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<td>Wo, PC; Zuo, L; Ngan, AHW</td>
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Time-dependent incipient plasticity in Ni$_3$Al as observed in nanoindentation

P.C. Wo, L. Zuo, and A.H.W. Ngan

Department of Mechanical Engineering, The University of Hong Kong, Hong Kong, People’s Republic of China

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The time-dependent characteristics of incipient plasticity in Ni$_3$Al during nanoindentation in the subcritical load regime were investigated statistically. The waiting time for incipient plasticity to occur at constant load was found to follow a Poisson-like distribution, with the peak shifting toward zero holding time as the load increased and eventually becoming an exponential distribution when the load was close to a critical value. The observed distribution of the strain burst waiting time at loads smaller than the critical value was inconsistent with the picture in which dislocations nucleated homogeneously out of the perfect crystal. The kinetics for the occurrence of strain burst in this case is thought to be governed by the accumulative growth of nucleation precursors.

I. INTRODUCTION

During nanoindentation, the onset of plasticity in a defect-free crystal is often associated with a sharp excursion in the indenter displacement when the load reaches a critical value, and this phenomenon is known as strain burst or pop-in. The occurrence of a strain burst is generally believed to be the result of the generation and fast multiplication of dense dislocation structures, marking the transition from elastic to plastic deformation overall. In constant ramping load experiments, the critical pop-in load was observed to increase with the loading rate. Moreover, it was also found that a strain burst may also occur when the indentation load is held below the critical value, after a certain waiting time. Figure 1 shows the load and displacement versus time during a nanoindentation test on a well-annealed Ni$_3$Al crystal. After the load was held at about 397 μN for about 18 s, a sudden increase in the displacement and a sudden drop in the load were observed simultaneously, indicating a strain burst in the specimen. In previous studies of this time-delay effects of pop-in by Gerberich et al. and Chiu and Ngan, the waiting time before pop-in was observed to be longer as the indentation load decreased. The statistical scatter of the results also appeared to be larger as the load decreased, but the sample sizes used in these studies, typically 5 indentations at each condition, were too small to allow convincing statistical comparison. The aim of the present study was therefore to investigate the statistical distribution of the waiting time before a pop-in occur at constant subcritical loads, with a goal of providing information on the mechanism of the delayed type of pop-in.

II. EXPERIMENTAL

An ingot was prepared by melting pure Ni (>99.92%) and Al (>99.79%) in an induction furnace, which was then homogenized in a vacuum better than 10$^{-5}$ mbar at 1200 °C for 120 h. A disk approximately 1 mm thick and 3 mm in diameter was cut from the ingot. Both sides of the disk were mechanically polished down to 1 μm. After that, one side of the disk was coated with lacquer, and the other side was electropolished in an electrolyte of 10% perchloric acid in methanol. The side protected by lacquer was then glued onto a flat nickel block for subsequent nanoindentation tests on the electropolished side.

The composition of the ingot was determined to be Ni$_{76}$Al$_{24}$ by energy-dispersive x-ray analysis. Previous transmission electron microscopy observations on samples under the same heat treatment showed that the average residual dislocation spacing was greater than 20 μm. As the indents made on the sample were mostly smaller than 0.5 μm in the present work, the probability of indenting on preexisting dislocation networks is very small.

Nanoindentation tests were carried out at room temperature using a Hysitron Triboscope transducer (Hysitron, Minneapolis, MN) mounted on a Thermomicroscopes CP scanning probe microscope (ThermoMicroscopes, Sunnyvale, CA). A Berkovich diamond indenter was used. The tip radius of the indenter was previously...
found to be about 500 nm using direct atomic force microscopy imaging of the tip, as well as fitting of the elastic load–displacement curve to the Hertzian contact theory.\textsuperscript{3}

All the indentation tests were performed on one selected grain with large sectional dimensions on the free surface, to remove orientation effects. The orientation of the grain was determined to be \([-0.37, 0.91, 0.18]\) using backscattered electron diffraction in a Cambridge Stereoscan 360 scanning electron microscope (SEM; Cambridge, UK). Thermal drift was controlled at an average rate of less than 0.5 nms\(^{-1}\). In the nanoindentation tests, the load was first increased linearly at a rate of 1000 \(\mu\)Ns\(^{-1}\) to 10\% of the maximum load \(P_{\text{max}}\) and was then held for 10 s before ramping further at the same rate to \(P_{\text{max}}\). The load was then held at \(P_{\text{max}}\) for a period of time before unloading linearly at 1000 \(\mu\)Ns\(^{-1}\). Previous observations\textsuperscript{3} indicate that a passive oxide film on Ni\(_3\)Al would result in no significant change in the strain burst load in this material. For this reason, no special attention was paid in this work to investigate the effects of surface oxide film on the nanoindentation responses.

### III. RESULTS

From the results of 30 indentation tests with 1000 \(\mu\)N \(P_{\text{max}}\) on the selected grain, the critical load for instantaneous pop-in, at the chosen loading rate of 1000 \(\mu\)Ns\(^{-1}\), was observed to be in the range 687.58 \pm 51.79 \(\mu\)N. The delayed type of pop-in was investigated at four subcritical loads, namely, 300, 350, 400, and 500 \(\mu\)N. When \(P_{\text{max}}\) was lower than 500 \(\mu\)N, a pop-in was always observed during the load hold at \(P_{\text{max}}\), but not earlier during the loading process, whereas when the maximum load was 500 \(\mu\)N, a pop-in might occur slightly before reaching \(P_{\text{max}}\) or after reaching \(P_{\text{max}}\) during the load hold process.

More than 50 indentation data were collected at each load. Figure 2 shows a SEM image of a typical indentation array at loads between 600 to 1000 \(\mu\)N; the larger indents were made with 5000 \(\mu\)N, and they served as markers for the SEM observation. The indents were made at more than 10 \(\mu\)m away from any grain boundary segments and the indents were at least 5 \(\mu\)m away from each other, so that deformation around individual indents would not interfere with each other.

The waiting time \(t_{\text{exc}}\) before the occurrence of pop-in, and the corresponding length of excursion \(h_{\text{exc}}\) in the indenter displacement were recorded for each load. Figure 3 shows a plot of \(t_{\text{exc}}\) and \(h_{\text{exc}}\) against the indentation load. Each data point for loads between 300 and 500 \(\mu\)N represents an average of more than 50 indentations. The results at 600 and 700 \(\mu\)N were the average of 5 indentation tests. It is observed from Fig. 3 that at a
lower load, it takes a longer waiting time to exhibit a pop-in, but the statistical dispersion of $t_{\text{exc}}$ also increases at lower loads. These results are very similar to those observed by Chiu and Ngan in a similar study on Ni$_3$Al [111] single crystal, albeit the much larger sample sizes in the present work.

Figures 4(a)–4(d) show the probability distributions for the pop-in waiting time at 300, 350, 400, and 500 $\mu$N, respectively. Two types of distributions are observed: (i) peaked, Poisson-like distributions for 300, 350 and 400 $\mu$N, and (ii) exponential distribution for 500 $\mu$N. A close inspection of the Poisson-like distributions at 300 to 400 $\mu$N in Figs. 4(a)–4(c), reveals a shifting of peak from 5–10 s at 400 $\mu$N to 75–125 s at 300 $\mu$N, i.e., the modal waiting time is longer at lower loads. At 300 and 350 $\mu$N, the distribution appears to be bimodal with a lower peak at a longer waiting time. The bimodal shape is less obvious at higher loads.

**IV. DISCUSSION**

**A. Review of proposed mechanisms of incipient plasticity**

At present, there is no generally accepted explanation for the delay in the occurrence of strain burst at subcritical loads. Also, different materials may have different reasons for exhibiting the delayed type of strain burst. One mechanism put forward earlier by the present authors may be described as the “invisible defect” theory. In this mechanism, the application of a subcritical load is assumed to cause the instantaneous formation of some stable defect, which would be unzipped due to the strong image force if the load is removed, hence the term “invisible defect” and the observation that the material would seem to recover elastically upon load removal. However, if the load is held for some time at a subcritical value, the invisible defect may grow by, for example, climb, and when it reaches the critical unstable size, an avalanche event would occur and a strain burst would result. Two factors would contribute to significant diffusion underneath a nanoindent even at a low homologous temperature such as room temperature. First, the diffusion path involved is very short, as the typical distance from the nearest free surface to the core of the indent is usually submicron in the case of nanoindentation. Secondly, the stress gradient involved in nanoindentation is typically several gigapascal per micrometer, which is many orders of magnitude higher than the usual megapascal per micrometer in bulk creep. The large stress gradient in nanoindentation gives rise to a large chemical potential gradient which is the driving force for diffusion. Recent computer simulations on nanoindentation of Cu along the [001] orientation indicate the existence of a special form of invisible defects, namely, Lomer–Cottrell
locks, which are unzipped when the load is removed. However, the Lomer–Cottrell locks are not generally observed in other loading orientations.

On the other hand, Schuh and Lund recently studied the distribution of the critical pop-in loads under constant loading rate conditions in SiC, and concluded that the observed statistics obey the characteristics of a mechanism involving thermally activated, stress-assisted homogeneous nucleation of dislocations. In this model, the nucleation rate of unstable dislocation loops in a virgin sample at any time depends only on the instantaneous load, but is independent of the load history of the sample. In a large number of samples, the cumulative frequency $F(t)$ of the samples exhibiting a life (the pop-in waiting time) longer than $t$ is given by

$$\frac{dF(t)}{dt} = -\dot{N}(t) F(t),$$

where $\dot{N}$ is the nucleation rate which in Schuh and Lund's work is assumed to depend on the instantaneous stress $\tau$ but not its history. Schuh and Lund further assumed a simple Boltzmann form for $\dot{N}$, namely,

$$\dot{N}(\tau) = \eta \exp(\tau^* k T),$$

where $\eta$ represents the nucleation rate in a stress-free crystal due to thermal activation alone, $\tau^*$ is the activation volume, and $kT$ is the thermal energy. In a constant loading rate test, $\tau$ is a linear function of $t$, and so Eq. (1) can be integrated to give

$$F(\tau) = \exp\left( -\frac{\eta k T}{\tau^*} \exp\left( \frac{\tau^*}{k T} \right) \right),$$

where $\tau$ is the constant loading rate. By performing constant-loading-rate tests on SiC, Schuh and Lund were able to obtain a distribution of the critical load $\tau$ at which spontaneous pop-in occurred, which obeys the form predicted in Eq. (2). The activation volume of defect formation they calculated from their results however, is on the order of atomic volume, instead of the volume expected from a dislocation loop.

In their paper, Schuh and Lund limited the application of their homogeneous nucleation model to critical load situations under constant loading rates in SiC. Note, however, that when applied to the present context for the delayed type of pop-in observed in Ni$_3$Al under constant subcritical loads, the implication of the homogeneous nucleation model would be intrinsically inconsistent with that of the “invisible defect” model described above. In the homogeneous nucleation model, a “virgin” sample is defined as one in which pop-in has not occurred, and for such a sample, the chance that a pop-in will occur in the next unit time does not depend on how long the (subcritical) load has already been applied on the sample. In the invisible defect model, a sample that has been loaded subcritically for a longer time would have a higher chance to exhibit a pop-in in the next unit time because the invisible defect would have climbed to a larger size and therefore be closer to criticality.

B. Interpretation of the present results

1. Homogeneous nucleation at 500 $\mu$N and above

The present data at 500 $\mu$N in Fig. 4(d) evidently obey an exponential distribution. An exponential distribution of the sample life (pop-in time) is consistent with the homogeneous nucleation picture proposed by Schuh and Lund. This can be seen easily from Eq. (1). If load $\tau$ is constant, the nucleation rate $\dot{N}$ would also be constant, and hence the solution to Eq. (1) is the exponential decay function $F(t) = \exp(-\dot{N} t)$. Note that $F(t)$ is the cumulative frequency of samples with life longer than $t$; the relative frequency distribution function $f(t)$ of sample life $t$ is related to it by $F(t) = \int_0^t f(t')dt'$, or $f = -dF/dt$. Hence, $f(t)$ would also be exponential decaying with the same time constant as $F$. The exponential distribution of the pop-in times at 500 $\mu$N in Fig. 4(d) therefore suggests that the delay in pop-in at this load is due to the kinetics involved in nucleating a defect from a homogeneous site.

The time constant of the exponential decay observed in Fig. 4(d) can be related to the parameters $\tau^*$ and $\eta$ in Eq. (2), but a second condition would be required to work out the individual values of $\tau^*$ and $\eta$. We therefore repeat the analysis in Schuh and Lund’s paper here, involving the use of the spontaneous pop-in loads observed in the experiments in which the load was ramped up to 1000 $\mu$N at a constant rate. From Eq. (2), a plot of $\ln(\ln(1/F))$ versus $\tau$ should yield a straight line with slope equal to $\tau^*/k T$. Figure 5 shows such a plot for our data. The value of $\tau$ used here is the maximum resolved shear
stress at the most highly stressed point, which is only about 4% different from the value of 7.4 GPa and the known reduced modulus of the diamond atomic potentials for Ni3Al developed by Voter and the simulations here are meant to provide information on how homogeneous nucleation occurs in Ni3Al alone, and since dislocation mechanisms in other materials may be different, one cannot simply presume that the mechanism observed in the simulations here will occur in other materials.

2. Incipient plasticity at lower extra loads

The peaked distributions at 400 μN and below as shown in Figs. 4(a)–4(c) clearly do not obey the exponential form expected from Eq. (1) by assuming \( \dot{N} \) to be constant, and hence the conclusion must be that at smaller loads, the delay in pop-in is not due to homogeneous nucleation. Apparently, at small stresses, homogeneous nucleation is too slow, and some other mechanism takes over.

The invisible defect mechanism remains a possible explanation. To explain the peaked distributions in Figs. 4(a)–4(c), we propose here that the invisible defects
are a form of precursors to the nucleation of unstable dislocation loops. These nucleation precursors could be single vacancies or clusters of them, or simply hot spots of the form shown in Fig. 6 but with greatly extended life times. Another possible origin of these precursors may be steps or roughness on the sample surface, which may cause high enough stress concentrations in the neighborhood to result in more rapid vacancy transport, for example. Unfortunately, the kinetics involved in the low stress regime is too slow to be directly simulated by finite-temperature molecular dynamics, so the details of these nucleation precursors cannot be revealed. Whatever they may be, their activation volumes are assumed to be small so that their formation or growth would not lead to detectable changes in the indenter tip displacement, hence they are invisible. However, once formed, they may act during their life times as heterogeneous sites for nucleation of unstable dislocation loops. We further propose that these precursors become more numerous, or grow to larger sizes, as the time under load increases; i.e., we assume a history-dependent, damage accumulation model. The effect is that the nucleation rate \( \dot{N}(t) \) in Eq. (1) is not a constant at constant stress conditions, but is an increasing function of time. The general solution to Eq. (1) can be written as

\[
F(t) = \exp \left( - \int_0^t \dot{N}(t') \, dt' \right)
\]  

The frequency distribution function \( f(t) \) of the pop-in times of the samples is therefore

\[
f(t) = - \frac{dF}{dt} = \dot{N}(t) \exp \left[ - \int_0^t \dot{N}(t') \, dt' \right].
\]  

Since we assume \( \dot{N}(t) \) to increase with \( t \), and clearly the exponential term in Eq. (4) is decreasing with \( t \), \( f(t) \) is therefore a peaked function with an exponential tail, as observed experimentally in Figs. 4(a)–4(c).

It is likely that \( \dot{N}(t) \) has a Boltzmann form with an activation energy decreasing with time and an activation volume increasing with time. However, we do not know the exact nature of the nucleation precursors so \( \dot{N}(t) \) cannot be derived theoretically. On the other hand, from Eqs. (3) and (4), the function \( \dot{N}(t) \) can be evaluated from the experimental frequency distributions in Figs. 4(a)–4(d) as

\[
\dot{N}(t) = \frac{f(t)}{\sum_{t' \geq t} f(t') \Delta t},
\]  

where \( \Delta t \) is the time interval in the frequency distributions. Figure 7 shows the calculated nucleation rate versus time at different indentation loads, using the data in Fig. 4. As it is mentioned above, \( \dot{N}(t) \) is likely to have a Boltzmann form, and so it would be more convenient to plot \( \ln \dot{N} \) versus time at different indentation loads, as

![FIG. 6. Molecular dynamics simulation of the microstructure evolution at the most highly stressed point in a perfect crystal under the indenter tip during an instability event.](image-url)
shown in Fig. 7. It is observed that, at constant loads of 300, 350, and 400 μN, \( \dot{N}(t) \) increases nearly exponentially with time, suggesting that the activation energy decreases nearly linearly with time, which agrees with the postulation of a damage accumulation model that we put forward above. Also, at a particular time \( t \), the nucleation rate is higher at a higher load. This corresponds to the experimental observation in Fig. 3 that a shorter holding time is required for the occurrence of pop-in at higher loads. From Fig. 7, the nucleation rate at 500 μN appears to be the upper limit as load increases, and in our nucleation precursor model proposed above, this upper limit corresponds to the scenario in which the nucleation precursors become so small that they are no different from the nuclei themselves. At 500 μN or higher, the nucleation process is no longer required to go through the precursor process and hence becomes homogeneous.

V. CONCLUSIONS

The statistics of delays in pop-in event during constant-load nanoindentation were studied in Ni₃Al. The occurrence of pop-in in the subcritical load regime was found to depend on the load history, such that at a smaller load, a longer hold time is required for a pop-in to occur. This behavior cannot be explained by the homogeneous nucleation of defects alone. To explain the results, the multiplication and growth of stable or metastable defects, which act as nucleation precursors to unstable defects, are proposed to be involved in the nucleation of the incipient plasticity process.

At or near the critical load, however, the results indicate homogeneous nucleation with atomic sized nuclei. Molecular dynamics simulations suggest that these homogeneous nuclei are likely to be hot atomic clusters with limited lifetimes in the crystal.

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