Inhibition of Nd magnetic order in NdFe$_{1-x}$Co$_x$O$_3$ by magnetic vacancies

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(Submitted on 11 November 2004; published online 28 April 2005)

The low-temperature specific heat of NdFe$_{1-x}$Co$_x$O$_3$ ($x=0$, 0.03, 0.1, 0.25, and 0.5) has been measured to study the magnetic ordering of the Nd sublattice as a function of Co content. The results, satisfactorily explained by a mean-field model, show the inhibition of the Nd cooperative ordering for $x \geq 0.1$. © 2005 American Institute of Physics. [DOI: 10.1063/1.1848354]

NdMO$_3$ are model systems to investigate the magnetic interaction between Nd (or other rare-earths) and 3$d$ or 4$d$ metal ions ($M$) in oxides. In general, the magnetic exchange interactions follow the hierarchy of $M$-$M$, $M$-Nd, and Nd-Nd in descending strength. In the compounds with a nonmagnetic $M$, Nd-Nd leads to antiferromagnetic ordering at about $T \approx 1$ K.$^{1-3}$ This is the case in NdCoO$_3$, where the Co$^{3+}$ ions are in a low-spin diamagnetic state, and $T_N=1.20$ K. When $M$ is magnetic, the magnetic ordering temperature $T_N$ of the $M$ sublattice ranges from $\sim 700$ K for $M=$Fe to $\sim 75$ K when $M=$Mn. Below $T_N$, the ordered $M$ sublattice polarizes the paramagnetic Nd sublattice. The isotropic $M$-Nd exchange is compensated by the contributions due to antiparallel moments, but the anisotropic exchange is not cancelled.

The same features are found in $x=0.03$, but the Nd critical temperature decreases to $T_N=0.72$ K, slightly increasing the temperature of the Schottky maximum (from $T=2.35$ K to $T=2.6$ K) as well as its height, which is nearer to the ideal Schottky value. With only $x=0.1$, the small peak on the low-temperature side has already disappeared. The Schottky maximum appears at $T=2.9$ K. Thus, the dilution of Fe with diamagnetic Co destroys the cooperative ordering of Nd for Co contents as low as a few percent. This is accompanied with a slight but clear shift of the Schottky maximum to higher temperatures for increasing $x$, corresponding to an enhancement of the Zeeman splitting of the Nd ground doublet.

From top to bottom: experimental specific heat of NdFe$_{1-x}$Co$_x$O$_3$ with $x=0$, 0.03, 0.1, 0.25, and 0.5. The results of the mean-field model are shown as solid lines for $x=0$, 0.03, 0.1, 0.25, and 0.5. The specific heat of NdFeO$_3$, shown in the upper part of the figure, features a Schottky-like anomaly, with a maximum at $T=2.35$ K (about 7% lower than the ideal doublet Schottky curve), as well as a small sharp peak at $T_N=1.05$ K, proving the on-set of Nd long-range order. The same features are found in $x=0.03$, but the Nd critical temperature decreases to $T_N=0.72$ K, slightly increasing the temperature of the Schottky maximum (from $T=2.35$ K to $T=2.6$ K) as well as its height, which is nearer to the ideal Schottky value. With only $x=0.1$, the small peak on the low-temperature side has already disappeared. The Schottky maximum appears at $T=2.9$ K. Thus, the dilution of Fe with diamagnetic Co destroys the cooperative ordering of Nd for Co contents as low as a few percent. This is accompanied with a slight but clear shift of the Schottky maximum to higher temperatures for increasing $x$, corresponding to an enhancement of the Zeeman splitting of the Nd ground doublet from $\sim 6$ K($x=0$) to $\sim 7$ K($x=0.1$). These provide clear evidence of the increase of the average internal field.
The specific heat curves of \( x=0.25 \) and \( x=0.5 \) are similar to the \( x=0.1 \) one. However, the two trends observed in the range \( x \leq 0.1 \) are reversed on the \( x \geq 0.1 \): the temperature and height of the specific heat maximum decreases for increasing \( x \) and its shape is distorted with growing Co concentration, completely losing the characteristic two-level Schottky shape. This may be indicative of a broad distribution of Zeeman splittings of Nd\(^{3+} \) ions.

We have developed a simple mean-field model\(^{2,6,8} \) that describes the specific heat, ground-doublet Zeeman splitting and neutron diffracted intensities due to \( M-\text{Nd} \) polarization above and below \( T_{N} \) in Nd orthoperovskites. NdFe\(_{1-x}\)Co\(_{x}\)O\(_{3}\) system has an orthorhombically distorted perovskite structure, space group \( D_{1h}^{30} \) (\( Pbmn \)), with four formula units per elementary cell. The magnetic configurations are described in terms of linear combinations of spin operators\(^{9} \) for different 3d metal or rare-earth sites, whose Cartesian components transform as one of the eight irreps of the reduced space group \( D_{1h}^{30} \). The Fe configuration in NdFeO\(_{3}\) is \( G_{xy} \), belonging to the \( \Gamma_{2} \) irrep. The internal field \( H_{\text{Fe-Nd}} \) produced by Fe must transform as \( \Gamma_{2} \), too, which in terms of the Nd allowed modes corresponds to \( c_{x}f_{x} \). The ferromagnetic moments \( f_{x} \) and \( f_{y} \) have never been detected by neutron diffraction, and will be neglected in the following (the thermodynamics of the model are not essentially modified by this approximation). The effect of the \( H_{\text{Fe-Nd}} \) internal field will be described by a Zeeman term with \( c_{y} \). The experimental \( C_{p}(T) \) curve of NdFeO\(_{3}\) evidences a true phase transition at \( T_{N}=1.05 \) K, implying that the Nd-Nd interaction favors a magnetic arrangement belonging to an irrep other than \( \Gamma_{2} \). Therefore, the Nd-Nd exchange interaction will be described by two terms: the first one is proportional to the polarized mode, the \( c_{y} \) symmetry, which has as order parameter \( \chi=-1/2(c_{y}) \), as argued earlier, and the second one corresponds to a yet unknown \( \hat{\mathbf{n}}_{a} \) cooperative mode \((\alpha \neq \gamma)\). The mean-field Hamiltonian can be written as

\[
\mathcal{H} = -2\theta_{x}v\hat{n}_{x} - (2\theta_{p}\chi - g_{\mu_{B}}H_{\text{Fe-Nd}})\hat{c}_{y} - 2\theta_{y}v^{2} - 2\theta_{y}\chi^{2},
\]

where the first and second terms describe the Nd-Nd exchange in cooperative and polarized modes, with exchange constants \( \theta_{x} \) and \( \theta_{y} \), respectively. The mean-field order parameters for the cooperative and polarized modes are \( v=-\frac{1}{2}(\hat{\mathbf{n}}_{x}) \) and \( \chi=-\frac{1}{2}(\hat{c}_{y}) \), respectively. The third term is the Nd-Fe Zeeman term created by the \( H_{\text{Fe-Nd}} \) exchange field. The last two are self-energy correction terms.

Nd atoms may lose one or more magnetic nearest neighbor Fe atoms due to the introduction of magnetic vacancies as a random substitution (see Fig. 1). The net effect is a further decomposition of the internal field due to a contribution from the isotropic and anisotropic components of the Fe-Nd interaction. Therefore, the internal field due to one vacancy in a pseudocubic cell can add or subtract to the anisotropic average field \( H_{\text{Fe-Nd}} \), depending on the position occupied by the magnetic vacancy.\(^{10} \) Besides, \( H_{\text{Fe-Nd}} \) will be reduced due to the loss of one compensated pair of Fe spins. Therefore, if we impose the effective field acting on the Nd moment as \( H_{\text{eff}}=[(z-2)/z]H_{\text{Fe-Nd}} + \eta H_{\text{ex}} \), two values of the perturbed splitting arise when solving Hamiltonian 1, \( \Delta_{\pm} \), corresponding to \( \eta=\pm 1 \). The free energy of the system has to be modified consequently, as

\[
\mathcal{F} = \frac{1}{2}(\theta_{x}v^{2} + \theta_{p}\chi^{2}) + (1-zx)T \ln \left[ 2 \cosh \left( \frac{\Delta^{+}}{2T} \right) \right] + \frac{1}{2} \sum_{n=\pm 1} (zx)T \ln \left[ 2 \cosh \left( \frac{\Delta^{-}}{2T} \right) \right].
\]

Minimizing this expression with respect to \( v \) and \( \chi \), the order parameter evolution with temperature can be numerically computed, and the heat capacity thereafter.\(^{6} \) The net result is equivalent to having a perturbing field superposed to the average \( (H_{\text{Fe-Nd}}) \), which is the value we obtain from experiment. It is convenient to introduce the parameter \( r = g_{\mu_{B}}H_{\text{Fe-Nd}}/2(\theta_{p}^{-}\bar{\theta}_{y}^{-}) \), the ratio between Fe-Nd and Nd-Nd exchanges, since this adimensional parameter directly expresses the existence \((r < 1)\) or inhibition \((r \geq 1)\) of the long-range transition.

The results obtained for \( x=0, 0.03 \) and 0.1 are shown in Fig. 1 superimposed on the corresponding data. \( x=0 \) is satisfactorily fitted with the parameter values \( \theta_{x}=2.7 \) K and \( \theta_{y}=-0.83 \) K, equivalent to an average exchange interaction of \( J/k_{B}=-0.88 \) K between Nd ions, and \( r=0.979 \); that is, an average internal field of \( H_{\text{Fe-Nd}}=59 \) kOe (using \( \mu_{\text{Nd}} = 0.92 \mu_{B} \) [6]). The fit to the \( x=0.03 \) heat capacity curve is achieved with the same \( \theta_{x} \) and \( \theta_{y} \) as for the pure compound but with \( r=0.995 \), or equivalently \( H_{\text{Fe-Nd}}=60 \) kOe; that is, a 1.5% increase. This value of \( r \) is in the range where both the Schottky maximum and the lambda peak are still observable. However, \( r=1.18 \) for \( x=0.1 \), beyond the limit of inhibition of Nd ordering, with \( H_{\text{Fe-Nd}}=71 \) kOe. A detailed plot of the experimental and theoretical results in the temperature range around \( T \approx 1 \) K for \( x=0, 0.03 \) and 0.1 is shown in Fig. 2, where the inhibition of Nd magnetic order with increasing Co concentration can be neatly observed.

Depending on \( x \), the fraction of Nd ions with a given number \( G \) of uncompensated spins varies (from 0 for no vacancies around the Nd to 4 for maximum uncompensation). \( G \) can be calculated as a function of \( x \) and are given in Table I. Since the Schottky heat capacity depends just on the

![FIG. 2.](Color online) Detail of the specific heat of \( x=0 \) (red), 0.03 (blue), and 0.1 (green) and the mean-field model results.
ground-doublet splitting, and is a single-particle contribution, it can be calculated as a weighted sum:

\[ C_p = \sum_{G=0}^{4} p_G \text{Sch}(\Delta G) \]

where the weight \( p_G \) are given in Table I and the function \( \text{Sch}(\Delta G) \) is the Schottky specific heat for a two-level system with splitting \( \Delta G \). The \( x=0.25 \) and 0.5 curves (shown in Fig. 1 with the corresponding data) have been fitted under this hypothesis to account for the broadening effect on the Schottky anomaly. The best fits for \( x=0.03 \) and 0.1 cannot be distinguished from the curves obtained from the mean-field model, except for the low-temperature peak on \( x=0.03 \). The excellent fit obtained with this simple approach validates the initial proposition of each vacancy contributing by an approximately constant amount to the internal field acting on the Nd\(^{3+}\) ion. (See Table II.)

We have shown that in the case of substitution of Fe atoms by Co, equivalent to the inclusion of magnetic vacancies at the Fe sites in NdFeO\(_3\), the Nd atoms are polarized by an effective field originating from the Fe sublattice, which increase in intensity of the number of vacancies increases, overcoming the Nd-Nd interaction and inhibiting the Nd long-range-order transition.

**ACKNOWLEDGMENTS**

This work has been financed by the Fundación Areces, CICYT MAT02-04178-C04, MAT02-0166 and DGA-P04/2001 projects.

\[ \Delta_0 = 5.31(1) \quad \Delta_1 = 4.93(6) \quad \Delta_2 = 4.05(4) \quad \Delta_3 = 3.32(3) \]

\[ \Delta_0 = 10.41(1) \quad \Delta_1 = 8.15(7) \quad \Delta_2 = 7.65(5) \quad \Delta_3 = 7.19(4) \]

\[ \Delta_0 = 12.15(5) \quad \Delta_1 = 10.2(3) \quad \Delta_2 = 15.62 \quad \Delta_3 = 34.61(2) \]

**TABLE I.** Fraction \( p_G \) of Nd\(^{3+}\) ions with a degree \( G \) of magnetic uncompensation.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>( G )</th>
<th>( x=0 )</th>
<th>( x=0.03 )</th>
<th>( x=0.1 )</th>
<th>( x=0.25 )</th>
<th>( x=0.5 )</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>0</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>0.796</td>
<td>0.518</td>
<td>0.325</td>
<td>0.274</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0.195</td>
<td>0.411</td>
<td>0.465</td>
<td>0.437</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0.009</td>
<td>0.066</td>
<td>0.175</td>
<td>0.219</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>~0</td>
<td>0.005</td>
<td>0.033</td>
<td>0.062</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>~0</td>
<td>~0</td>
<td>0.002</td>
<td>0.008</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**TABLE II.** Energy splittings \( \Delta_G \) of the Nd\(^{3+}\) ground doublet as obtained from the fit of the experimental curves.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>( E / k_B ) (K)</th>
<th>( x=0.03 )</th>
<th>( x=0.1 )</th>
<th>( x=0.25 )</th>
<th>( x=0.5 )</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>( \Delta_0 )</td>
<td>5.31(1)</td>
<td>4.93(6)</td>
<td>4.05(4)</td>
<td>3.32(3)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>( \Delta_1 )</td>
<td>10.41(1)</td>
<td>8.15(7)</td>
<td>7.65(5)</td>
<td>7.19(4)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>( \Delta_2 )</td>
<td>12.15(5)</td>
<td>10.2(3)</td>
<td>15.62</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>( \Delta_3 )</td>
<td>34.61(2)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
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