Strength of ultrananocrystalline diamond controlled by friction of buried interfaces

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Abstract

Grain boundary (GB) plasticity plays a critical role in deformation of nanocrystalline (NC) materials. However, it has been unclear how strength of these materials depends on GB properties. We use ultrananocrystalline diamond (UNCD) as a model material in which the plastic deformation is mainly located at the GBs and the dislocation processes are not active. We discover that hardness and yield stress have a simple functional dependence on the stress required for GB sliding. Our results on hydrogenated UNCD demonstrate that phenomena from the field of nanoscale friction can be utilized to understand the deformation of NC materials.

(Some figures in this article are in colour only in the electronic version)

1. Introduction

Materials with grain size refined to the nanometre scale hold great potential for mechanical applications that range from microelectromechanical systems (MEMS) to macroscopic abrasive coatings and cutting tools used in industrial applications [1–9]. Superior mechanical properties of nanocrystalline (NC) materials include high hardness, outstanding wear resistance, and improved fracture toughness and ductility [1, 4, 5, 7]. When the grain diameter is reduced to ~10 nm or less, it is expected that mechanical response will be dominated by grain boundary (GB) sliding [10–20]. It is therefore not surprising that many studies have been dedicated to investigating GB phenomena in deformation, which include atomistic mechanisms and dynamics of GB sliding, nucleation and annihilation of dislocations at GBs, and the coupling between GB sliding and GB migration [16, 21–29]. Important insights into GB sliding have been also brought by studies of coarse-grained materials. In particular, it has been shown that when the accommodation mechanism for GB sliding is entirely elastic, resistance to sliding can be interpreted as internal friction [30–32]. In the plastic regime, GB sliding has been extensively studied in the context of time-dependent phenomena (e.g. creep), where GB friction acts as an energy dissipation mechanism during deformation. In coarse-grained materials GB sliding is usually controlled by accommodation mechanisms. Specifically, accommodation mechanisms exert a back stress on the sliding GB and thereby they control the amount of deformation [30, 32]. In NC materials GB sliding occurs on much smaller length scales (on the order of a few Å) [10–20] and therefore it is possible that it can be entirely accommodated by the free volume [30, 32] at GBs so that accommodation mechanisms do not provide any back stress on the GB. In this regime GB shear strength is expected to play an important role in deformation, but it remains an open question how it affects the overall strength of NC materials. In dislocation plasticity the yield strength $Y$ of the material is proportional to the critical shear strength for dislocation motion $\tau_{\text{dis}}$. An equivalent relationship for GB controlled deformation has not been established.

To address the above questions we employ large-scale molecular dynamics (MD) simulations and we investigate plastic deformation of ultrananocrystalline diamond (UNCD). We chose this material for a few different reasons. First of all, UNCD is a promising material for tribological applications because of its superior mechanical properties [2, 6, 9, 33–42]. For example, hardness of UNCD can be as high as 98 GPa [38]. Although it is expected that deformation of UNCD is localized at GBs, so far specific mechanisms of plasticity in this material have not been identified. UNCD serves also as an excellent model material to quantify the effect of GBs on a mechanical response because the extremely high value of $\tau_{\text{dis}}$
in diamond (~90 GPa, see section 3) makes the nucleation of dislocations unlikely during mechanical deformation [2, 33–35, 38]. Understanding gained in the studies of UNCD will provide insights into deformation mechanisms of other NC materials (and NC ceramics in particular) in the regime where dislocation activity is known to be suppressed [18, 19]. Another advantage of modelling UNCD is that numerous experimental studies have been reported on the dependence of mechanical properties of UNCD on GB properties, and more specifically on the concentration of H atoms at the GBs of this material [36, 39, 41, 43–48]. It was shown that both hardness and elastic modulus of UNCD decrease with increasing amount of hydrogen atoms in GBs [36, 39, 46], although specific mechanisms responsible for these trends have not been established. We take advantage of the published experimental data to validate our modelling predictions.

2. Modeling methods

We perform large-scale MD simulations of nanoindentation and of compressive uniaxial test on UNCD. All MD simulations are performed using our in-house codes and the second generation reactive empirical bond-order (REBO) potential [49]. The REBO potential accurately captures the complex chemistry of hydrocarbon systems and the elastic modulus of various solid forms of carbon.

UNCD samples are generated using the Voronoi construction method [50]. Each sample consists of 2048 grains with the average grain diameter of 4 nm. The dimensions of each sample are 40 nm × 40 nm × 40 nm. First, the UNCD structure is relaxed in a high-temperature sintering process with periodic boundary conditions applied in all three spatial directions. The sample is first sintered at 1800 K for 100 ps and then equilibrated at 300 K with no external pressure.

Both experimental studies and simulations have confirmed that hydrogen atoms introduced during processing of UNCD become incorporated at GBs of this material [36, 39, 44, 45]. The concentration of H in UNCD samples can be as high as 8% [39]. In order to discover the effect of H concentration on mechanical properties of UNCD, hydrogen-doped UNCD samples are generated by replacing a certain fraction of carbon atoms in the GBs with H atoms. The GB atoms have to be identified as the first step. Since the carbon atoms near the GB still preserve their local diamond environments, these atoms have the cohesive energy very close to the cohesive energy of diamond, which is −7.36 eV. In contrast, atoms in GBs have local bond geometries and/or hybridization different from the perfect crystal, these atoms will therefore have a higher energy (less negative) than those in the crystalline matrix. An atom is identified as belonging to a GB if its atomic energy is higher than the cut-off value of −6.63 eV, which is 90% of the cohesive energy of diamond. This energy criterion gives the fraction of GB atoms equal to 12.23% and the thickness of GB is approximately two to three atomic layers (2 Å to 4 Å in width), which is consistent with the experimental measurements of GB width [36]. Additionally, [46] reports the fraction of GB atoms to be 8.1% in the UNCD sample with average grain diameter of 7 nm. Since the fraction of GB atoms scales approximately linearly with the grain diameter d [46], the fraction of GB atoms in samples with average grain size of d = 4 nm (as in our models) is estimated to be 14.3%. This estimate is consistent with the 12.23% calculated directly for our samples using the energy criterion.

After identifying the atoms in GBs, we constructed hydrogen-incorporated UNCD samples by replacing a certain fraction of carbon atoms in the GBs with H atoms. The hydrogenated UNCD samples have hydrogen concentrations equal to 0%, 2.45%, 4.89%, 7.33%, 9.78% and 12.23%. These samples are annealed further at 1200 K for 100 ps and then equilibrated at 300 K. After annealing we confirmed that the H atoms remained in the GB regions. Since all hydrogenated samples are prepared starting from the same H-free UNCD structure, all samples are characterized by the same GB network and grain misorientations. The main difference among the samples is H concentration in GBs. Our analysis of computer generated UNCD samples shows that the fraction of sp³-bonded atoms is 93.3% for the non-hydrogenated sample (see figure 1). The fraction of sp² atoms is 6.7%, which is close to 2–5% reported in experiments [37, 38, 40, 42]. While it is generally agreed upon that the fraction of sp² atoms depends on the H content in UNCD, both a decrease [44, 47, 48] and an increase [39] of sp² fraction with an increasing H content have been reported. The cause of the discrepancy is not clear yet. The relationship between H content and carbon hybridization is complicated by the fact that incorporation of H during the growth affects the grain size of UNCD, which results in a different volume fraction of GBs [41, 42]. In this study, we focus on the dependence of mechanical properties of UNCD on GB chemistry alone, while the grain size is kept constant. Therefore, we are comparing our simulation results with the experiments by Xiao et al [39], where the grain size of UNCD was kept relatively constant while H concentration was increased. In Xiao et al ’s experiments [39], the fraction of sp³-bonded atoms increases with the H content in UNCD. As shown in figure 1, the same trend is observed in our MD simulations.

We also found that the presence of H affects the magnitude of the compressive residual stresses in the GBs, which...
is consistent with finding from ab initio calculations of Qi et al [46]. In our samples, the magnitude of residual stresses is always smaller than $\sim 200 \text{MPa}$, which is comparable to experimentally reported values [39]. Since the magnitude of the residual stress is insignificant as compared with the elastic modulus of UNCD (hundreds of GPa), therefore these GB stresses will have a negligible effect on the deformation mechanisms of UNCD.

In the nanoindentation simulations, the indenter is made of diamond-like carbon and its surface is not passivated. With the exception of the surface passivation, the indenter is prepared using exactly the same schedule as described in [51]. The radius of curvature of the indenter is 20 nm. During the indentation, the indenter is held rigid, i.e., none of the atoms of the indenter are allowed to move. This approach allows us to explore deformation in UNCD without having to take into account material properties of the indenter. The power-12 repulsive term of the Lennard–Jones (LJ) potential is super-imposed on the REBO potential to increase the strength of the interfacial repulsion and to prevent sample atoms from sticking to the indenter. The parameters of LJ are the same as in [51], except that the value of $\sigma$ is multiplied by 10.

The simulations of nanoindentation are displacement-controlled and are performed using a push–hold schedule. In each step the indenter is displaced by 1 Å (corresponds to 0.2% of equivalent strain) and then it is held in place allowing for transient forces to decay. The duration of the pushing and holding phases are 1 ps and 10 ps, respectively. The load is measured as the total normal force acting on the indenter atoms and we report the value of load averaged over the last 3 ps of the holding phase. Compression simulations are performed using a similar push–hold schedule as in nanoindentation simulations. In each step a 0.5% uniaxial strain is applied for a period of 1 ps and then the sample is held at the constant strain for 10 ps. The sample is allowed to deform in both directions perpendicular to the loading axis so that the corresponding stress components are zero. The maximum strain in both nanoindentation and compression simulation is $\sim 8\%$.

3. Results and discussion

3.1. Elasto-plastic properties of UNCD

The load ($P$) versus displacement ($h$) curves of our nanoindentation simulations are shown in figure 2(a). The $P$–$h$ curve is continuous and shows no signs of discrete events. We fit the load–displacement curve to the relationship predicted by Hertz model [56],

$$P = 4/3E^*R^{1/2}(h - h_0)^{3/2},$$

(1)

where $R = 20$ nm is the curvature radius of the indenter, $h_0$ is a fitting parameter that corresponds to zero displacement, and

$$E^* = \left(\frac{1 - v_1^2}{E_1} + \frac{1 - v_2^2}{E_2}\right)^{-1}$$

(2)

is the effective modulus of the contact, $E_1$ and $E_2$ are the tip and the sample Young’s moduli, and $v_1$ and $v_2$ are Poisson’s ratios of the tip and the sample, respectively. Only data points at displacements lower than 6 Å are fitted because in this regime the deformation is purely elastic. The effective elastic modulus $E^*$ of a given sample is obtained as a fitting parameter. The fitting quality is $R^2 = 0.999$ for all samples. As shown in figure 3(a), the elastic modulus obtained from fitting simulation data to Hertz model (filled squares) is in very good agreement with values obtained from compressive simulations (crosses) and is within the range of experimental data (blue symbols). For example, experimentally measured values of the modulus are in the range 790 to 950 GPa, for low hydrogen content (less than a few per cent) [2,52–55] while our simulations for 0% H sample gave the value of 791 GPa. Our simulations show that elastic modulus decreases from 791 GPa for 0% H to 417 GPa for 12.23% H, consistent with experimental trends reported in [39]. The experimental values on samples with an average grain size of $d = 7\text{nm}$ [39] is also shown in figure 3(a). The deviation may be due to the fact that our simulations are preformed on UNCD with a smaller grain size ($d = 4\text{nm}$). An increase in elastic modulus with increasing grain size for UNCD has been previously demonstrated by computer modelling [55] and experiments [41].

The change in hardness as a function of indenter displacement $h$ is plotted in figure 2(b). Instantaneous values of hardness are calculated by dividing the normal load by...
The contact area. The contact area is calculated as the area enclosed by the edge of the contact zone of the indenter and the sample (details provided in [57]). It is shown in figure 2(b) that the instantaneous values of hardness reaches an asymptotic value at displacements $h \geq 20 \, \text{Å}$. The indentation hardness of each sample is calculated as the average over four indentation steps in the regime of constant hardness value, that is within the range of displacements from 20 to 24 Å. We find that hardness in our simulations agrees with experimental values reported in the literature. Specifically, the hardness of simulated UNCD with 0% H was found to be 92 GPa, which is comparable to the experimentally measured values between 88 to 98 GPa [2, 38, 54]. As shown in figure 3(b), calculated hardness (filled squares) decreases from 92 GPa for 0% H to 51 GPa for 12.23% H, and this decrease is consistent with the experimentally observed trend in hardness (open symbols). The very good agreement of elasto-plastic properties between the model UNCD and experimental data indicates that our computational model captures correctly the relevant physics of UNCD’s deformation.

The yield strength of UNCD samples was measured in the uniaxial compression simulations. Typically yield strength is defined as a stress corresponding to a pre-defined value of a permanent (plastic) strain. In our study, the yield strength of each sample is measured as the flow stress at the strain of 7.5%. This strain level is selected because it corresponds to the equivalent strain in the nanoindentation simulations where the hardness is measured. The equivalent strain in nanoindentation with a spherical indenter is defined as $0.2a/R$ [58], where $R = 20 \, \text{nm}$ is the radius of the indenter and $a$ is the radius of the contact area. The equivalent strain of 7.5% corresponds to the nanoindentation at the displacement $h = 22 \, \text{Å}$.

### 3.2. Effect of GB sliding on yield stress and hardness

Having shown that our models reproduce correctly mechanical properties of UNCD samples, we now investigate the fundamental mechanisms underlying the deformation. No dislocation activity is observed in UNCD, which is consistent with in situ transmission electron microscope studies performed during nanoindentation experiments [2]. At present, there is still lack of experimental room-temperature measurements of the critical shear stress for dislocation glide in a single crystal diamond. However, one can extrapolate this value from measurements carried out at higher temperatures. The authors of [59] provide a universal relationship between the critical shear stress in materials with diamond-like lattice (e.g. Si, Ge, SiC and diamond) and the parameter $kBT/\mu b^2$, where $kB$ is the Boltzmann constant, $T$ is the temperature, $G$ is the shear modulus and $b$ is the length of the Burgers vector. The critical shear stress for diamond has been measured at 2073 K by Evans and Wild [60] and was found to be 0.5 GPa. Using the values of $G = 510 \, \text{GPa}$ and $b = 2.52 \, \text{Å}$, we extrapolated the critical shear stress to 300 K and we estimated it to be 127 GPa. The theoretical shear strength calculated using the REBO potential is 96 GPa [61], which is lower than the extrapolated value, but still much higher than the maximum shear stress (∼50 GPa) observed in our samples during nanoindentation. Therefore, although REBO potential is not capable of modelling dislocation structures of diamond correctly, based on the shear stresses reached in the samples it is reasonable to assume that no dislocations will be nucleated within the diamond grains.

We found that the dominant mechanism of plasticity in UNCD is GB sliding. To visualize the GB sliding we colour the samples into stripes and monitor the motion of the stripes during the deformation. Assignment of atoms into stripes is based on the position of these atoms along the loading direction before the deformation. An example of a colour-coded sample before any deformation is shown in figure 4(a). After the deformation atoms are visualized with the initially assigned colors (figures 4(b)–(d)) so that the motion of the stripes can be monitored. Figure 4 shows one example of a GB that slides during the deformation of UNCD and it is clear that GB sliding is more pronounced for samples with higher H content. It is important to point out that although the figure shows one example of a GB, the increase in a sliding distance with increasing H content is typical among GBs that slide during deformation. The sliding distance depends on both the H content and the orientation of the GB with respect to the...
Figure 4. The snapshot of the system (a) before and (b)–(d) after nanoindentation of UNCD samples with H concentration of (a) 7.33%, (b) 2.45%, (c) 7.33%, and (d) 12.23%. Both C and H atoms are visualized, with H atoms having a smaller diameter. GB sliding is demonstrated by a relative shift of the coloured stripes, which are marked before the deformation in (a) and are then visualized after deformation (b)–(d). Only the sample with 7.33% H is shown before nanoindentation, because the coloured stripes look the same before deformation. Black lines mark the GB plane. The arrows are added to guide the eye and they indicate shifts of the colour stripes, i.e. the magnitude of GB sliding.

loading axis. Typical sliding distance was found to be on the order of 0.5–3.5 Å.

How to quantify the increase in the GB sliding distance due to the higher H content? We propose that this trend can be analysed by viewing the GB sliding resistance as an interfacial friction of these buried interfaces. The key parameter that characterizes a frictional resistance of a sliding interface is the interfacial shear strength $\tau_{GB}$. We measure the shear strength for those GBs that were observed to slide during nanoindentation and/or compression. To determine $\tau_{GB}$ we first calculate a stress tensor for a 10–15 Å thick slab that contains the GB itself and parts of the two adjacent grains. The GB shear strength $\tau_{GB}$ is then calculated as the shear stress resolved on the plane of the GB.

We found that hardness scales linearly with the shear strength $\tau_{GB}$ of those GBs that slide during deformation. As shown in figure 5(a), the ratio of a hardness over $\tau_{GB}$ varies among different GBs and ranges from 2.87 to 5.32. This ratio is a geometric factor that relates the local stress to the orientation of a GB plane with respect to the applied stress and this ratio is also dependent on the atomic structures of the GB.

To exclude the effect of a non-uniform stress distribution under the indenter on GB deformation, the yield strength was calculated in uniaxial compression test. We find that the yield strength $Y$ is also linearly dependent on the GB shear strength $\tau_{GB}$ (figure 5(b)). The average ratio of $Y$ to $\tau_{GB}$ is calculated to be 2.00 ± 0.28. It is analogous to the Taylor’s factor $Y/\tau_{dis}$ calculated for materials exhibiting dislocation-based plasticity, where typically the value of the factor is measured to be between 2 and 3 [62]. We have also quantified the dependence of the GB shear strength on H
content in the GBs (figure 5(c)). We conclude that GB sliding is the dominant plastic deformation mechanism in UNCD and that shear strength of GBs, $\tau_{GB}$, controls hardness and yield strength of this material. The GB shear strength $\tau_{GB}$ is a fundamental parameter equivalent to $\tau_{dis}$ in dislocation-based plasticity. In addition, the decrease in $\tau_{GB}$ with increasing H content (figure 5(c)) is responsible for the observed decrease in hardness in hydrogenated samples (figure 3).

### 3.3. Accommodation mechanisms

It remains to be addressed what mechanisms accommodate GB sliding during deformation of UNCD. To shed light on the coupling between GB sliding and accommodation processes, we plot the resolved shear stress on a sliding GB as a function of the position along the GB. Figure 6(a) shows the stress distribution along one such GB in the sample with 12.23% H. This profile is typical of stresses measured for isolated sliding events (shown in figure 5(a)). It is characteristic that although the stress fluctuates along the GBs, there is no stress accumulation at any of the ends (junctions) of the GB. The lack of stress accumulation suggests that GB sliding is accommodated by a plastic deformation and that the back stress from the elastic accommodation is negligible [30, 32, 63]. As we will show later, the fundamental mechanism underlying plastic accommodation in this case is the reduction of free volume (densification) in the GB network.

The lack of stress build-up combined with the short GB sliding distances ($\sim$0.5–3.5 Å) further supports the interpretation that the measured shear stress $\tau_{GB}$ is the inherent frictional resistance of a GB to slide. We have also observed that in the regime where hardness no longer changes with the applied strain (for strains $>$6%), $\tau_{GB}$ on each sliding GB also remains constant, which means that the stress required to sustain GB sliding is related to the properties of GB itself rather than to the accommodation mechanism. This analysis confirms that GB sliding at the nanoscale is distinct from the macroscopic GB sliding observed in coarse-grained materials, where sliding of an isolated GB is typically accommodation limited.

Interestingly, we found a number of cases where accommodation does play a role in the GB sliding in UNCD. Specifically, when two adjacent GBs slide simultaneously towards a common GB junction, there is a stress accumulation at the GB junction as shown in figure 6(b) due to the elastic deformation of the surrounding material. In contrast to the single GB sliding event, the stress accumulation indicates that a simultaneous sliding of two GBs cannot be adequately accommodated by the free volume of GB junctions and the elastic accommodation becomes active. Such double sliding events have been found only in the nanoindentation simulations, where by the nature of the test the deformation is highly localized. The pile-up of GB sliding events and associated hardening are analogous to phenomena resulting from dislocation intersections. Dislocations can glide in response to the resolved shear stress $\tau_{dis}$. However, if two dislocations intersect, they can interact and impede further glide. In the case of simultaneous sliding of adjacent GBs the shear stress measured on the GB does not correspond to the intrinsic frictional strength of GBs but it also includes a contribution from a back stress. We also find that in the case of simultaneous GB sliding the dependence of the GB resolved shear stress on H content is less pronounced than was found for isolated sliding events (shown in figure 6(a)).

It is instructive to discuss the details of the plastic accommodation mechanism, which is the reduction of free volume in the GB network. Figure 7 shows such volume reduction in a GB that is aligned perpendicularly to the loading direction. Volume reduction is induced by a movement of two grains towards each other and this process is accompanied by bond breaking and forming within the GB. This process of bond reforming starts at approximately $h \sim 10–11$ Å. During the indentation displacement from $h = 12.5$ to 13.5 Å, the two grains shown in figure 7 are moved closer to each other by 0.4 Å in the direction normal to the GB plane. No sliding is observed in this particular GB.

We found that in addition to densification of GBs, GB sliding is also accommodated by a limited amount of local amorphization within the crystalline grains near the GB junctions. However, the occurrence of this mechanism is rare. The maximum strain considered in our study is $\sim$8%. For larger strain, other accommodation mechanisms mentioned above will become more active. However, given the large hardness of UNCD, it would be challenge to achieve a strain that is much larger than what we investigated.

### 3.4. Relationship between atomic scale friction and GB sliding

We have shown that a decrease in GB shear strength $\tau_{GB}$ leads to a decrease in Y and hardness. The decrease of $\tau_{GB}$...
with increasing H content can be understood by viewing GBs as frictional interfaces. It is well established in the field of nanotribology that friction and the interfacial shear strength are dramatically reduced when diamond surfaces are passivated with H [37, 64–67]. It is because H passivation leads to a replacement of strong interfacial C–C bonds with weaker C–H bonds and thus it lowers the resistance to sliding. The same mechanism explains the reduction of GB shear strength $\tau_{GB}$ with increasing H content observed in our simulations (figure 5(c)). This analysis exemplifies how understanding of mechanisms that govern atomic scale friction provides a connection between plastic properties of NC materials and the atomic structure of GBs. It is worth pointing out that while H decreases the interfacial shear strength, other dopants may increase the resistance to GB sliding and they can therefore enhance the yield strength of materials. For instance, it has been shown that creep resistance of polycrystalline alumina is enhanced by the presence of rare earth impurities (e.g. yttrium) segregated to GBs [68]. Guidance as to whether particular impurities will enhance or retard GB sliding in a material can be brought in from studies of interfacial shear strength between a relevant pair of materials.

3.5. Effect of rehybridization

We find that atoms can change their hybridization during deformation. The hybridization state of carbon atoms is determined by the number of nearest neighbours, which is defined by the coordination number provided in the REBO potential. Specifically, figure 8 shows that the number of $sp^3$ carbon atoms increases in the sample during indentation. Since most carbon atoms are $sp^2$ and $sp^3$ hybridized, this change (increase) in the number of $sp^3$ atoms is approximately equal to the change (decrease) in the number of $sp^2$ atoms. Consequently, the chemical changes that we observe during plastic deformation correspond to a transition from $sp^2$ to $sp^3$ hybridization and the change to other hybridization states is negligible. Since most of the bond reforming takes place in the GB regions, we conclude that GB yielding is accompanied by an increase in the $sp^3$ hybridization in GBs. The increase of $sp^3$ is consistent with the fact that high pressure will stabilize the diamond phase over graphite at room temperature. The rehybridization has a negligible effect on our conclusions. As shown in figure 8, the rehybridization only accounts for approximately 1% of all $sp^3$ atoms. In addition, no aggregation of the $sp^2$ hybridized atoms, i.e. the formation of graphite flakes, is observed. The shear strength of GB is averaged over the last four indentation steps. During these steps, the shear strength of GB is constant while the number of rehybridized atoms increases by a factor of two. This observation suggests that there is negligible effect of rehybridization on the shear strength of GB.

3.6. Applicability of phenomenological models to UNCD

We have shown that dislocation plasticity is inactive in UNCD and that plastic deformation is controlled by GB sliding. It is instructive to ask whether quantitative relationships between indentation hardness and yield strength $Y$ that are predicted by phenomenological indentation theories
apply when deformation is controlled by GB sliding. For polycrystalline metals, Tabor [58] proposed that the indentation hardness equals three times the yield strength \(Y\). More complex models have been developed to describe the correlation between hardness and \(Y\) as a function of other material properties, such as Young’s modulus and Poisson’s ratio [56, 69, 70]. Specifically it has been shown that the ratio of hardness to \(Y\) depends on a non-dimensional strain \(E^*a/YR\) (see figure 9), where \(a\) is the radius of the contact area, \(R\) is the indenter radius of curvature and \(E^*\) is the effective modulus of the interface [56, 58]. These theories have been developed and validated for polycrystalline materials that exhibit dislocation plasticity and for amorphous materials. We test the applicability of the above phenomenological indentation theories to UNCD. Using the cavity model of Johnson [56] as well as the elastic moduli and the yield strength of UNCD measured in our simulations, we predict that for all our samples the hardness to \(Y\) ratio is \(\sim 1.75\) (red symbols in figure 9). The ratio of hardness to \(Y\) measured directly from our simulations ranges from 1.68 to 1.84 with the average value of 1.75. The very good agreement between the theory and simulations shows that the phenomenological indentation theories are applicable for both dislocation plasticity and for intergranular plasticity controlled by GB sliding.

4. Concluding remarks

We have demonstrated that friction of buried interfaces controls mechanical properties of NC materials in the regime where dislocation plasticity is inactive. In such cases the yield stress and hardness of the material scale linearly with the interfacial shear strength of GBs. By viewing GB sliding as a frictional phenomenon, we provided understanding of the experimentally observed effect of H incorporation in UNCD on hardness and yield strength of this material. The relationships among yield strength, hardness and interfacial strength are consistent with phenomenological models that had been developed for materials exhibiting dislocation plasticity. Our study demonstrates that the knowledge from the field of nanoscale friction can be utilized to understand the deformation of NC materials.

Conclusions from this study are expected to apply to other NC materials in which intergranular yielding has a lower energy barrier than intragranular yielding and where GB sliding has been observed to be the dominant mechanism of deformation in the early stages of plasticity [11, 12, 14, 18, 20]. Our conclusion may not apply to cases where GB sliding is accommodated by other processes such as GB migration, the emission and annihilation of dislocation from GBs, or GB diffusion creep.

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