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Leonid Chernyak  
*University of Central Florida*

Andrei Osinsky

Vladimir Fflyigin

E. F. Schubert

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Leonid Chernyak, Andrei Osinsky, Vladimir Fuflyigin, and E. F. Schubert

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Electron beam-induced increase of electron diffusion length in $p$-type GaN and AlGaN/GaN superlattices

Leonid Chernyak
Department of Physics, University of Central Florida, Orlando, Florida 32816-2385

Andrei Osinsky and Vladimir Fuflyigin
NZ Applied Technologies, Woburn, Massachusetts 01801

E. F. Schubert
Department of Electrical and Computer Engineering, Boston University, Massachusetts 02215

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The diffusion length, $L$, of electrons in Mg-doped $p$-GaN grown by metal-organic chemical vapor deposition was found to increase linearly from 0.55 to 2.0 $\mu$m during 1500 s of electron beam irradiation. Similar trends were observed for $p$-type Mg-doped GaN and AlGaN/GaN superlattices grown by molecular-beam epitaxy. While the electron diffusion length in $p$-(Al)GaN depends on irradiation time, the diffusion length of holes in $n$-GaN remains unchanged, with $L \approx 0.35$ $\mu$m. We attribute the observed diffusion length change in $p$-(Al)GaN to an increase in the minority carrier lifetime. This increase is likely due to electron beam-induced charging of the deep metastable centers associated with Mg doping. The concentration of these centers was estimated to be $\sim 10^{18}$ cm$^{-3}$. The minority carrier diffusion length increase in $p$-(Al)GaN, which occurs during electron injection, may lead to self-improvement of the bipolar transistor characteristics.

The electron beam from a scanning electron microscope (SEM) JEOL 6400F was used to locally irradiate the samples. Depending on the thickness of the layers, an electron beam accelerating voltage of 10 and 20 kV was used. This corresponds to an electron range, $R$, of 0.36 and 1.20 $\mu$m, respectively. $L$ measurements, using electron beam induced current (EBIC), were carried out in situ in the SEM. A planar metal–semiconductor (Schottky) configuration was used for this purpose. $L$ was derived from the EBIC line scan. The scanning was carried out by moving the electron beam starting at the edge of the Schottky contact pad. After completion of a line scan (16 s), the process was repeated. Total time of the multiple line scan was up to 1500 s (for $p$-type samples), depending on the film thickness. The irradiation volume was calculated based on the beam penetration depth and the distance covered during the line scan ($\sim 4.4$ $\mu$m, at $\times 5000$ magnification). The total charge was determined as the product of multiple line-scan time and absorbed electron beam current, measured by a Keithley 480 picoammeter (0.65 nA at 20 kV and 0.13 nA at 10 kV). A Stanford Research current preamplifier and home-written software were used to record the EBIC line scans. The samples under investigation were considered as a bulk material, since the $L$ values, measured perpendicular to a sapphire substrate, were found to be at least 4 times lower than the sample thickness.

There were no EBIC resolution limitations as well, since the ratio $R/L \leq 4$ was satisfied for all of our measurements.

First, we performed hole diffusion length measurements in the reference $n$-GaN sample. This resulted in $L$ of $\sim 0.35$ $\mu$m, which remained constant for at least one hour of electron beam scanning across the region under investigation. The total electric charge, injected into this region, was $2.35 \times 10^{-6}$ C.

The minority carrier diffusion length, $L$, is a critical parameter for GaN-based heterojunction bipolar transistors (HBTs) and solar blind photodetectors. The diffusion length of carriers, injected from the wide band gap emitter of an HBT, determines the base transport factor. This, in turn, defines the common-base and common-emitter current gains. It is important not only to know the absolute values of $L$ for the HBT base, but also to understand the factors which cause the time dependence of the diffusion length.

Several deep levels, located 1.1, 1.4, and 2.04 eV above the valence band edge, were identified in $p$-type GaN. In this publication, we report an electron beam-induced increase of the minority carrier diffusion length in $p$-type GaN and Al$_x$Ga$_{1-x}$N/GaN ($x = 0.1, 0.2$) superlattices and attribute this increase to charging of these deep centers.

Metal-organic chemical vapor deposition (MOCVD) and molecular-beam epitaxy (MBE) were employed for growth of both $p$-type GaN layers and AlGaN/GaN superlattices. The $p$-type GaN layers were $\sim 2.0$ $\mu$m thick, whereas AlGaN/GaN superlattices had 20 periods with $\sim 10$-nm-wide barriers and wells (total thickness of $\sim 0.4$ $\mu$m). Hole concentrations of $\sim 2 \times 10^{18}$ and $4 \times 10^{18}$ cm$^{-3}$ were measured at room temperature for the Al$_x$Ga$_{1-x}$N/GaN superlattices with $x = 0.1$ and 0.2, respectively. The hole mobility, $\mu$, in both superlattices was $\sim 1.2$ cm$^2$/V s. For MOCVD and MBE $p$-GaN layers, $\mu$ was $\sim 7$ and 3.5 cm$^2$/V s, respectively. The measured hole concentration was in the range of $3 \times 10^{17}$ cm$^{-3}$ in both cases. A $3$-$\mu$m-thick MOCVD $n$-GaN layer ($n \sim 2 \times 10^{17}$ cm$^{-3}$) was used as a reference sample.
Assumed to be Al 0.2 Ga 0.8 N/GaN superlattices, respectively. This corresponds to the value of D = 6.5 cm²/s. The values for the p-GaN samples range from 600 s for AlₓGa₁₋ₓN/GaN and AlₓGaN layers, to 1500 s for GaN samples. Based on the experimental data and the lines 1, 2, 3, and 4 represent the fit for p-type MOCVD-GaN, MBE-GaN, AlₓGa₁₋ₓN/GaN, and AlₓGaN superlattices, respectively. The charge density of 2.0 × 10⁻⁷ C/μm² corresponds to an electron beam irradiation time of ~1500 s for MOCVD- and MBE-grown GaN samples. The charge density of 1.5 × 10⁻⁷ C/μm² corresponds to an electron beam irradiation time of ~660 s for AlₓGa₁₋ₓN/GaN superlattice. Time scale for AlₓGa₁₋ₓN/GaN superlattice is the same as in the latter case.

Electron beam irradiation of p-type material resulted in a significant increase of the minority electron diffusion length, as shown in Fig. 1. The general trend for all the p-type samples is a linear four- to eight fold increase of L from the initial values. This takes place within ~1500 s for GaN samples and within ~540 and 660 s for AlₓGa₁₋ₓN/GaN and AlₓGaN superlattices, respectively. L saturates when the irradiation time is larger than the above-mentioned values.

The minority electron lifetime, τ, was estimated as a function of injected electric charge, based on the measured L values, according to

$$\tau = \frac{L^2}{D},$$

where D is carrier diffusivity, determined from mobility using the Einstein relation. Due to minority carrier mobility uncertainty in the superlattice structures, the estimations were done only for p-GaN samples.

We assumed that the room temperature mobility of minority electrons in p-GaN is ~1.3 times lower than that for majority ones in n-GaN. Based on the Hall measurements of n-GaN samples, the minority electron mobility, μ, was assumed to be ~250 cm²/Vs for a p-type MOCVD epilayer. This corresponds to the value of D = ~6.5 cm²/s. The values of μ and D for electrons in MBE-grown p-GaN layer were 100 cm²/Vs and 2.6 cm²/s, respectively.

Figure 2 presents a square root of lifetime dependence on injected charge (density) for the p-GaN samples. Based on the linear dependence of electron diffusion length on charge, we obtained the same trend for the square root of lifetime [cf. Eq. (1)].
where \( E_i \) = center energy (eV) with respect to the valence band edge; \( e = \) GaN static dielectric constant; \( m \) and \( m^* \) = free and effective electron mass, respectively; \( T \) = temperature.

Using \( e = 8.9 \) and \( m/m^* = 0.2 \), \( \sigma_i \sim 1.4 \times 10^{-21} \) cm\(^2\) was obtained for the centers with \( E_i = 2.04 \) eV. This is consistent with the previously published value of \( \sigma_i < 10^{-20} \) cm\(^2\) in GaN.\(^{12}\) Taking the average thermal velocity \( v = 10^7 \) cm/s\(^{12}\) into account, the capture cross-section volume \( (v \sigma_i)^{1/3} \) of \( \sim 1.4 \times 10^{-14} \) cm\(^3\) was found. If the deep center lies within this volume, the electron, injected or created by an electron beam, will be captured. Using the standard doping level of GaN with magnesium of \( \sim 10^{20} \) Mg atoms/cm\(^3\),\(^{13}\) and assuming a homogeneous distribution of dopants across the sample, a volume of \( 10^{-20} \) cm\(^3\), occupied by a single Mg atom in GaN, was obtained. Comparing the latter volume with the capture cross-section volume, we conclude that \( \sim 10^8 \) Mg atoms/centers are needed to capture one electron. Taking the total saturation charge density of \( 1.9 \times 10^{17} \) C/\( \mu \)m\(^3\) for MOCVD \( p \)-GaN as an example (cf. Figs. 1 and 2), we obtained the beam electron density of \( \sim 10^{24} \) cm\(^{-3}\). Assuming that one electron is needed to charge one deep center, and accounting that only one out of \( 10^8 \) centers may capture an electron, we found the concentration of charged deep traps to be \( \sim 10^{18} \) cm\(^{-3}\).

Independence of the minority hole diffusion length with electron beam irradiation in \( n \)-GaN is an additional argument in favor of the Mg-acceptor role in electron diffusion length increase observed in \( p \)-(Al)GaN. Time-dependent EBIC measurements, carried out on MOCVD \( p \)-GaN, showed the value of \( L \sim 1 \) \( \mu \)m, 17 h after sample charging with an electron beam. \( L \) decreased to its initial value of \( \sim 0.55 \) \( \mu \)m three days after an electron beam irradiation. This is consistent with the photocurrent decay seen in Mg-doped GaN.\(^2\)

Electron beam irradiation of \( p \)-(Al)GaN leads to a four-to eight-fold increase of minority electron diffusion length, taking place within 1500 s of electron beam excitation. This is attributed to charging of the deep levels associated with Mg doping. The density of current, injected in (Al)GaN by an electron beam, is \( \sim 60 \) mA/cm\(^2\). This is 2.5 orders of magnitude lower than the current densities driven through (Al, Ga)N-based bipolar devices (\( \sim 25 \) A/cm\(^2\)). Our experiments on MOCVD \( p \)-GaN demonstrated a twofold diffusion length increase within 900 s, under a current density of 1 A/cm\(^2\) driven through the Schottky barrier under forward bias conditions. This indicates that self-improvement of HBT performance is possible within a reasonably short time after turning on the device.

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