

6

THE OBSERVATION OF
MOLECULAR BOND RUPTURE DURING FRACTURE
IN POLYMERS

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1. Introduction	284
2. Fracture Analyses	284
General	284
Molecular reaction-rate theories	285
Continuum fracture mechanics	285
3. Polymer Morphology	286
General	286
Morphology of fibers	287
Morphology of rubbers	289
4. Experimental Methods	290
Fundamentals of EPR	290
Basic equipment	291
5. Free Radical Chemistry	292
General	292
Free radical site identification	292
Free radical decay and stabilization	296
6. Mechanical Degradation by Grinding and Slicing	297
General	297
Surface bond rupture density in ground polymers	297
Identification of fracture location in block co-polymers	297
7. Ozone Attack on Rubber	300
8. Stress-induced Radical Generation in Preoriented Elastomers	308
Background	308
Experimental procedure	310
Results	310
Theory of high strength and ductile behavior of preoriented elastomers at low temperature	313

9. Fracture in Drawn Fibers	313
General	313
Some previous models of fracture	313
Amount and location of bond rupture	317
An improved fracture model	320
Infrared spectroscopic studies of atomic stress distribution	327
10. Conclusion	332
Addendum	332
Acknowledgements	333
References	333

1. INTRODUCTION

ONE of the central themes in the development of materials science has been the search for atomistic models from which the macroscopic material strength can be inferred. It can be argued that an understanding of the molecular and supermolecular mechanisms underlying fracture can lead to advances in our ability to predict failure and even to develop materials more resistant to failure. Since the macroscopic strength of essentially all materials is orders of magnitude less than that calculated from a theoretical consideration of atomic bond strengths, it follows that these atomistic theories must be rather complex; they must in some way account for the defect structure of the material. As will be discussed in some detail, these analyses generally hypothesize the molecular mechanisms and then bring the theory into line with experimental fracture data by a "suitable" choice of the several constants in the formulae. Such agreement with experiments, however, may well be a fortuity arising from the number of constants to be selected; one really needs some means of observing experimentally the molecular mechanisms on which the model is based. Until recently, experimental techniques capable of providing this information were lacking, forcing one to rely on little more than educated intuition when hypothesizing the elemental molecular fracture processes.

In polymer materials one would expect the formation of two free radicals (unpaired electrons) upon homolytic scission of covalent backbone bonds. If formed in sufficient quantity these free radicals can be detected by electron paramagnetic resonance (EPR) spectroscopy. The use of EPR in the study of free radical chemistry is well known⁽¹⁻³⁾ and Campbell has published a review of EPR studies specifically of polymeric systems.⁽⁴⁾ However, its application to polymer fracture is much more recent. Zhurkov⁽⁵⁻⁷⁾ and his colleagues at the Ioffe Technical Institute, Leningrad, Russia, published the first such work and have continued as very active pioneers in the field. Since then EPR-fracture work has been reported in the United States by DeVries *et al.*⁽⁸⁾ and Peterlin and Campbell⁽⁹⁾ and in Germany by Kausch, Becht, and Fischer,⁽¹⁰⁻¹¹⁾ while some review articles on certain facets of the work have also appeared.^(4,12-14)

Although EPR has proved to be an extremely powerful tool in polymer fracture studies, it does suffer from certain inherent limitations. This present review discusses these limitations in some detail, outlines means of reducing or working around them, and presents some of the many successful studies which have been completed.