scattering properties. A Stone-Wales defect is a metastable bond rotation, consisting of two pentagons and two heptagons embedded in the graphene lattice, whereas a 555777 defect is a relaxed form of a divacancy, consisting of three pentagons and three heptagons. Such defects are expected to be found in irradiated graphene, where especially 555777 defects may occur in relatively high concentrations. Figure 4(a) compares transport results for a 16-atom wide armchair-edges GNR (AGNR), containing a single Stone-Wales defect, obtained from a modified TB model and the density functional theory (DFT). The TB hopping parameters are obtained from the relaxed bond lengths around the defects, acquired from the SIESTA implementation of DFT and the DFT transport results are from the TRANSIESTA code.

In Fig. 4(b), we show bulk scattering cross sections for three defects, computed by applying \( k \)-space sampled periodic boundary conditions in the transverse direction. Although retaining the same general shape as the one shown in Fig. 1, the scattering cross section of a monovacancy is now considerably smoother. At low defect densities of up to roughly 10\(^{-2}\) defects per atomic site, the scattering cross section for monovacancies and Stone-Wales defects lose their pointlike nature, and the scattering cross-section formalism breaks down. Additionally, a high density of defects will contribute to the transmission through an impurity band.

We next test the predictive power of the scattering cross-section approach. If a system contains several different types of defects, one can estimate the average and typical transmissions from

\[
\langle T(E) \rangle = \frac{T_0(E)}{1 + L \sum_i n_i \sigma_i(E)}, \quad L \ll \xi(E), \quad (5)
\]

and

\[
T_{\text{typ}}(E) = \frac{T_0(E)}{\exp \left[ \frac{\phi L}{\xi(E) + \xi(E^0)} \sum_i n_i \sigma_i(E) \right]}, \quad L \gg \xi(E). \quad (6)
\]

We define the localized domain as the region where \( T_{\text{typ}}(E) \), given by Eq. (6), is smaller than \( \langle T(E) \rangle \), given by Eq. (5). Figure 5 shows calculated mean and typical transmission functions for a 1.3 \( \mu \)m long and 30 nm wide AGNR with 100 each of monovacancies, Stone-Wales defects, and 555777 defects.
defects, together with corresponding predictions obtained using Eqs. (5) and (6). The transmissions have been calculated using the TB model, based on an ensemble of 12 defect realizations, whereas the predictions are based on the bulk scattering cross sections shown in Fig. 4(b). As the results indicate, the mean or typical transmission in a realistically wide GNR or CNT can be estimated by only calculating the transmission functions for single defects in an edgeless system. The estimates are slightly lower than the actual mean and typical transmissions, which correspond to about 15% lower values for the scattering cross sections than predicted from systems with single defects. The discrepancy may be caused by the anisotropy of the Stone-Wales and 555777 defects, as the single-defect scattering cross section corresponds to scattering only in the armchair direction.

In summary, we have presented numerical simulations showing that effective scattering cross sections for defects, combined with scaling theory, can be used to estimate the transport properties of graphene-based devices of sizes ranging from nano- to micrometers. In particular, their conductances can be predicted both in the Ohmic and strongly localized regimes. As the scattering cross section can be computed from small-scale systems, possibilities to model systems beyond the reach of present-day methods are opened.

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