

Mechanical Properties Obtained by Indentation of Hollow Pd Nanoparticles

Felipe J. Valencia,^{†,‡,ⓐ} Rafael I. González,^{¶,ⓐ} H. Vega,^{||} Carlos Ruestes,[⊥] José Rogan,^{†,ⓐ} Juan Alejandro Valdivia,^{†,ⓐ} Eduardo M. Bringa,[#] and Miguel Kiwi^{*,†,ⓐ}

[†]*Departamento de Física, Facultad de Ciencias, Universidad de Chile, Casilla 653,
Santiago, Chile 7800024*

[‡]*Núcleo de Matemáticas, Física y Estadística, Facultad de Ciencias, Universidad Mayor,
Chile.*

[¶]*Centro de Nanotecnología Aplicada, Facultad de Ciencias, Universidad Mayor, Santiago,
Chile*

[§]*Centro de Nanotecnología Aplicada, Facultad de Ciencias, Universidad Mayor, Camino La
Pirámide, 5750, Huechuraba, Santiago, Chile*

^{||}*Programa de Fisiología y Biofísica, Instituto Ciencias Biomédicas, Facultad de Medicina
Universidad de Chile Independencia 1027, Santiago, Chile.*

[⊥]*CONICET and Facultad de Ciencias Exactas y Naturales, Universidad Nacional de
Cuyo, Mendoza 5500, Argentina*

[#]*CONICET and Facultad de Ingeniería, Universidad de Mendoza, Mendoza 5500,
Argentina*

[ⓐ]*Centro para el Desarrollo de la Nanociencia y la Nanotecnología, CEDENNA, Avda.
Ecuador 3493, Santiago, Chile 9170124.*

E-mail: m.kiwi.t@gmail.com

Abstract

Palladium nanoparticles are technologically important for catalysis, hydrogen storage, and many other applications. Here we investigate the mechanical properties of Pd hollow nanoparticles of different sizes and thicknesses by means of classical molecular dynamics simulations. Hollow nanospheres of sizes ranging from 5 to 40 nm are compressed using planar indenters. Our results suggest that the mechanical response of hollow nanoparticles can be tailored by tuning the external radius (R) and shell thickness (ω). The largest elastic limit for a given thickness is achieved when the aspect ratio $A = R/\omega$ is $3 \leq A \leq 4$. This delay of the onset of plastic deformation is due to the fact that, for this geometry, hollow nanoparticles can buckle, avoiding stress concentration in the contact; this in turn favors stress accumulation and dislocation emission at the inner surface, in sharp contrast with the behavior of solid nanoparticles and “bulk” surfaces.

Introduction

Hollow nanoparticles (hNPs) have attracted much interest, especially for use in nanotechnology. In fact, they have outstanding performance in plasmonics,¹ catalysis,² drug delivery,³ gas storage,⁴⁻⁶ and other applications. Their main features, low density and high specific surface area, are responsible for the efficiency enhancement relative to conventional solid nanoparticles (NPs). A less explored area is related to their mechanical properties, probably due to the fact that hNPs are perceived as fragile structures, unstable against any perturbation that could trigger hNP failure or collapse⁷⁻¹⁰ into a solid NP. However, Shang *et al.*¹¹ proved that CdSe hNPs of about 500 nm can be subject to large stress without collapsing. Moreover, it was recently shown that hNPs of sizes no larger than 20 nm can withstand even hyper-velocity impacts.¹² In addition, several authors have suggested that hollow interior macroscopic spherical particles could be used as protective coating for space vehicles.¹³⁻¹⁵

Highly porous materials such as aerogels,¹⁶ nanofoams,^{17,18} and bio-inspired compos-

ites¹⁹ are also very attractive, since they display a combination of flexibility and toughness. Therefore, based on all these facts, it is natural to think that hNPs can display not only the required strength, but also increased flexibility. Precisely that is the main focus of the present contribution.

Studies of the mechanical properties of NPs are generally carried out by compression using flat indenters.²⁰ Mechanical properties of a NP can differ significantly from bulk properties, leading for instance to large pseudo-elasticity,^{13,21} and size-dependent strength.²¹⁻²⁴ Experimentally, it has become possible to perform indentation of nanoparticles,^{26,27} and study the induced defects with in-situ high resolution electron microscopy.²⁵

Experimental studies are often supplemented by molecular dynamics (MD) simulations, which can model particles of up to tens of nm in diameter, and provide information not only on constitutive models for elasticity, but also on plasticity beyond the elastic limit. MD simulations of plasticity are usually carried out for NPs with face centered cubic (FCC) structure.²⁸⁻³⁷

Despite the above advances for solid NPs, experimental studies of the mechanical properties of hollow NP are still relatively scarce. However, there are studies for CdS,³⁸ amorphous carbon,³⁹ silica,^{11,40,41} and other elements, all of which indicate that hNPs are able to withstand large stresses. Recently, the anomalous lattice expansion of Ni hNP was studied,⁴² for radii of $\approx 50-100$ nm and shell thicknesses of $\approx 10-25$ nm. It may be noted that many studies include Finite Element Method (FEM) simulations of hollow NP compression, considering only elastic behavior.^{38,39,43} However, FEM simulations require constitutive models which may not be available at the nanoscale. In addition, despite advances on synthesis and experimental techniques, we are not aware of any published simulation on mechanical properties of metallic hNPs.

Several MD simulations^{6,7,44-46} tried to elucidate how the stability of hNPs depends on wall thickness and external radius, since it is expected that the mechanical properties of hNPs are mainly determined by these two parameters. Recently, the behavior of Si hNPs

was studied using MD simulations.³⁴ Buckling and amorphization was found for thin shells ($A = R_{ext}/\omega > 5$), while dislocation nucleation occurred for thicker shells.

Among all the diverse hNPs reported in the literature here we focus our interest on the nano-indentation response of palladium hNPs, since Pd is among the most important materials for catalysis and H storage,^{47–52} because of its capability to dissociate H₂ under room temperature conditions. Even more, in 2016 we proposed⁶ to use Pd hNPs as hydrogen nano-containers as a result of MD simulations, something that was achieved experimentally very recently by Sheravani *et al.*⁵³ This makes the development of Pd based high strength and elasticity materials an ideal candidate to improve hydrogen technologies.⁵⁴ Recently Pd NP have been shown to behave as efficient carbon scavengers;⁵⁵ and since hNPs would be easier to deform and more mobile, they may improve performance.

Methods

The mechanical properties of hNPs are calculated by molecular dynamics (MD) simulations, as implemented in the LAMMPS code.⁵⁶ The interaction between Pd atoms is simulated using the Embedded Atom Method potential,⁵⁷ with the parameters by Sheng. *et al.*⁵⁸ This potential compares extremely well with DFT calculations and experiments, reproducing properties such as elastic constants,⁵⁹ generalized stacking fault surface (GSFS) energies,⁶⁰ bulk modulus and the equation of state⁶¹ for pressures up to 100 GPa. All the hNPs were constructed following the standard procedure already employed for other metallic hNPs, such as Au,^{7,8,45} Ag,⁴⁴ Pt,⁶² and Pd.^{6,12} The method consists in cutting out two concentric spheres of the Pd lattice, and this way generating nanostructures with an external radius of $5a_0 < R_{Out} < 45a_0$ (or $1.95 \text{ nm} < R_{Out} < 17.91 \text{ nm}$) and thicknesses of $5a_0 < \omega < 10a_0$ (or $1.95 \text{ nm} < R_{Out} < 3.89 \text{ nm}$), where $a_0=0.389 \text{ nm}$ corresponds to the Pd lattice parameter. Experimentally hNPs of these sizes have been synthesized using galvanic replacement.^{50,51}

Cutting the crystal lattice is likely to create hNPs far from equilibrium, and subject

to some remnant stress due to the cavity presence. In order for the hNP atoms to reach a minimum energy configuration a conjugate gradient minimization, followed by a FIRE minimization,⁶³ and ending with a MD relaxation of 0.5 ns at 300 K, was carried out.

Indentation was performed using a flat indenter to mimic experimental conditions.²¹ In order to describe the interaction of the indenter surface and the hNP we adopted a potential of the form⁶⁴

$$U(z) = K(z - z_0)^3, \quad (1)$$

where z_0 is the indenter position and $K = 10 \text{ eV}/\text{\AA}^3$ is the constant which describes the indenter stiffness. Before the indentation is performed, the relaxed hNP is located on a fixed flat surface subject to the potential of Eq. (1); next the structure is relaxed in order to adapt the contact area of the hNP.

We adopted this procedure to check for possible defect nucleation due to contact with the NP substrate. Jiang, *et al.*⁴⁴ modeled the deformation of hNPs during sintering focusing on the neck dynamics of two different sized hNPs. They found that these two hNPs can nucleate SFs when in contact, a behavior not observed for solid NPs, where the presence of a substrate or the sintering between them did not nucleate a significant defect concentration, other than surface reconstruction or rotations. In our simulations, defects were not observed after relaxation of the hNP on the substrate.

Previous authors have established that MD indentation compression rates of 10^{-8}s^{-1} are typically sufficient to capture the physics of the problem both for bulk and NPs.⁶⁵ However, our simulations suggest a more stringent requirement of 10^{-7}s^{-1} for hNPs. This criterion was adopted since the largest aspect ratio hNPs we study are prone to collapse, even at room temperature. This insures that the largest aspect ratio hNPs in contact with the indenter do not collapse, and large fluctuations of the stress-strain plot, related to the hNP breathing modes, are avoided.

All indentation tests were carried out at 300 K, and the system temperature was controlled by means of a velocity rescaling algorithm, with a timestep of 1.0 fs. Finally, all the

hNPs were compressed up to 15%. On the other hand, after the desired strain is achieved, the flat indenter is kept fixed during 0.2 ns before the unload process is started.

Defect analysis was carried out using common neighbor analysis (CNA) and the polyhedral template matching method (PTM), both implemented in OVITO.⁶⁶ Dislocations were identified with the DXA algorithm, and defective atoms such as stacking faults (SF) or twin boundaries were analyzed with the Crystallographic Analysis Tool (CAT) code.⁶⁷

The stress-strain relations are obtained on the basis of the contact area and the indenter force. To determine the indenter contact area we compute the number of atoms in the indenter neighborhood, on the basis of the rule that $|z - z_0| < 0.2 \text{ \AA}$ (where z and z_0 are the vertical position of the atom and the surface, respectively) following the method proposed by Ziengenhain *et al.*⁶⁸ The elastic behavior of Pd is described completely by the elastic constants C_{11} , C_{12} , and C_{44} . The values of the Pd elastic constants by Sheng. *et al.*⁵⁸ were used to calculate the orientation-dependent elastic modulus for (100) single crystals by means of the following equation⁶⁹

$$\frac{1}{E_{100}} = \frac{C_{11} + C_{12}}{(C_{11} + 2C_{12})(C_{11} - C_{12})}, \quad (2)$$

which renders $E_{100} = 79 \text{ GPa}$.

Results

The stress-strain plots of Fig. 1 (and Fig. S1 of the Supplementary Material) show that the Pd hNP mechanical behavior is strongly dependent on the thickness ω and the aspect ratio ($A = R_{\text{Out}}/w$). A linear regime is observed, which reaches all the way up to between 5% and almost 8% strain, for $\omega = 10a_0$ and $6a_0$, respectively; beyond these strain values dislocation plasticity sets in. However, several differences are observed in the plastic regime: for $\omega = 10a_0$, $8a_0$, and $7a_0$ a second linear region, after the first partial drop, is observed; it corresponds to the formation of a SF tetrahedron in the contact region, as shown in Fig. 1A.

This structure was already observed for Al NP by Salah *et al.*,³² who showed that the edges of the surface in contact with the indenter concentrates a large stress, leading to the nucleation of four $\{111\}$ partial dislocations.

hNPs display a second yield stress in association with the gliding SF planes of the tetrahedron, which leads to twin formation not observed in Al NP,³² as shown in Fig. 1B. On the other hand, in the thinner shell case ($\omega = 6a_0$), the first partial dislocation emitted is rapidly absorbed by the inner surface, before a second Shockley partial dislocation can interact with it; thus, the formation of a perfect SF tetrahedron on the upper indenter, with junctions which can act as further dislocation sources is not feasible (Fig. 1D). From the simulations, the critical thickness to observe the SF tetrahedron is $\omega = 7a_0$. Below this thickness, the pyramidal structure can disappear quasi-elastically, as seen in Fig. 1E.

The elastic response of hollow spheres can be treated by means of different theories depending on the ratio of the thickness w to mid-radius R_{mid} , namely $Z = \omega/R_{mid}$. For $Z \leq 1/10$ the classical thin shell theory is the best choice due to the simplicity of its solution and sufficient accuracy; under this theory, transverse shear deformation is neglected. For $Z > 1/10$ however, an accurate representation of the “true” values of the stress distribution of a hollow sphere compressed by equal and opposite axial loads can be determined by allowing transverse shear deformation in the formulation. In general, the calculation of the elastic moduli of thin-shelled spheres is analyzed using the theory by Reissner,^{70,71} and while it was not originally developed for cases in which $Z > 1/10$, its accuracy was tested by Gregory *et al.*,⁷² rendering values closer to the “true” ones than those of classical thin shell theory, due to the inclusion of transverse shear deformation. Under Reissner’s theory, for a given indentation δ (less than the shell thickness w) the force F on a spherical shell of radius R , elastic modulus E , and Poisson’s ratio ν , are given by

$$F = \frac{4 E_{100} w^2 \delta}{R \sqrt{3(1 - \nu^2)}}. \quad (3)$$

The predictions of this last equation are illustrated in Fig. 2, with remarkable agreement to the simulations for two distinctive cases. This finding not only supports the statement by Gregory *et al.*⁷² of the applicability of the theory to a different aspect ratio by considering the transverse shear deformation, but also shows that the model is likely to hold for nanoscale systems like the ones studied here.

In Fig. 3 the compression of a hNP defined by $\omega = 5a_0$ and $A = 4$ is illustrated. For this particular combination of geometrical parameters the first dislocation emission occurs from the inner surface, contrary to what is observed for solid NP indentation. It is important to note that simulations for Si hNPs showed dislocation nucleation from the inner surface,³⁴ for a certain range of aspect ratios, but this nucleation occurred in the polar region, and not in the equatorial region as observed here. Before the first dislocation appears, the CNA algorithm detects an unusually large concentration of bcc atoms in the equatorial region (Fig. 3g); however, further analysis using the PMT method shows that the bcc atoms are fcc atoms? in regions with large strain concentration. The large strain and stress observed in the inner surface act as the seed for the partial dislocation nucleation, as shown in Figs. 3(a-c). After dislocations propagate and new SFs are nucleated, a twin boundary also originates from the inner surface, as shown in Fig. 3 d). Even after the loss of symmetry due to the first dislocation, the subsequent dislocations also originate in the equatorial region (see Fig. 3f), on the basis of the same mechanism than the first one. The fact that a second dislocation emitted from the inner surface does take place implies that, this mechanism is not restricted only to the highly symmetric case. It is important to keep in mind that hNPs with uniform thicknesses and sizes, and without surface irregularities or defects, are difficult to obtain experimentally.

In Fig. 3 h) the shear strain distribution is illustrated for a hNP with $\omega = 4a_0$ and $A = 7$. Contrary to the $A = 4$ case the strain in the equatorial region is almost uniform. However, the stress concentration appears close to the indenter region; therefore, it is expected that dislocations will be generated close to the contact surface.

A solid NP reaches an elastic limit of around 3% for $R=10$ nm, while a hNP with $\omega=2.5$ nm reaches nearly a 7% elastic limit. This much larger elastic limit is a general feature for hNPs. To construct Fig. 4 several stress-strain plots were calculated for different values of ω and A , and they were classified according to the 2D phase diagram proposed by Jiang *et al.*⁷ In Fig. 4 it is observed that the hNP elastic limit and strength decreases for extreme values of A or ω . However, two quite different scenarios emerge. If ω remains constant, and A is large enough, the hNP becomes thermally unstable due to the presence of the cavity and the spherical shape cannot be maintained under ambient conditions. On the other hand, for large ω values the hNP tends to behave as a compact NP. From the diagram we obtain that the maximum elastic deformation and stress that a hNP can achieve is $\approx 11\%$ and ≈ 20 GPa, respectively. This limit is reached in the neighborhood of $3 \leq A \leq 4$, and is larger than for other Pd nanostructures.^{54,73} It is worth noticing that the improvement of the mechanical properties, for these specific A values, matches with the fact that the dislocations are nucleated from the hNP inner surface, and not from the indenter contact region.

Si hNP with $R=20$ nm and shell thickness $\omega = 2 - 15$ nm display a maximum critical strain (before plasticity) close to $\omega/R=0.2$, and a maximum critical stress close to $\omega/R=0.5$. In this study we observe a rich behavior, which also depends on A . These results are in contrast with the monotonic behavior of the often observed critical NP stress, as for example in the work of Mordehai *et al.*,²² Millan *et al.*,³⁰ and in this work for $A=1$ values (solid NP). Buckling models which work well at the micron-scale³⁹ do not seem to be predictive at the nanoscale. Buckling was observed³⁴ for Si hNPs for values of $\omega/R < 0.2$; however, only slight buckling was observed in our simulations, but it is expected for somewhat larger Pd hNPs (for $\omega/R < 0.1$), but it is quite unlikely that Pd hNPs will be able to withstand the cavity induced stress without collapsing.

hNP load vs. strain plots along the $\{111\}$ and $\{100\}$ orientations are compared in Fig. 5. Both structures have the same external radii and thicknesses. As expected, orientation changes the slope in the elastic regime, the elastic limit and also the plasticity. For the

{111} orientation dislocations appear for a 5% strain, whereas in the {100} orientation they appear for an 8% strain. The main difference is that the {100} orientation leads to the formation of a large SF over the entire NP, followed by a twin associated with a second linear regime. As expected from the available {111} planes, in contrast to the four {100} planes, case, {111} compression leads to the formation of three SFs in the contact region, activated by the same mechanism that generated the SF tetrahedron.³² However, in this case the Shockley partial dislocations interact forming a stair-rod (Fig. 5C) dislocation according to

$$\frac{1}{6}[\bar{1}2\bar{1}] + \frac{1}{6}[1\bar{1}2] \rightarrow \frac{1}{6}[011] .$$

In Fig. 5D it is observed that larger strain leads to the formation of additional partial dislocations. These SFs are also nucleated from the surface contact edges, and therefore follow the orientation of the SF nucleated previously. At 15% strain all emitted partial dislocations remain confined to the polar region in between the SF pyramids, a result which is different from the {100} case, where SFs or twin planes are expected over the whole hNP for such large deformations. Interestingly enough, the compression for these two cases gives a somewhat similar response in the elastic regime, with {111} being slightly stiffer, as expected from the magnitudes of the corresponding elastic moduli.

Finally, different load-unload plots for 7.5, 8.0, 11.0, and 15.0% were obtained, as illustrated in Fig. 6. After compression of 8.0, 11.0 and 15.0% the hNPs are permanently modified after removing the indenter, while for 7.5% a full recovery of the initial shape results consistent with a reversible elastic response. It is worth noticing that for a 7.5% all the defective atoms belong to the SF tetrahedron, that forms in the indenter contact region, disappear once the indenter is removed. For larger strains permanent modifications are associated with twin formation, which induce size and shape changes, and the appearance of surface steps.

Discussion and Conclusions

Elastic-plastic transitions of palladium hollow nanoparticles can be tuned by control of their thicknesses and radii. Large hNPs can withstand severe strain before plastic deformation sets in. The largest strains measured are associated with some surface buckling, which allows a stress accumulation in the internal surface, either in the equatorial or polar region, and acts as an impediment for atoms below the indenter to form partial dislocations. This mechanism can lead to nucleation originating from the equatorial inner surface, contrary to the assertion that atoms below the indenter control the initiation of plastic deformation.^{32,74} This result may have interesting applications in industry.

The best performance of hNPs is obtained when the aspect ratio is close to $A = 4$, reaching nearly 10% strain and supporting an almost 20 GPa stress, better than other Pd nanostructures. For a larger aspect ratio, the hNP elastic limit and strength decrease due to the fact that the stress induced by the cavity dominates dislocation nucleation, and thermal stability^{6,7,46} can lead the partial collapse of the hNP.

Orientation plays a major role in the deformation mechanism, as expected. In contrast with the $\{100\}$ case, plasticity for the $\{111\}$ orientation starts much earlier, at 5%; however, dislocations are confined to the polar region and adopt a triangular pyramid structure, product of stair-rod dislocations, which remain stable even at 15% strain. Stair-rod junctions require a large stress to act as dislocation sources, acting as a barrier for partial dislocations nucleated from the polar region.

While we studied Pd hNPs due to their importance for hydrogen based technologies⁵⁴ a similar behavior is to be expected for other fcc metals. It would be interesting to explore metals with different twinnability, which might lead to variations in hardening after plastic yielding.⁷⁵

Arrays of hNPs could also display excellent mechanical properties with reduced weight, as was recently shown for silica⁷⁶ hNPs. Metallic hNP arrays might be able to achieve remarkably large elastic limits before NP densification and sintering occurs. In addition to

hNPs, other highly porous nano-objects such as nanotubes,⁷⁷ nanoframes,⁷⁸ nanocubes^{79,80} and/or elastic membranes^{32,81} could also manifest unexpected mechanical properties.

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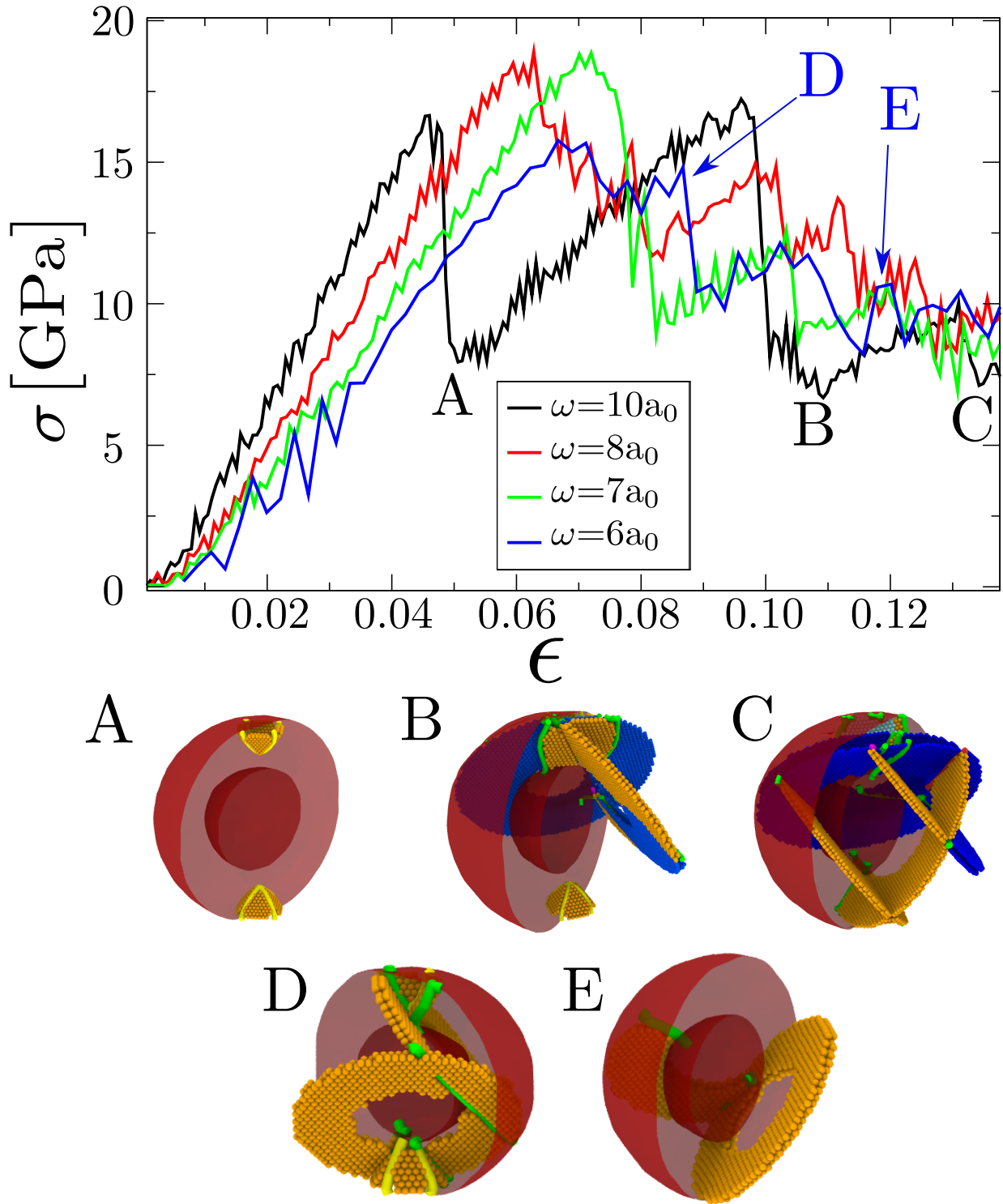


Figure 1: Deformation under loading of hNPs with an aspect ratio of 2 and different thicknesses. A, B, and C show dislocation formation for the $\omega=10a_0$ hNP, while D, and E display dislocations for a hNP of thickness $\omega=6a_0$. Orange and blue colors represent Pd atoms belonging to SFs and twin boundaries, respectively. Different coordination atoms are removed from the figure. The red region delimits the hNP inner and outer surfaces. Green and yellow lines represent Shockley and Hirth dislocations, respectively.

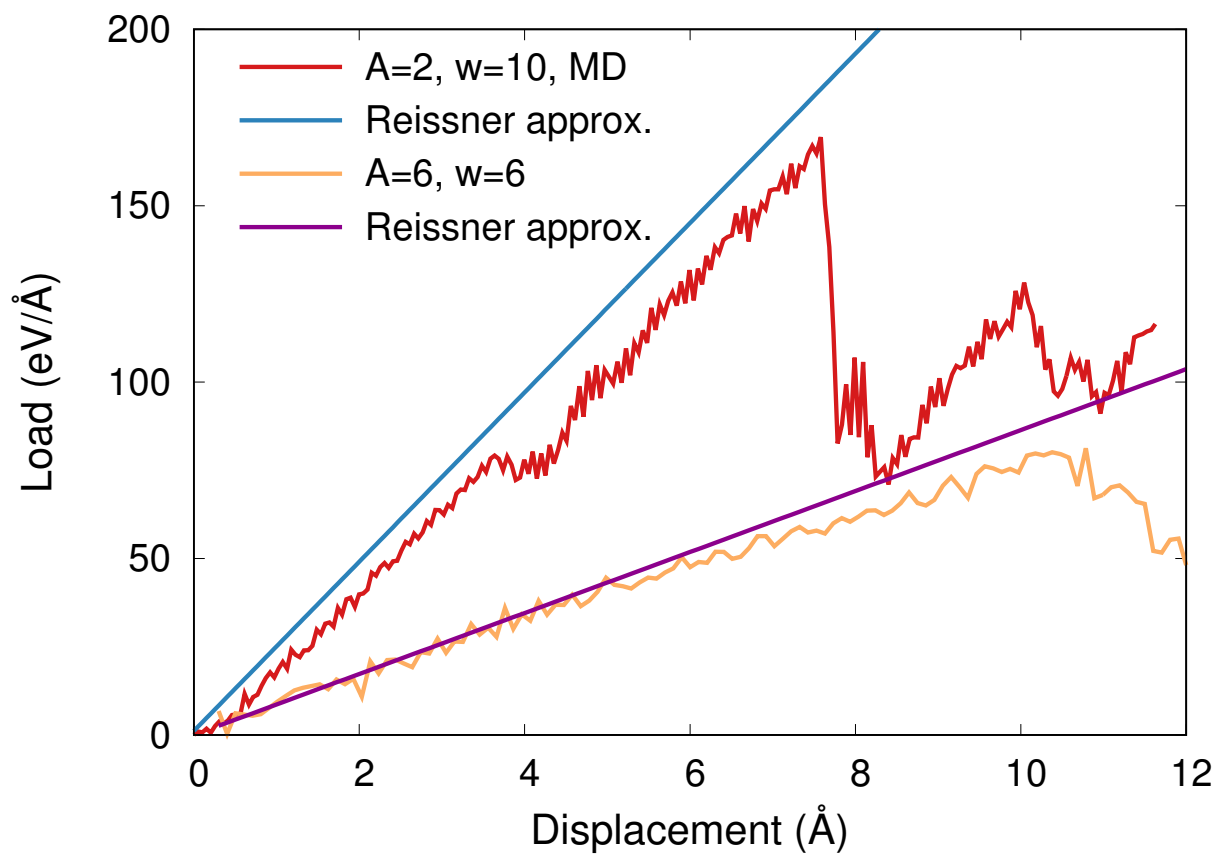


Figure 2: Comparison of two loading plots using the elastic approximation, derived from Reissner's theory.

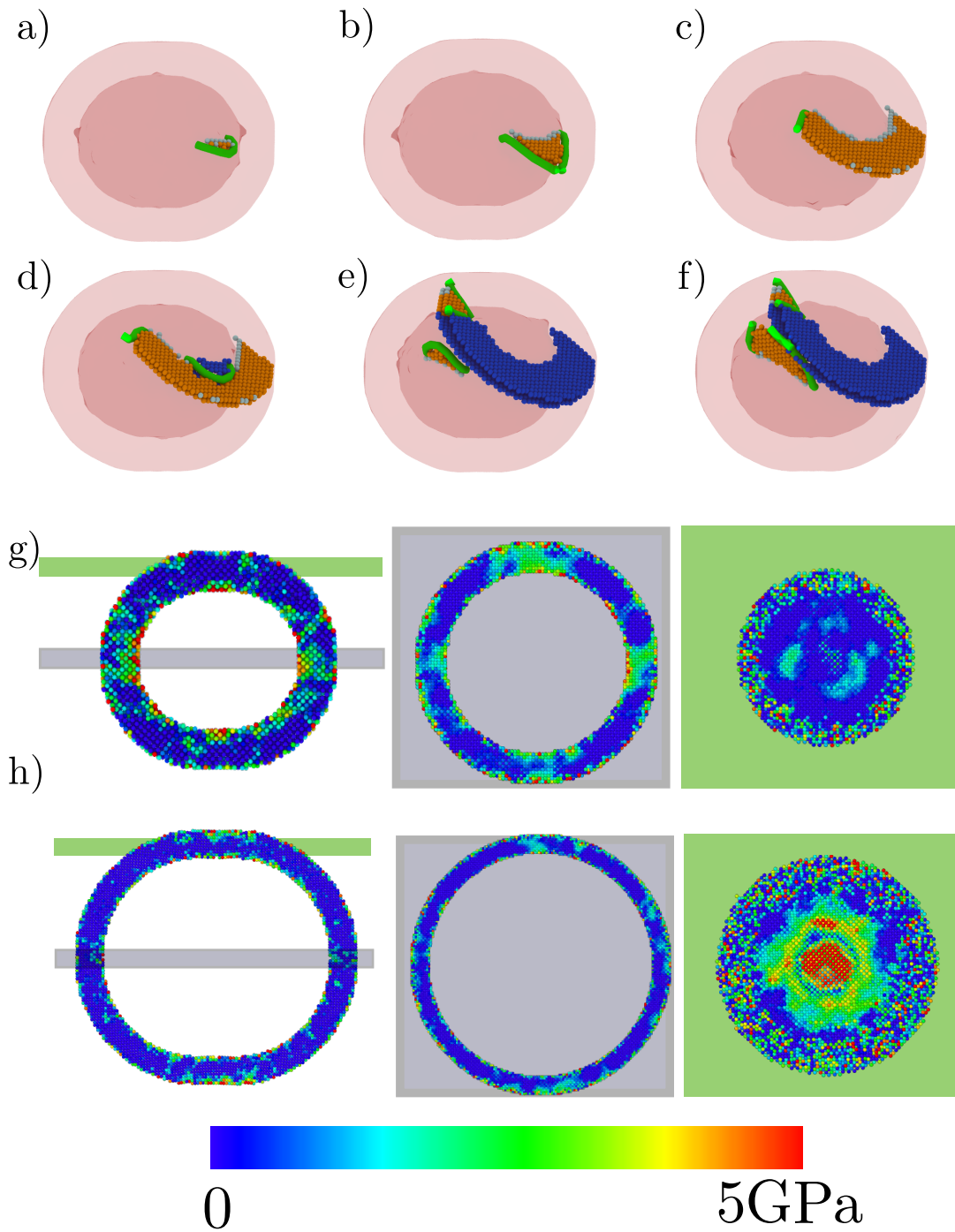


Figure 3: Figs. a-f) show the nucleation of dislocations during the indentation of a hNP of $\omega=5a_0$ and $A = 4$ at different strains. Orange and blue atoms correspond to SFs and twin boundaries, respectively; green lines are Shockley partial dislocations. g) and h) show the stress distribution for a planar cut at $\epsilon = 6\%$, for hNPs of aspect ratio $A = 4$ and $A = 7$, respectively. Gray cuts illustrate the stress in the equatorial region, and green ones in polar region.

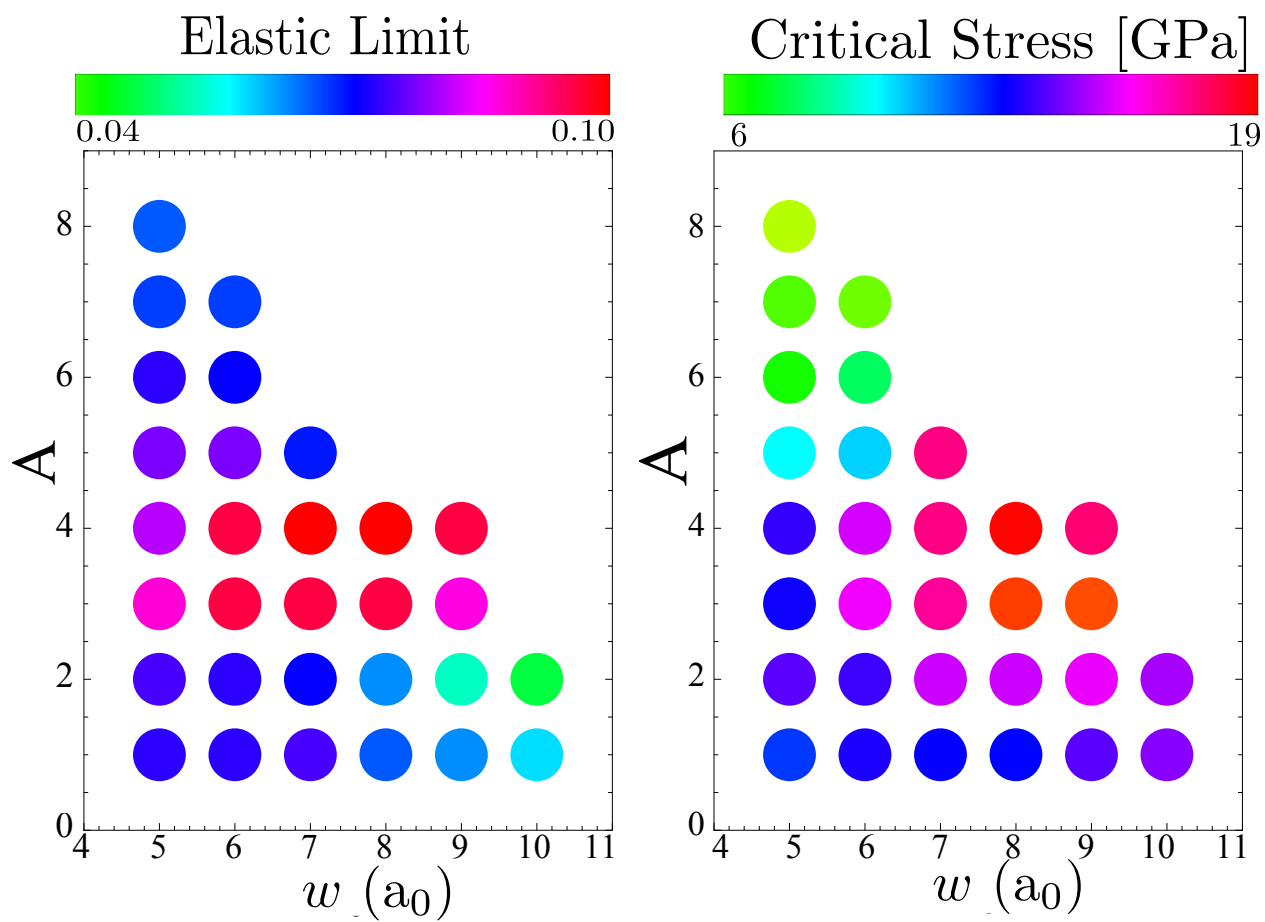


Figure 4: Elastic limit (left) and critical stress (right) as function of thickness w and aspect ratio A . $A = 1$ corresponds to a non-hollow spherical NP.

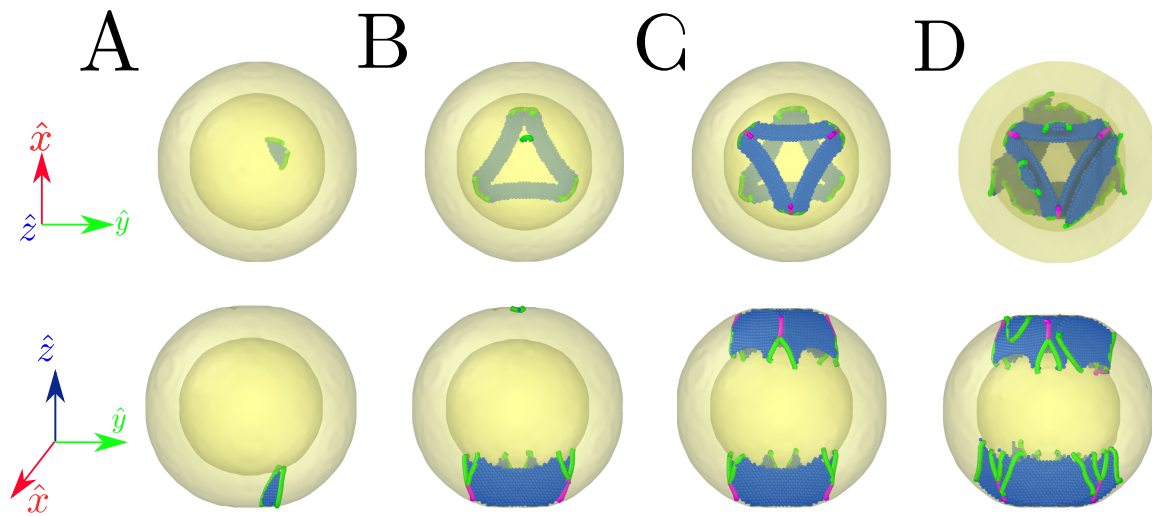
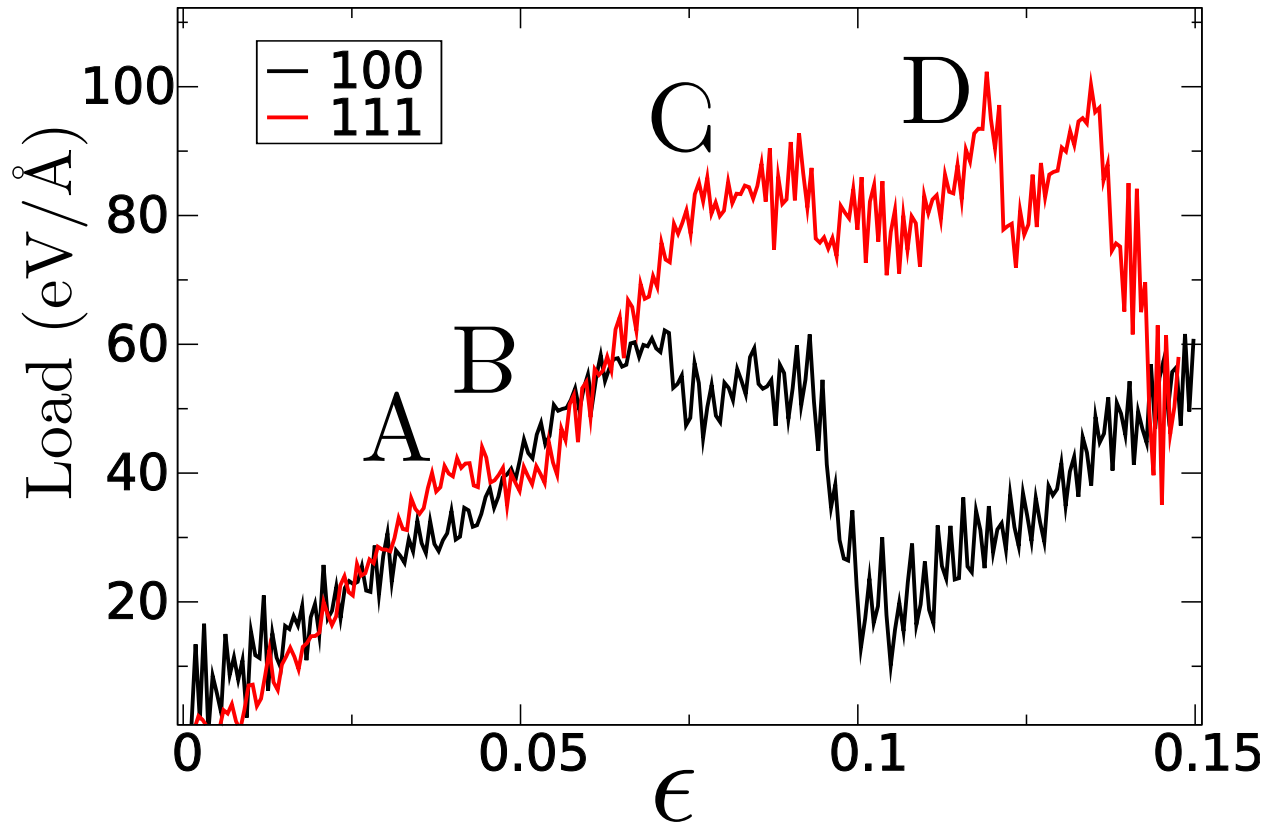


Figure 5: Indenter force as a function of strain for a $\{111\}$ and a $\{100\}$ hNP. Both nanostructures are $\omega = 2.5$ nm wide and $R = 15$ nm in diameter. The yellow region delimits the inner and outer surfaces. A, B, C and D correspond to different stages of the $\{111\}$ hNP indentation process. Top figures show dislocations and defects observed from the indenter perspective (\hat{z}), while the bottom panels show an outside view, both cases represent the same $\{111\}$ indentation. In the figure green and pink lines correspond to Shockley and stair-rod dislocations, and blue regions denote atoms that belong to stacking faults.

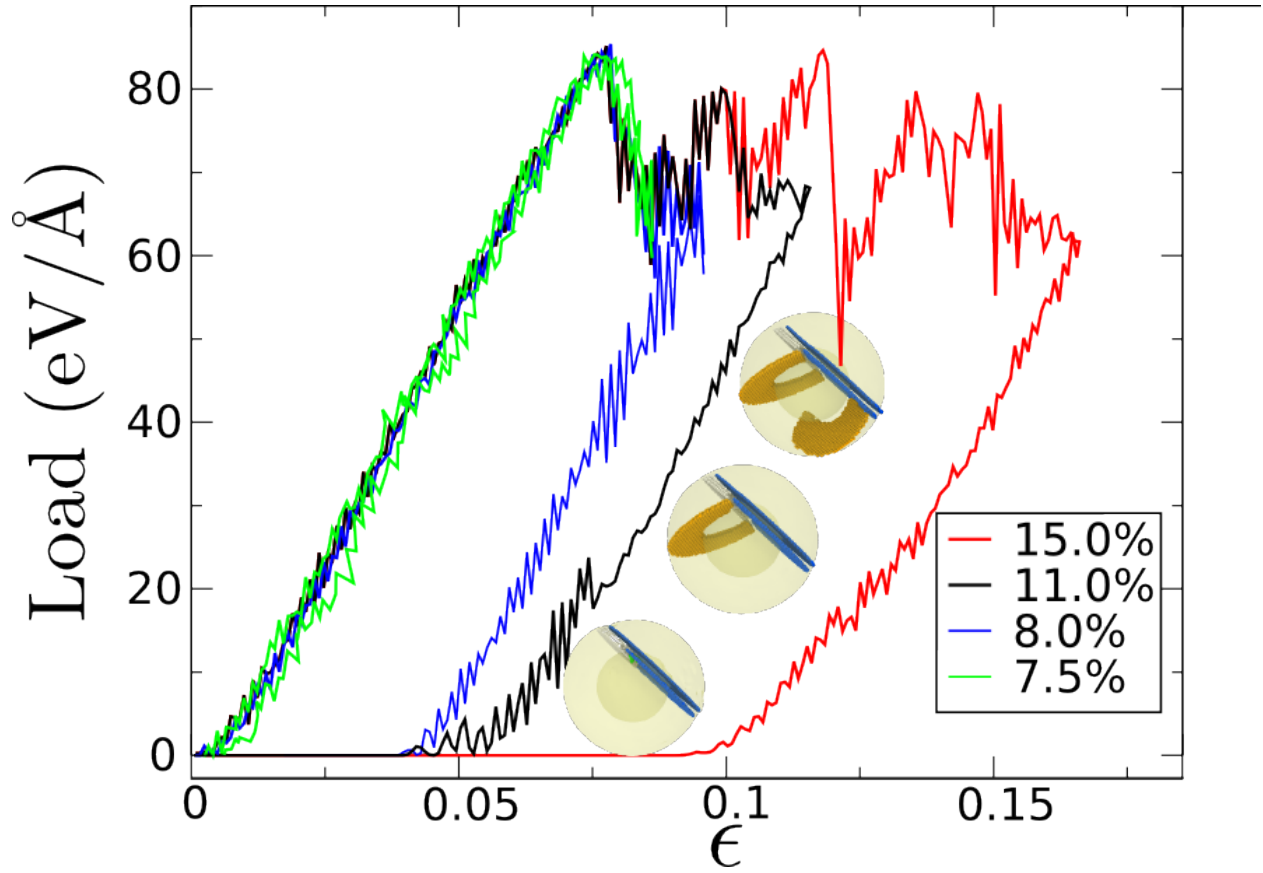


Figure 6: Load-unload plots for different deformations. The hNP has a radius of $18a_0$ and a thickness of $9a_0$. Yellow atoms correspond to SFs, blue atoms to a twin boundary and white atoms represent an intrinsic SF.