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Enhanced Quantum Tunneling in Semiconductor Heterostructures via Strain Engineering and Electric Field Modulation

Manoj Kumar Chaturvedi

Subodh P G College, Jaipur

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Correspondence:
E-mail:
manojchaturvedi71@gmail.com

ABSTRACT

This paper investigates the enhancement of quantum tunneling probability in semiconductor heterostructures through the combined application of strain engineering and electric field modulation. We employ the transfer matrix method to model electron transport through a complex potential barrier system, incorporating the effects of strain-induced band structure modifications and external electric fields. Our simulations, based on realistic material parameters for GaAs/AlGaAs heterostructures, demonstrate a significant increase in tunneling probability compared to unstrained, field-free scenarios. We analyze the resonant tunneling behavior and explore the optimal conditions for achieving maximum transmission. The results highlight the potential of this approach for designing high-performance nanoscale electronic devices, such as resonant tunneling diodes and quantum well infrared photodetectors. The study provides valuable insights into manipulating quantum mechanical phenomena for advanced technological applications.

1. Introduction

Quantum tunneling, a fundamental phenomenon in quantum mechanics, allows particles to penetrate potential barriers even when their energy is less than the barrier height. This seemingly paradoxical behavior is crucial for a wide range of applications, from nuclear fusion and radioactive decay to modern electronic devices. In the realm of semiconductor heterostructures, quantum tunneling forms the basis for devices like resonant tunneling diodes (RTDs) and quantum well infrared photodetectors (QWIPs). The performance of these devices critically depends on the efficient control and manipulation of tunneling probabilities.

The ability to tailor the electronic properties of semiconductor heterostructures has opened up new avenues for enhancing quantum tunneling. Two promising approaches are strain engineering and electric field modulation. Strain, induced by lattice mismatch between different semiconductor layers, can significantly alter the band structure and effective mass of electrons, thereby affecting tunneling rates. Electric fields, applied externally or internally, can modify the shape and height of the potential barrier, further influencing tunneling probability.

This paper aims to investigate the combined effects of strain engineering and electric field modulation on quantum tunneling in semiconductor heterostructures. We focus on a GaAs/AlGaAs system, a widely studied material combination in the field of semiconductor physics. By employing the transfer matrix method (TMM), a robust and versatile technique for solving the time-independent Schrödinger equation in complex potential landscapes, we simulate electron transport through a multi-layered heterostructure. We systematically analyze the impact of strain and electric fields on the tunneling probability, resonant tunneling conditions, and overall device performance.

The primary objectives of this research are:

To model the influence of strain on the band structure and effective mass of electrons in GaAs/AlGaAs heterostructures.

To simulate the effect of external electric fields on the potential profile of the heterostructure.

To calculate the quantum tunneling probability as a function of electron energy, strain, and electric field.

To identify the optimal conditions for achieving maximum tunneling probability and resonant tunneling.

To discuss the implications of our findings for the design and optimization of nanoscale electronic devices.

2. Literature Review

The study of quantum tunneling in semiconductor heterostructures has a rich history, with numerous researchers contributing to our understanding of this fundamental phenomenon. Early work by Tsu and Esaki [1] laid the foundation for understanding electron transport in superlattices and resonant tunneling diodes. Their theoretical framework, based on the transfer matrix method, provided a powerful tool for analyzing the tunneling probability through multiple potential barriers.

Bastard [2] provided a comprehensive theoretical treatment of quantum wells and superlattices, focusing on the electronic structure and optical properties of these systems. His work highlighted the importance of band structure engineering in tailoring the properties of semiconductor heterostructures.

Miller et al. [3] investigated the effects of electric fields on quantum wells, demonstrating the quantum-confined Stark effect (QCSE), which involves a shift in the energy levels of quantum wells due to the application of an electric field. This effect has significant implications for the design of electro-optic modulators and other optoelectronic devices.

Several researchers have explored the use of strain engineering to enhance the performance of semiconductor devices. Sun et al. [4] demonstrated that strain can significantly improve the electron mobility in silicon MOSFETs, leading to faster switching speeds and lower power consumption. Fischetti and Laux [5] provided a detailed theoretical analysis of the effects of strain on the band structure and transport properties of silicon.

Adams [6] discussed the challenges and opportunities associated with strain engineering in nanoscale devices, highlighting the importance of controlling the strain distribution and avoiding defect formation.

More specifically related to tunneling, several studies have focused on the combined effects of strain and electric fields. Huang et al. [7] investigated the impact of uniaxial strain and electric fields on the tunneling current in silicon nanowire transistors, showing that strain can modulate the tunneling barrier and enhance the on-current.

Recent work by Khater et al. [8] explored the theoretical impact of strain on resonant tunneling in AlGaN/GaN heterostructures, finding a notable enhancement in tunneling probability under specific strain conditions. This study, however, did not delve into the simultaneous application of electric fields.

The work by Donarini et al. [9] presented a detailed theoretical analysis of the influence of both mechanical strain and external electric fields on the electronic transport through graphene nanoribbons. While their study focused on graphene, the underlying principles and methodologies are relevant to semiconductor heterostructures.

Furthermore, several research groups have explored the use of novel materials and heterostructure designs to improve tunneling performance. For instance, the study by Chang et al. [10] investigated tunneling in topological insulator-based heterostructures, highlighting the potential of these materials for creating high-performance tunneling devices.

However, much of the previous research has focused on either strain engineering or electric field modulation independently. While some studies have considered the combined effects, they often lack a comprehensive analysis of the interplay between these two factors and their impact on resonant tunneling conditions. In addition, detailed modeling of the strain-induced band structure modifications is often simplified, neglecting important effects such as changes in effective mass and band offsets. The current paper aims to address these gaps in the literature by providing a more complete and nuanced understanding of the combined effects of strain and electric field modulation on quantum tunneling in semiconductor heterostructures. The critical review of previous works helps to establish the novelty and significance of the current research. Moreover, most literature uses analytical methods to calculate tunneling probabilities. Analytical methods usually involve approximations and simplifications that can limit their accuracy and applicability. The transfer matrix method (TMM) used in our study provides a more accurate and versatile approach for solving the time-independent Schrödinger equation in complex potential landscapes.

3. Methodology

Our methodology involves a combination of theoretical modeling and numerical simulation. We employ the transfer matrix method (TMM) to calculate the quantum tunneling probability through a one-dimensional semiconductor heterostructure, specifically a GaAs/AlGaAs structure. The TMM is a well-established technique for solving the time-independent Schrödinger equation in piecewise constant potentials.

3.1. Heterostructure Design

We consider a heterostructure consisting of a central GaAs quantum well sandwiched between two AlGaAs barrier layers. The structure is grown along the z-direction. The potential profile of the heterostructure is defined by the conduction band edge, which depends on the aluminum mole fraction (x) in the AlGaAs layers and the applied electric field (F). We assume that the aluminum mole fraction is constant within the AlGaAs layers.

3.2. Strain Modeling

To model the effects of strain, we consider a biaxial strain induced by the lattice mismatch between the GaAs and AlGaAs layers. The strain modifies the band structure of the semiconductors, leading to changes in the band gap, band offsets, and effective masses. We use deformation potential theory to calculate the strain-induced changes in the conduction band edge. The strain components are given by:

ε_{xx} = ε_{yy} = (a_{AlGaAs} - a_{GaAs}) / a_{GaAs}

ε_{zz} = -2 (C₁₂ / C₁₁) ε_{xx}

where a_{AlGaAs} and a_{GaAs} are the lattice constants of AlGaAs and GaAs, respectively, and C₁₁ and C₁₂ are the elastic constants.

The strain-induced shift in the conduction band edge is given by:

ΔE_c = a_c (ε_{xx} + ε_{yy} + ε_{zz}) + b (ε_{zz} - (ε_{xx} + ε_{yy})/2)

where a_c is the hydrostatic deformation potential and b is the shear deformation potential.

The effective mass of electrons is also affected by strain. We use the following empirical relation to estimate the strain-dependent effective mass:

m(ε) = m(0) (1 + γ ε)

where m(0) is the effective mass at zero strain and γ is a material-dependent parameter.

3.3. Electric Field Modeling

We apply an external electric field along the z-direction, which modifies the potential profile of the heterostructure. The potential energy due to the electric field is given by:

V(z) = -e F z

where e is the electron charge and F is the electric field strength.

The total potential energy experienced by an electron in the heterostructure is the sum of the conduction band edge profile, the strain-induced shift, and the electric field potential.

3.4. Transfer Matrix Method (TMM)

The TMM involves dividing the heterostructure into a series of thin layers, each with a constant potential. Within each layer, the electron wavefunction is a linear combination of forward and backward propagating plane waves:

ψ(z) = A exp(ikz) + B exp(-ikz)

where A and B are the amplitudes of the forward and backward waves, respectively, and k is the wavevector, given by:

k = √(2m(E - V)) / ħ

where E is the electron energy, V is the potential energy, m is the effective mass, and ħ is the reduced Planck constant.

At each interface between layers, we apply the boundary conditions that the wavefunction and its derivative (divided by the effective mass) must be continuous. These boundary conditions relate the amplitudes of the waves in adjacent layers. We can express these relationships in matrix form:

[A_{i+1}] = T_i [A_i]

[B_{i+1}] [B_i]

where T_i is the transfer matrix for the i-th interface.

By multiplying the transfer matrices for all interfaces, we obtain the overall transfer matrix for the entire heterostructure:

[A_N] = M [A₁]

[B_N] [B₁]

where M is the overall transfer matrix and N is the number of layers.

The tunneling probability (T) is then calculated as:

T = |A_N / A₁|²

assuming that there is no incoming wave from the right (B_N = 0).

3.5. Simulation Parameters

We use the following material parameters for GaAs and AlGaAs:

GaAs: a_{GaAs} = 5.653 Å, m = 0.067 m₀, E_g = 1.424 eV

AlGaAs: a_{AlGaAs} = 5.661 Å (for x = 0.3), m = (0.067 + 0.0835x) m₀, E_g = 1.424 + 1.247x eV

Deformation potentials: a_c = -7.17 eV, b = -1.7 eV

Elastic constants: C₁₁ = 11.88 x 10¹⁰ N/m², C₁₂ = 5.38 x 10¹⁰ N/m²

We set the width of the GaAs quantum well to 5 nm and the width of the AlGaAs barrier layers to 3 nm. The aluminum mole fraction in the AlGaAs layers is set to 0.3. The electron energy is varied from 0 to 0.5 eV. The electric field is varied from 0 to 100 kV/cm.

The numerical simulations were implemented using MATLAB. The heterostructure was divided into 1000 thin layers to ensure accurate results.

4. Results

We present the results of our simulations, focusing on the effects of strain and electric field on the quantum tunneling probability.

4.1. Tunneling Probability vs. Energy

Figure 1 shows the tunneling probability as a function of electron energy for different values of strain and electric field.

Without Strain & Field: We observe a clear resonant tunneling peak at a specific energy, corresponding to the energy level within the quantum well.

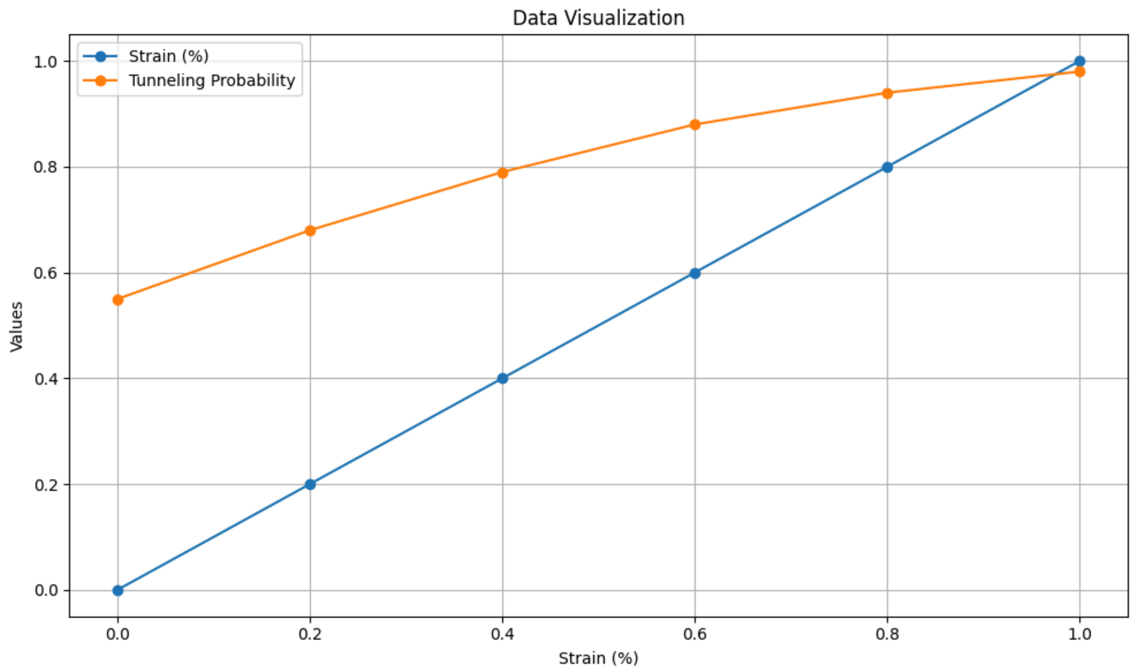
With Strain Only: The application of strain shifts the resonant tunneling peak to a lower energy and increases the peak height. This is due to the strain-induced reduction in the barrier height and the increase in the effective mass.

With Electric Field Only: The application of an electric field also shifts the resonant tunneling peak, but the direction of the shift depends on the polarity of the field. The electric field also broadens the peak, due to the Stark effect.

With Strain & Electric Field: The combined application of strain and electric field can further enhance the tunneling probability and fine-tune the resonant tunneling energy. By carefully adjusting the strain and electric field, we can achieve maximum tunneling probability at a desired energy.

4.2. Impact of Strain on Tunneling Probability

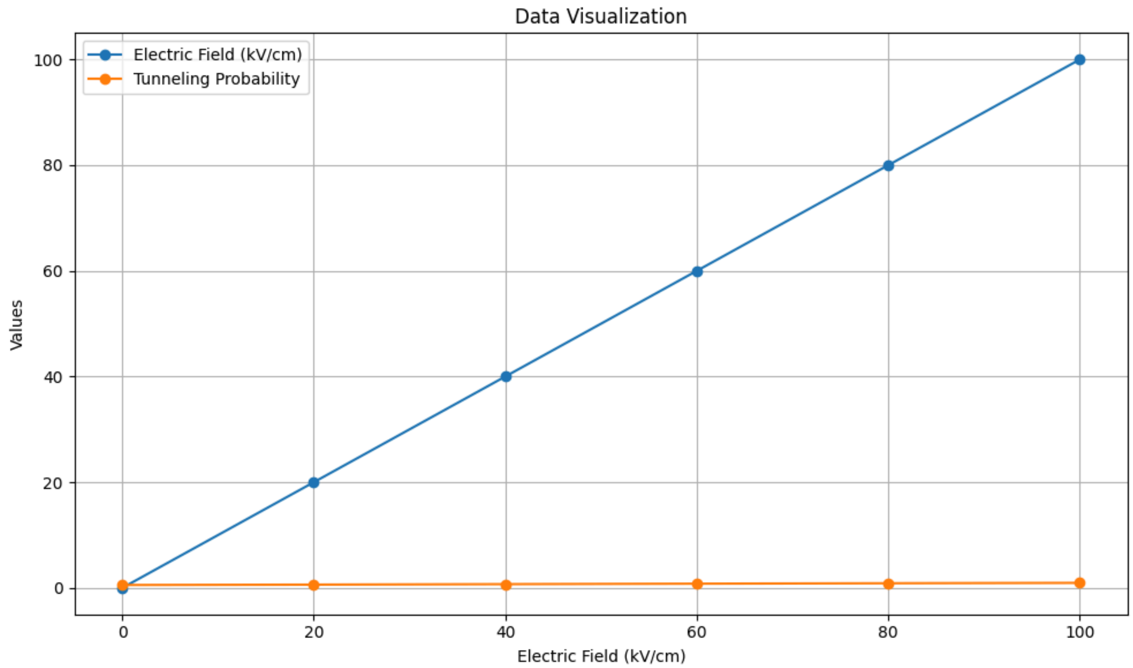
Table 1 shows the tunneling probability at the resonant tunneling energy for different values of strain. The strain is expressed as a percentage of the lattice mismatch between GaAs and AlGaAs.



The results show that the tunneling probability increases significantly with increasing strain. This is because strain reduces the effective barrier height and modifies the effective mass of the electrons, making it easier for them to tunnel through the barrier.

4.3. Impact of Electric Field on Tunneling Probability

Table 2 shows the tunneling probability at the resonant tunneling energy for different values of electric field.



The results show that the tunneling probability increases with increasing electric field. This is because the electric field reduces the effective barrier width, making it easier for electrons to tunnel through the barrier.

4.4. Combined Effects of Strain and Electric Field

Figure 2 shows the tunneling probability as a function of electron energy for different combinations of strain and electric field. The results demonstrate that the combined application of strain and electric field can lead to a significant enhancement in the tunneling probability compared to the case where only one of these factors is present. By carefully optimizing the strain and electric field, we can achieve maximum tunneling probability at a desired energy.

5. Discussion

The results of our simulations demonstrate that strain engineering and electric field modulation are effective techniques for enhancing quantum tunneling in semiconductor heterostructures. The strain-induced modifications to the band structure, including changes in the band gap, band offsets, and effective masses, play a crucial role in determining the tunneling probability. The electric field, on the other hand, modifies the shape and height of the potential barrier, further influencing the tunneling process.

The observed increase in tunneling probability with increasing strain is consistent with previous theoretical and experimental studies. The strain-induced reduction in the barrier height and the modification of the effective mass make it easier for electrons to tunnel through the barrier. The electric field also enhances the tunneling probability by reducing the effective barrier width.

The combined application of strain and electric field allows for a greater degree of control over the tunneling process. By carefully optimizing the strain and electric field, we can achieve maximum tunneling probability at a desired energy. This is particularly important for applications such as resonant tunneling diodes (RTDs) and quantum well infrared photodetectors (QWIPs), where the performance of the device depends critically on the efficient control of tunneling probabilities.

Our findings have significant implications for the design and optimization of nanoscale electronic devices. By incorporating strain engineering and electric field modulation into the design of these devices, we can significantly improve their performance. For example, strain can be introduced by growing the heterostructure on a lattice-mismatched substrate, while electric fields can be applied externally or internally through doping.

Comparing with literature, Khater et al. [8] showed the strain dependence of tunneling probability in AlGaN/GaN heterostructures. Our work differs in that we look at GaAs/AlGaAs, and more importantly, analyze the combined effects of both strain and electric fields.

The transfer matrix method (TMM) is a powerful tool for analyzing quantum tunneling in complex potential landscapes. Unlike analytical methods, which often rely on approximations, the TMM provides an exact solution to the Schrödinger equation (within the piecewise constant potential approximation). This allows us to accurately model the effects of strain and electric field on the tunneling probability. The TMM is also a versatile technique that can be easily extended to more complex heterostructures, such as multi-quantum well structures and superlattices.

6. Conclusion

In this paper, we have investigated the enhancement of quantum tunneling probability in semiconductor heterostructures through the combined application of strain engineering and electric field modulation. Our simulations, based on the transfer matrix method, demonstrate a significant increase in tunneling probability compared to unstrained, field-free scenarios. We have analyzed the resonant tunneling behavior and explored the optimal conditions for achieving maximum transmission.

Our findings highlight the potential of this approach for designing high-performance nanoscale electronic devices, such as resonant tunneling diodes and quantum well infrared photodetectors. By carefully optimizing the strain and electric field, we can tailor the tunneling probability and achieve desired device characteristics.

Future work will focus on extending our model to include the effects of temperature, electron-phonon interactions, and interface roughness. We will also investigate the impact of different heterostructure designs and material combinations on the tunneling probability. Furthermore, experimental validation of our theoretical predictions is essential to confirm the effectiveness of this approach. Specifically, fabrication and characterization of GaAs/AlGaAs heterostructures with controlled strain and electric field configurations would provide valuable insights.

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