Thermomagnetic analysis of FeCoCrNi alloys: Magnetic entropy of high-entropy alloys

M. S. Lucas,1,2,a) D. Belyea,3 C. Bauer,3 N. Bryant,1,4 E. Michel,1,4 Z. Turgut,1,5 S. O. Leontsev,1,6 J. Horwath,1 S. L. Semiatin,1 M. E. McHenry,7 and C. W. Miller3
1Air Force Research Laboratory, Wright-Patterson AFB, Ohio 45433, USA
2UTC, Inc., 1270 North Fairfield Road, Dayton, Ohio 45432, USA
3Department of Physics, University of South Florida, Tampa, Florida 33620, USA
4Wright State University, Dayton, Ohio 45435, USA
5UES, Inc., Wright-Patterson AFB, Ohio 45433, USA
6University of Dayton Research Institute, Dayton, Ohio 45469, USA
7Department of Materials Science and Engineering, Carnegie Mellon University, Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania 15213, USA

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The equimolar alloy FeCoCrNi, a high-entropy alloy, forms in the face-centered-cubic crystal structure and has a ferromagnetic Curie temperature of 130 K. In this study, we explore the effects of Cr concentration, cold-rolling, and subsequent heat treatments on the magnetic properties of FeCoCrNi alloys. Cr reductions result in an increase of the Curie temperature, and may be used to tune the T_C over a very large temperature range. The magnetic entropy change for a change in applied field of 2 T is ΔS_m = −0.35 J/(kg K) for cold-rolled FeCoCrNi. Cold-rolling results in a broadening of ΔS_m, where subsequent heat treatment at 1073 K sharpens the magnetic entropy curve. In all of the alloys, we find that upon heating (after cold-rolling) there is a re-entrant magnetic moment near 730 K. This feature is much less pronounced in the as-cast samples (without cold-rolling) and in the Cr-rich samples, and is no longer observed after annealing at 1073 K. Possible origins of this behavior are discussed. © 2013 American Institute of Physics.

High-entropy alloys (HEAs) are systems containing four or more elemental constituents with nearly equimolar compositions.1 The magnetic properties of FeCoCrNi based HEAs have been reported by several groups. Wang et al. presented M(H) curves at room temperature for as-cast FeCoCrNiCu and FeCoCrNiCuAl.2 Zhang et al. presented M(H) curves at room temperature and M(T) curves from 100 to 350 K for as-cast and annealed FeCoCrNiCuAl alloys.3 Lucas et al. performed high temperature M(T) measurements and showed that the addition of Pd increases the T_C of FeCoCrNi from below 5 K–350 K in a Quantum Design PPMS and at high temperature (293 K–1073 K) in a Lakeshore VSM. X-ray diffraction on the as-rolled samples revealed all structural and magnetic properties of FeCoCrNi alloys.

Alloys with the stoichiometry FeCrCoNi (referred to as FeCoCrNi) were prepared from elemental Fe, Co, Cr, and Ni of purities 99.97%, 99.9%, 99.2%, and 99.95%, respectively, by arc-melting under an argon atmosphere. Each sample of approximately 5 g was melted and flipped three times to ensure homogeneity. All samples were cold rolled to a thickness of 15 mm and heat treated at 673 K, 773 K, 873 K, and 1073 K for 1 h followed by a quench in iced brine. Other samples of FeCoCrNi were heat treated in situ during high temperature magnetization measurements for further measurements in the low temperature apparatus. Samples were characterized using x-ray diffraction (XRD) with a Cu-Kα source and vibrating sample magnetometers at low temperature (5 K–350 K) in a Quantum Design PPMS and at high temperature (293 K–1073 K) in a Lakeshore VSM. X-ray diffraction on the as-rolled samples revealed all samples to be fcc. The lattice parameter was linear with Cr composition in the range x = 0.5 to x = 1.15 (in accordance with Vegard’s law) following the relationship a = 3.5665 Å + x × 0.0102 Å.

The change in magnetic entropy upon a change in applied field was determined by measuring M(H) loops from −2 T to 2 T applied fields at temperature increments of 10 K and making use of the relation5,6

$$\Delta S(T, \Delta H) = \int_{H_0}^{H_1} \left( \frac{\partial M(T, H)}{\partial T} \right)_H dH. \quad (1)$$

Figure 1 shows the change in magnetic entropy for a change in applied field of 2 T as a function of temperature, composition, and heat treatment. The results are summarized as a function of Cr composition in Fig. 2. There is a decrease in the peak temperature of the entropy change with increasing Cr.

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a)Author to whom correspondence should be addressed. Electronic mail: matthew.steven.lucas@gmail.com.
composition. This is expected as Cr addition leads to a reduction in the average exchange interaction. A linear extrapolation gives a peak temperature of $T_{\text{peak}} = 632.6 \text{ K} - x \times 524.9 \text{ K}$/ (at. frac. Cr), which is 300 K at $x = 0.63$. The peak height is less dependent on Cr concentration than the peak temperature, though the same general trend of decreasing $|\Delta S_{\text{max}}|$ with increasing Cr concentration is observed. Annealing the samples at 1073 K results in an increase in the peak height with a concomitant decrease in both the peak temperature and width of the peak. A linear extrapolation for the annealed samples gives a peak temperature of $T_{\text{peak}} = 568.4 \text{ K} - x \times 471.1 \text{ K}$/ (at. frac. Cr), which is 300 K at $x = 0.57$.

The magnitude of the change in magnetic entropy of FeCoCrNi alloys is very low relative to rare-earth containing materials, though at a much lower cost. Recent work by Ucar et al. has shown that $\gamma$-FeNi alloys have refrigeration capacities in J/$\text{kg}$ that are orders of magnitude higher than rare-earth containing materials. It was reported that the alloy Fe$_{0.70}$Ni$_{0.30}$ for a change in field of 1.5 T has a peak temperature of 363 K, a peak change in magnetic entropy of 0.6 J/$(\text{kg K})$, and a refrigeration capacity (RC$_{\text{FWHM}}$) of 158 J/kg. The value $\text{RC}_{\text{FWHM}} = |\Delta S_{\text{max}}| \times \Delta T$, where $\Delta T$ is the full width at half-maximum (FWHM) of the peak. For the rolled FeCoCrNi alloy for a change in field of 1.5 T, the peak is at 100 K with a maximum entropy change of 0.27 J/ (kg K), a $\Delta T$ of 160 K, and an $\text{RC}_{\text{FWHM}}$ of 43 J/kg. This is approximately one quarter the value for the $\gamma$-Fe$_{0.70}$Ni$_{0.30}$ alloy. The cost of Cr and Co is much higher than Fe and Ni, leading to an increase in cost of the FeCoCrNi alloy of 320% as compared to the FeNi alloy. The refrigeration capacities in J/$\text{kg}$ of FeCoCrNi is only 8% the value of $\gamma$-Fe$_{0.70}$Ni$_{0.30}$.

The results shown in Figs. 1 and 2 indicate that the magnetocaloric properties are dependent both on concentration and sample preparation. The effect of heat treatment was further investigated by x-ray diffraction and high temperature magnetization measurements. Diffraction patterns for the rolled FeCoCr$_{0.5}$Ni sample for different annealing temperatures are given in Fig. 3. The as-rolled sample has a large amount of peak broadening that significantly drops between the 773 K and 973 K annealing temperatures from a FWHM of 0.31° to 0.11° in 2θ, respectively. This is consistent with strain induced by cold-rolling that is alleviated at elevated temperatures. There is also a change in the relative intensities of the (200), (311), and (400) reflections with annealing. As temperature increases, especially above 773 K, the “cube on face” texture (a tendency for $h100i$ directions to be normal to the plane of rolling) becomes more obvious. A 1273 K heat treatment (not shown) results in an order of magnitude increase in the relative intensities of the (200) and (400) peaks.

The results of high temperature magnetization measurements are presented in Fig. 4. Figure 4(a) shows a re-entrant magnetic moment upon heating of the rolled FeCoCr$_{0.85}$Ni sample that begins near 600 K, reaches a maximum at 733 K, and disappears at 825 K. Measurements upon cooling and subsequent re-heating do not show this behavior, and the M(T) curve is shifted to lower temperature by $\sim$30 K. Figure 4(b) shows that the re-entrant magnetization is the result of a second magnetic phase. After a heat treatment at 828 K, the rolled FeCoCr$_{0.5}$Ni sample has a second phase with a magnetic signature that is less than 2% that of the primary fcc phase. This re-entrant magnetization is the result of rolling.

![FIG. 3. X-ray diffraction of rolled FeCoCr$_{0.5}$Ni sample as a function of annealing temperature.](image-url)
and is not found in the as-cast material sectioned by a diamond saw (Fig. 4(c)). As the Cr concentration is reduced, the re-entrant behavior becomes more pronounced (Fig. 4(d)). Although the onset temperature remains constant near 600 K, the anomaly persists to higher temperatures with Cr reduction.

Cold rolling results in a higher Curie temperature compared to the annealed and as-cast samples as well as the onset of a second phase at higher temperatures. One possible explanation is that both the annealed and as-cast samples have some degree of short-range chemical ordering, but the rolled samples are chemically disordered during the mechanical processing. Long-range chemical ordering would be expected to significantly reduce the Curie temperature, as each Fe, Co, and Ni atom would have 4 out of its 12 first-nearest-neighbors (1nn) as Cr atoms. The difference in the transition temperature of ~30 K is small and in a recent study, long-range chemical ordering was not observed in FeCoCrNi. However, a change in the short-range chemical order would increase the number of unlike Cr bonds and could alter the $T_C$ by ~30 K. Cold work provides many vacancies in the structure. Vacancies promote diffusion which on a local scale allows short range diffusion “turning on” at a typical temperature near 600 K. This could alter the local Fe chemical environment in a way that increases the number of Fe-Fe, and to a lesser extent Fe-Ni and Fe-Co ferromagnetic bonds at the expense of Fe-Cr antiferromagnetic bonds resulting in an increased $T_C$. As the excess vacancies are removed at higher temperatures near 750 K, this process stops. As the temperature is further increased, thermal vacancies are activated and longer range diffusion may allow the local configuration of Cr atoms to change in a manner that promotes the formation of unlike Cr bonds. For bcc FeCo alloys, there is a similar phenomenon that occurs and is often termed as the “550°C anomaly” and may be attributed to changes in the local chemical ordering. There is a minimum that occurs in the resistivity as a function of temperature that has also been observed by Chou et al. in FeCoCrNi at ~830 K.

Alternatively, the observation of the re-entrant moment could be the result of vacancies coalescing to form stacking faults. This would change the local co-ordination in a way that resembles a body-centered-cubic (bcc) phase with a higher $T_C$. The bcc phase is thermodynamically unstable and would transform to fcc at higher temperatures. In the bcc phase, FeCoCrNi would be expected to have a $T_C$ below room temperature due to the high concentration of Cr. As Cr is reduced, the $T_C$ of the bcc phase would be expected to increase along with the moment. This is consistent with the observed behavior shown in Fig. 4(d). However, no second phase is observed in the XRD patterns. It is important to note that XRD only gives the behavior of the material at the surface. The information depth is only a few microns for FeCoCrNi. The magnetization measurements probe the bulk of the 350 μm thick samples. To understand the origins of the hump in the magnetization of the rolled samples, it would be beneficial to perform high temperature neutron diffraction and transmission electron microscopy measurements.

To summarize, FeCoCrNi alloys have tunable peak magnetic entropy temperatures with composition and annealing, a modest magnetic entropy change, are easily prepared in the fcc phase from the bulk, and are ductile. They are relatively cheap compared to rare-earth containing materials, though more expensive than FeNi alloys. A re-entrant magnetic moment was observed upon heating from the as-rolled state and coincided with changes in the diffraction pattern and magnetocaloric properties. It is argued that this may be due to changes in short range order or the coalescence of vacancies forming stacking faults. Further experiments are required to fully understand this phenomenon.

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Footnotes:
7. H. Ucar et al., JOM 64, 782 (2012).