

# Nature of Electronic States in Atomically Thin MoS<sub>2</sub> Field-Effect Transistors

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Recently, MoS<sub>2</sub>-based dichalcogenides have been of renewed interest due to the possibility of creating atomically thin semiconductor membranes for a variety of applications.<sup>1–4</sup> Being a layered compound, with a weak van der Waal interaction between the layers, MoS<sub>2</sub> can be exfoliated like graphene on insulating substrates. This has recently led to the fabrication of a single-layer MoS<sub>2</sub> field-effect transistor that has a very high on–off ratio due to a finite band gap.<sup>4</sup> It has been demonstrated that the band gap is indirect ( $\approx 1.2$  eV) for multi-layer MoS<sub>2</sub> films but direct ( $\approx 1.8$  eV) for a single atomic layer,<sup>3</sup> which may lead not only to low-power dissipation electronic devices but also new possibilities in energy harvesting designs. The existence of a band gap can also have serious implications on the charge transport and nature of disorder in MoS<sub>2</sub> films, affecting its ability to screen external potential fluctuations.<sup>5,6</sup> In fact, the mobility ( $\leq 200$  cm<sup>2</sup>/V·s) of charge carriers in single-layer MoS<sub>2</sub> devices is much lower than that of graphene, which has been attributed to the absence of a band gap in pristine 2D layers of graphene. Our objective here is to explore the nature of disorder and hence that of the electronic states, from the low-temperature electrical transport in MoS<sub>2</sub> films, when the film thickness is downsized from a few to a single molecular layer.

Often, disorder in low-dimensional electron systems arises from extraneous sources, such as local charge distribution that induces a random Coulomb potential on the electrons. This, for example, can be the remote dopant ions in modulation-doped III–V semiconductors<sup>7</sup> or charges trapped in the substrate in the case of graphene.<sup>8</sup> At low carrier densities, the screening of the random Coulomb potential becomes weak, causing carriers to localize and/or charge distribution to become inhomogeneous.<sup>9,10</sup> This would have a direct impact not only on the transport but also on the response of the system to various stimuli including light, stress, etc. Although a

**ABSTRACT** We present low-temperature electrical transport experiments in five field-effect transistor devices consisting of monolayer, bilayer, and trilayer MoS<sub>2</sub> films, mechanically exfoliated onto Si/SiO<sub>2</sub> substrate. Our experiments reveal that the electronic states in all films are localized well up to room temperature over the experimentally accessible range of gate voltage. This manifests in two-dimensional (2D) variable range hopping (VRH) at high temperatures, while below  $\sim 30$  K, the conductivity displays oscillatory structures in gate voltage arising from resonant tunneling at the localized sites. From the correlation energy ( $T_0$ ) of VRH and gate voltage dependence of conductivity, we suggest that Coulomb potential from trapped charges in the substrate is the dominant source of disorder in MoS<sub>2</sub> field-effect devices, which leads to carrier localization, as well.

**KEYWORDS:** dichalcogenides · field-effect transistor · MoS<sub>2</sub> · localization · Mott variable range hopping · resonant tunneling · charge impurity scattering

similar charge-trap-mediated transport has been suggested in thick nanoscale patches of MoS<sub>2</sub>,<sup>11</sup> the microscopic picture is far from clear. It is also not known if such a picture would be valid in monolayer or very few layer MoS<sub>2</sub> devices. In this context, our experiments with MoS<sub>2</sub> devices of different thicknesses (see Table 1) reveal that electrons are strongly localized in all cases, which manifest in variable range hopping transport and an inhomogeneity in charge distribution that results in local transport resonances at low temperatures. We suggest that localization is probably due to strong potential fluctuations induced by the randomly occupied charge traps that are located primarily at the MoS<sub>2</sub>–substrate interface.

## RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Devices were prepared by standard mechanical exfoliation of bulk MoS<sub>2</sub> on 300 nm SiO<sub>2</sub> on n<sup>++</sup>-doped silicon substrate using the scotch tape technique.<sup>12,13</sup> The flakes were identified using an optical microscope and characterized *via* Raman spectroscopy and atomic force microscopy (AFM). We present detailed experiments on five devices (see Table 1) of different film thicknesses. In Figure 1c, we show Raman spectra for bulk, trilayer, and single-layer MoS<sub>2</sub> films. We focus on the E<sub>2g</sub><sup>1</sup> and A<sub>1g</sub> modes which have been

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shown to be sensitive to the number of atomic layers.<sup>3</sup> The position of both modes agrees well with a recent investigation of Raman spectroscopy in thin exfoliated MoS<sub>2</sub> films. The separation of E<sub>2g</sub><sup>1</sup> and A<sub>1g</sub> peaks was found to be 23, 21, and 16 –18 cm<sup>-1</sup> for trilayer, bilayer, and single layer, respectively. For further confirmation of Raman data, we determined the thickness of flakes using contact mode AFM. A line scan across the edge of a single-layer flake (Figure 1d) shows a step of ≈0.7 nm, which compares very well with the thickness of the single MoS<sub>2</sub> layer (≈0.65 nm).

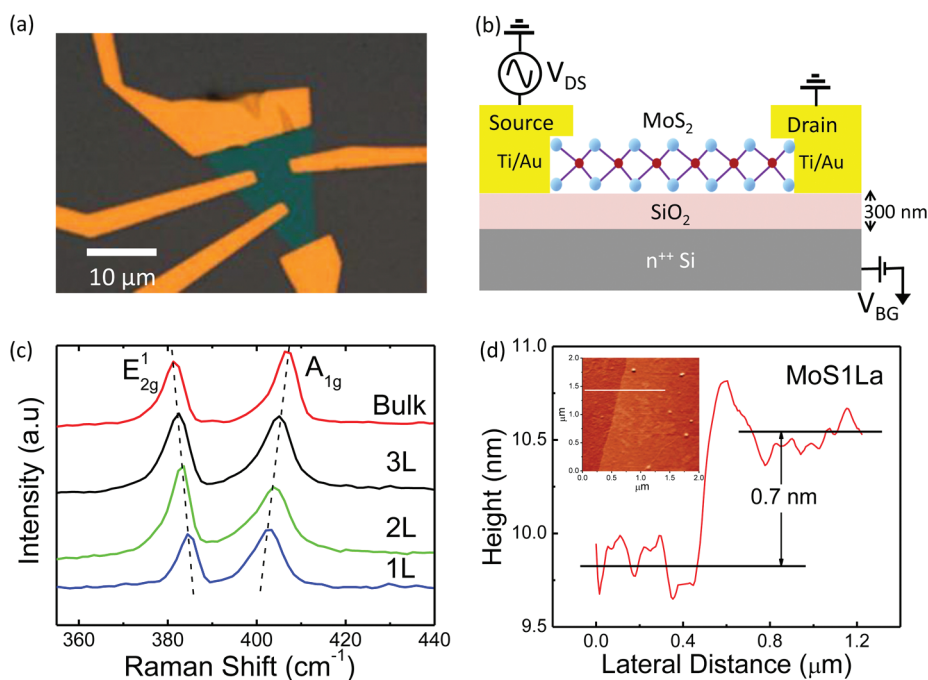
The electrical contacts, designed with electron beam lithography, consisted of thermally evaporated Ti/Au or Au films. The optical image of the MoS<sub>2</sub> device is shown in Figure 1a. All measurements were carried out in cryostats under high vacuum (10<sup>-6</sup> mbar) condition. In all devices, the gate voltage (V<sub>BG</sub>) was applied only at the doped silicon backgate (see Figure 1b). Measurements were primarily two-probe current measurement using lock-in technique due to very high resistance of

these systems, although four-probe devices were fabricated, as well. We found, at high doping concentration, that the contact resistance was negligible near room temperature but increases to about half of the sample resistance below 100 K. Detailed I<sub>DS</sub>–V<sub>DS</sub> measurements, where I<sub>DS</sub> and V<sub>DS</sub> are the drain–source current and bias, respectively, were conducted to characterize the electrical contacts (see Supporting Information). At low voltages (|V<sub>DS</sub>| ≤ 300 mV), I<sub>DS</sub>–V<sub>DS</sub> values at all V<sub>BG</sub> and near room temperature were linear for both Ti/Au and Au deposited samples, although we have better linear contact with only Au. These results bear close resemblance to the characteristics reported recently for high-mobility MoS<sub>2</sub> devices.<sup>4</sup> As shown in the Supporting Information, I<sub>DS</sub>–V<sub>DS</sub> characteristics become nonlinear at large V<sub>DS</sub>, particularly at low temperatures (T), although we attribute this to the insulating nature of the devices which causes the nonlinearity. The symmetric nature of I<sub>DS</sub>–V<sub>DS</sub> around V<sub>DS</sub> = 0 enables us to eliminate any possibility of Schottky contact in our operating V<sub>DS</sub> range. This is supported by the observed magnitude of the differential carrier mobility μ (=1/C × dσ/dV<sub>BG</sub>), where C is the gate capacitance per unit area (here 1.2 × 10<sup>-4</sup> F/m<sup>2</sup> for 300 nm SiO<sub>2</sub>), and σ (=L/W × I/V<sub>DS</sub>) is the linear conductivity at low V<sub>DS</sub>. L and W are the length and width of the MoS<sub>2</sub> channel. In both two- and four-probe geometry, we obtained similar values of mobility, which are typical values reported for MoS<sub>2</sub> transistors<sup>4</sup> on the SiO<sub>2</sub> substrate (see Table 1).

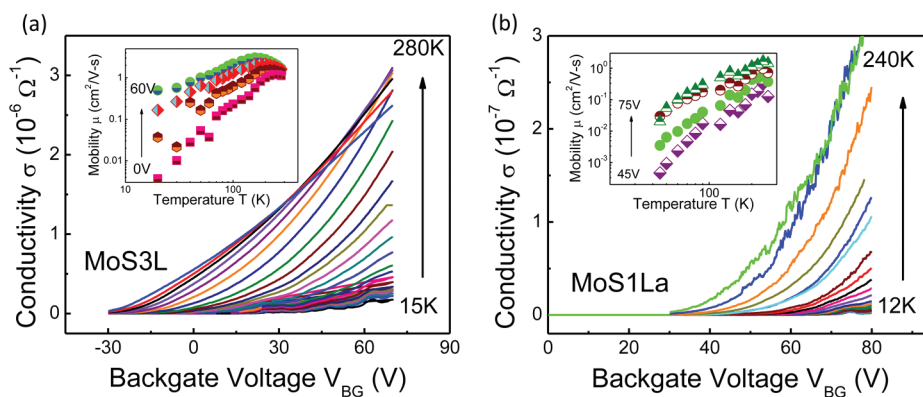
**TABLE 1. Details of the Devices:**

device	number of layers	contact material	V <sub>ON</sub> <sup>a</sup>	device area (L × W) <sup>b</sup>	mobility <sup>c</sup>
MoS1La	1	Ti/Au	32	4 × 3	1
MoS1Lb	1	Au	15	2 × 2.5	5
MoS1Lc	1	Au	-5	5 × 8	12
MoS2L	2	Au	-2	2.8 × 2.5	20
MoS3L	3	Ti/Au	-25	4 × 16	10

<sup>a</sup>In volts. <sup>b</sup>Both dimensions in μm. <sup>c</sup>In cm<sup>2</sup>/V·s near room temperature.



**Figure 1.** (a) Optical micrograph of a typical MoS<sub>2</sub> device. (b) Schematic of a single-layer MoS<sub>2</sub> field-effect transistor. (c) Raman spectrum of the bulk, trilayer, bilayer, and single-layer MoS<sub>2</sub> films on Si/SiO<sub>2</sub> substrate. (d) Thickness scan along the white line across the boundary of the single-layer MoS<sub>2</sub> in the inset. Inset: High-resolution atomic force microscopy (AFM) image of single-layer MoS<sub>2</sub> film on SiO<sub>2</sub> substrate.



**Figure 2.** Conductivity  $\sigma$  as a function of backgate voltage ( $V_{BG}$ ) at various temperatures for (a) MoS3L with  $V_{DS} = 4$  mV and (b) MoS1La with  $V_{DS} = 100$  mV. Insets show corresponding field-effect mobility  $\mu$  vs temperature  $T$  at different gate voltages,  $V_{BG}$ , extracted from the linear fit of a small region around a particular  $V_{BG}$  in  $\sigma$  vs  $V_{BG}$  graph.

In Figure 2, we show the variation of  $\sigma$  in MoS3L and MoS1La as a function of  $V_{BG}$  over a range  $\sim 10$  to 280 K. The conduction was achieved predominantly in the positive  $V_{BG}$  regime, implying that the MoS<sub>2</sub> films were intrinsically n-type.<sup>11</sup> The doping was higher in MoS3L, which required a negative  $V_{BG}$  to pinch off completely. Below 250 K, both devices were strongly insulating at all  $V_G$ . A weak metal-like behavior was observed at  $T > 250$  K and very high doping (large positive  $V_{BG}$ ) for most of the samples. Such a behavior, which was stronger in MoS3L, was found to be connected to a decrease in  $\mu$  with increasing  $T$  in this regime (inset of Figure 2a,b). This can be attributed to enhanced scattering of electrons by phonons at high temperatures.<sup>14</sup> At low  $T$ , both  $\sigma$  and  $\mu$  drop rapidly with decreasing  $T$ . Such an insulating behavior was observed in multilayer nanopatches of MoS<sub>2</sub> (thickness = 8–35 nm), as well,<sup>11</sup> with an apparent activated behavior of  $\sigma$  over a rather limited range of  $T$ . This was explained by invoking a dense distribution of trap states, which acted as an “impurity band”, although the origin or the physical location of such traps is unclear.

In contrast to the nanopatches,<sup>11</sup> the  $T$  dependences of  $\sigma$  in our monolayer and trilayer MoS<sub>2</sub> devices are not activated, but there are two distinct regimes in the  $T$  variation in  $\sigma$  (Figure 3a,b): the high  $T$  regime ( $T \gtrsim 30$  K), where  $\sigma$  increases rapidly with increasing  $T$ , and second, the low  $T$  regime ( $T \lesssim 30$  K), where the variation in  $\sigma$  weakens considerably at most  $V_{BG}$  in both devices (except for MoS1La at low  $V_{BG}$ , where the weakening of  $\sigma$  sets in at higher  $T$  (Figure 3b)). We find that, in the high  $T$  regime, the variation of  $\sigma$  with  $T$  can be modeled very well in terms of variable range hopping (VRH) transport rather than the thermally activated behavior with

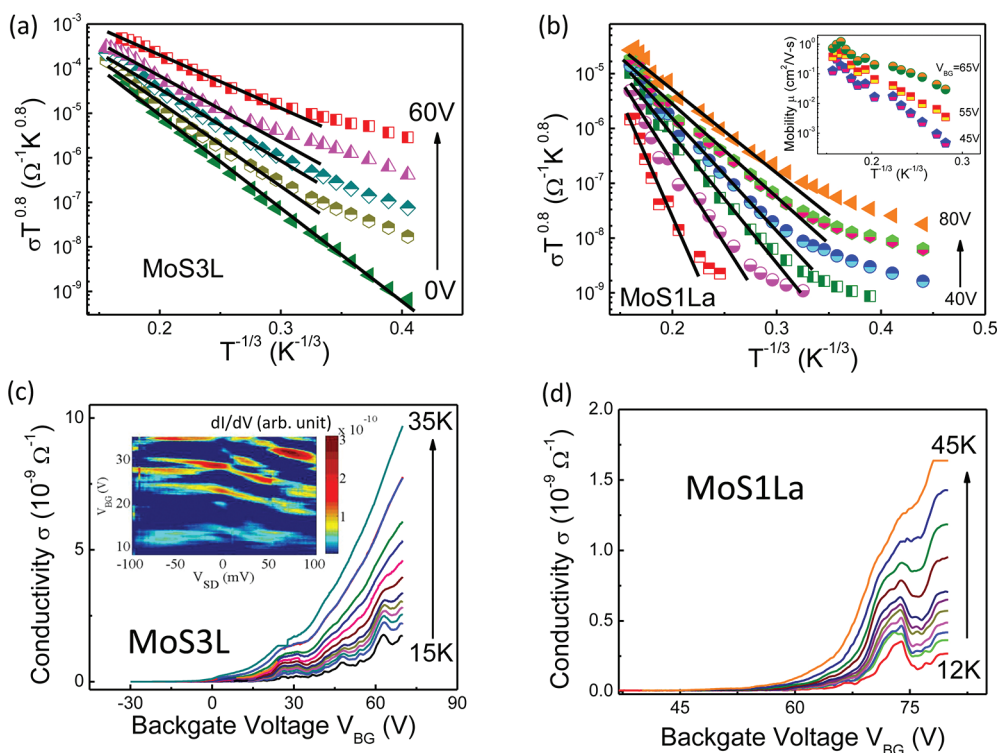
$$\sigma = \sigma_0(T) \exp[-(T_0/T)^{1/(d+1)}] \quad (1)$$

where  $T_0$  and  $d$  are correlation energy scale and dimensionality,<sup>15,16</sup> respectively, and  $\sigma_0 = AT^m$  with  $m \approx 0.8-1$ . The agreement of the data to VRH transport with  $d = 2$  indicates the electron transport in atomically thin MoS<sub>2</sub> occurs in a wide ( $\gg k_B T$ ) band of localized states,

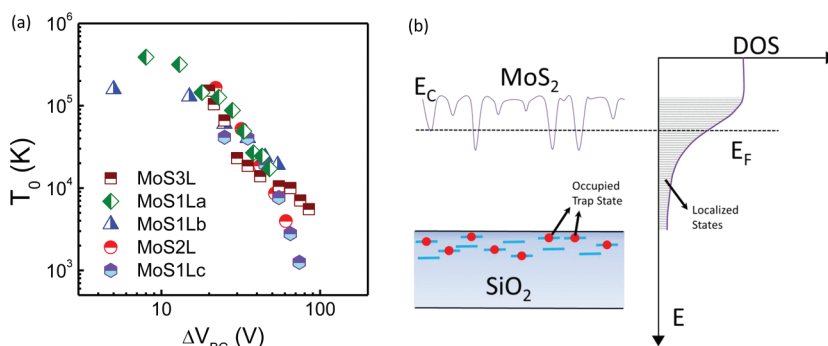
rather than direct excitation to conduction band minimum or mobility edge from the Fermi energy as suggested for the nanopatches.<sup>17</sup> The VRH transport in  $\sigma$  also results in  $\ln \mu \propto T^{-1/3}$  in two dimension.<sup>14</sup> This is confirmed in the inset of Figure 3b for the MoS1La device. The magnitude of  $T_0$  decreases rapidly as  $V_{BG}$ , or equivalently, the Fermi energy  $E_F$ , is increased. Such a behavior is common to strongly localized 2D electron systems<sup>18,19</sup> and implies that  $E_F$  is located in the conduction band tail.

To understand the weakening of  $\sigma$  at  $T \lesssim 30$  K, we have magnified this regime for both MoS3L (Figure 3c) and MoS1La (Figure 3d). In both cases, the variation of  $\sigma$  with  $V_{BG}$  becomes nonmonotonic and displays several peaks which become progressively well-defined as  $T$  is reduced. The peaks are highly reproducible and stable even at  $T \sim 30-40$  K, indicating that random fluctuations due to interference of hopping paths are unlikely to cause them. Resonant tunneling at the localized states in disordered mesoscopic semiconductors is known to result in strong reproducible peaks in  $\sigma$  at low temperatures.<sup>20,21</sup> In the presence of multiple overlapping resonances,  $T$  dependence of  $\sigma$  weakens, as observed in our data.<sup>21</sup> However, confirmation of this scenario can be obtained by shifting the resonance peaks using finite  $V_{DS}$ . For this, we focused on a small interval of  $V_{BG}$  (8–35 V) near pinch-off where a number of isolated resonances could be identified. In the ( $V_{BG}, V_{DS}$ ) plane, this leads to diamond-like pattern in differential conductivity  $dI/dV_{DS}$  (inset of Figure 3c). The occurrence of transport resonances indicates a rather inhomogeneous charge distribution in MoS<sub>2</sub> films, possibly puddles of charge near conduction threshold, through which charging events at the localized states couple to the metal contacts.

We now turn to the key issue here that concerns the origin of localized states in ultrathin MoS<sub>2</sub> films. This requires an understanding of the origin of disorder in such systems, for which we first examine the values of  $T_0$ . However, to compare  $T_0$  for different devices, we define a device-specific reference voltage  $V_{ON}$  close to the “pinch-off” voltage in  $\sigma$  versus  $V_{BG}$  curve, so that the



**Figure 3.** Temperature dependence of conductivity ( $\sigma$ ) and variable range hopping (VRH) at different backgate voltages, for (a) MoS3L ( $V_{DS} = 4$  mV) and (b) MoS1La ( $V_{DS} = 100$  mV). The solid black lines are the linear fit to the data indicating VRH behavior in 2D MoS<sub>2</sub> film. Inset in panel b shows variation of mobility ( $\mu$ ) with  $T^{-1/3}$  for the single-layer device. (c,d) Reproducible conductance oscillations with backgate voltage ( $V_{BG}$ ) at low temperature are shown for MoS3L and MoS1La, respectively. Inset of panel c shows the 2D map of the differential conductance  $dI/dV_{DS}$  of MoS3L as a function of backgate voltage ( $V_{BG}$ ) and source–drain bias voltage ( $V_{DS}$ ) obtained at 12 K.

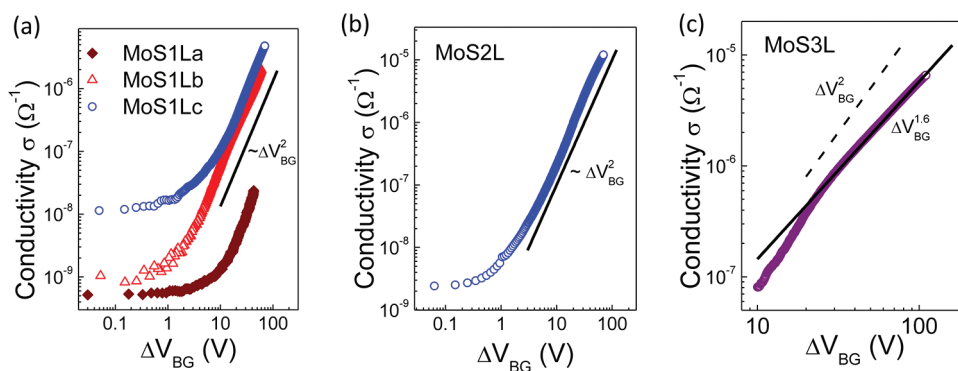


**Figure 4.** (a) Values of  $T_0$ , extracted from VRH slope for five different devices, are plotted as a function of  $\Delta V_{BG}$  ( $=V_{BG} - V_{ON}$ ). (b) Schematic representation of the fluctuations in the conduction band of MoS<sub>2</sub> thin films, arising due to the proximity of the trapped charges at the SiO<sub>2</sub>/MoS<sub>2</sub> interface (left) leading to the band tail and localized states (right).

difference  $\Delta V_{BG} = V_{BG} - V_{ON}$  is proportional to  $E_F$  or number density  $n$ . In Figure 4a, we have plotted the variation of  $T_0$  as a function of  $\Delta V_{BG}$  for all of the devices. The striking feature here is the close agreement of  $T_0$  in both absolute magnitude and energy over nearly three decades, irrespective of independent preparation of devices, varying layer number, mobility, and device geometry, etc. This indicates a very similar disorder landscape in all devices that reflects comparable magnitude and energy dependence of localization length ( $\xi$ ) and density of states  $D(E)$ . Disorder arising from defects in bulk of the MoS<sub>2</sub> films is unlikely to explain the insensitivity of  $T_0$  to

the number of layers since screening of impurities and density of defect in bulk are expected to strongly influence the density of localized states. Instead, our data indicate a common external origin of disorder, such as the trapped charges in the substrate. This is also supported by recent transport experiments,<sup>4</sup> where higher mobility of thin MoS<sub>2</sub> flakes could be achieved by changing the electrostatic environment alone. Indeed, a charge-trap-induced disorder can readily explain the observed magnitude of  $T_0$ . To illustrate this, we take  $\xi$  as the typical size of the puddles, which for MoS3L can be roughly estimated to be  $\xi \sim 8$  nm from the charging energy ( $\sim 90$  meV) at





**Figure 5.** Variation of conductivity  $\sigma$  with  $\Delta V_{\text{BG}}$  for (a) single layer at 240 K (diamond) and 300 K (triangle, circle), (b) bilayer at 300 K, and (c) trilayer at 280 K devices.

$V_{\text{BG}} \approx 23$  V (corresponding to  $\Delta V_{\text{BG}} \approx 48$  V) (see inset of Figure 3c). Taking  $D(E) \sim 4 \times 10^{12} \text{ eV}^{-1} \text{ cm}^{-2}$  as the typical surface density of charge traps at the  $\text{SiO}_2$  interface<sup>11,22</sup> and using  $T_0 = 13.8 / (k_{\text{B}} \xi^2 (E) D(E))$ , we find  $T_0 \approx 6.2 \times 10^4$  K, which is in good agreement to the observed magnitude from VRH data (Figure 4a).

This leads us to suggest that the physical origin of the localized states in ultrathin  $\text{MoS}_2$  films is connected to the random potential fluctuations from the trapped charges at the  $\text{MoS}_2$ – $\text{SiO}_2$  interface (see the schematic of Figure 4b). The screening of these trapped charges will be poor due to the large band gap of  $\text{MoS}_2$  (unlike graphene) and hence can lead to a considerably long band tail. It is likely that the interfacial traps are randomly occupied during processing of the devices, predominantly via transfer of electrons from the exfoliated pristine  $\text{MoS}_2$  layers, and subsequently form the frozen disorder landscape since most experiments are conducted at low  $T$ .

Finally, to confirm the charge-impurity-induced disorder, we have examined the nature of scattering of carriers by defects at high  $V_{\text{BG}}$  and  $T$  so that the electron wave functions are nearly extended. If the main source of disorder arises from the randomly occupied interfacial traps, one would expect the scattering to be dominated by charge impurity scattering, which for two-dimensional electron systems with parabolic energy bands will lead to<sup>23</sup>

$$\sigma \propto n^2, \text{ bare Coulomb impurity} \quad (2)$$

$$\propto n, \text{ screened Coulomb impurity} \quad (3)$$

In Figure 5a–c, we have shown the dependence of  $\sigma$  on  $\Delta V_{\text{BG}}$  ( $\propto n$ ) near room temperature for the single-layer, bilayer, and trilayer  $\text{MoS}_2$  devices, respectively. In all monolayer  $\text{MoS}_2$  devices, as well as the bilayer (MoS2L) case, we find  $\sigma \propto \Delta V_{\text{BG}}^2$ , indicating scattering from nearly un-

screened charged impurities. In the trilayer device (MoS3L), the variation in  $\sigma \sim \Delta V_{\text{BG}}^{1.6}$  is somewhat slower, indicating partial screening of the charge impurities. Assuming the electronic density of states to be approximately 1/10 of the free electron density of states at maximal doping ( $\sim 5 \times 10^{12} / \text{cm}^2$ ) used in our experiment, the Debye screening length in our devices can be estimated to be  $\sim 1.5$ – $2$  nm, which is nearly three molecular layers of  $\text{MoS}_2$ . This readily explains the bare charge impurity scattering in single-layer and bilayer  $\text{MoS}_2$ , while charge impurities are partially screened for the trilayer device.

It is then natural to draw an analogy of our findings to other heavily researched exfoliated atomic scale transistors, in particular, graphene and topological insulators. The ubiquity of surface trap states probably constitutes a generic source of disorder in such ultrathin field-effect devices. Reducing substrate traps, for example, by using crystalline substrates such as graphene on boron nitride, may improve the quality of these systems considerably. A suspended device, as in case of graphene, could also lead to extremely high mobilities.

## CONCLUSION

We have studied low-temperature electrical transport in monolayer, bilayer, and trilayer  $\text{MoS}_2$  transistors exfoliated onto  $\text{Si}/\text{SiO}_2$  substrates. We find that the electrons in all cases are localized well up to room temperature at most gate voltages and display variable range hopping transport as temperature is lowered. We showed that the disorder is likely to arise from Coulomb potential of randomly distributed charges at the  $\text{MoS}_2$ – $\text{SiO}_2$  interface, and hence highly improved devices should be possible with appropriate substrate engineering.

## METHODS

**Device Fabrication.**  $\text{MoS}_2$  flakes were exfoliated from bulk  $\text{MoS}_2$  (SPI Supplies) using scotch tape on  $\text{SiO}_2$  (300 nm)/ $n^{++}$ -Si

wafer. To keep the disorder level comparable, the wafers were thoroughly cleaned by standard RCA cleaning followed by acetone and isopropyl alcohol cleaning in ultrasonic bath. The flakes with typical linear dimensions ranging from 2 to  $20 \mu\text{m}$

were identified by an Olympus BX51 optical microscope. Raman spectra were recorded using a WITEC confocal (100 $\times$  objective) spectrometer with 600 lines/mm grating, 514.5 nm excitation at a very low laser power level (less than 1 mW) to avoid any heating effect. The AFM measurements were carried out in contact mode with a NT-MDT NTEGRA AFM instrument. Ti(10 nm)/Au(40 nm) or Au(40 nm) contacts were defined using standard electron beam lithography followed by thermal evaporation and lift off in hot acetone. No Ar/H<sub>2</sub> annealing was done in any of our devices.

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**Supporting Information Available:** Detailed room temperature and low-temperature drain–source characteristics are presented for trilayer and monolayer devices in Figure S1. The temperature-dependent data for Mott-type variable range hopping for MoS<sub>1</sub>Lc are shown in Figure S2 along with the calculation of the VRH slope. This material is available free of charge via the Internet at <http://pubs.acs.org>.

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