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# Hydrogen Insertion Effects on the Electronic Structure of Equiatomic MgNi Traced by *ab initio* Calculations.

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For equiatomic MgNi which can be hydrogenated up to the composition MgNiH<sub>1.6</sub> at an absorption/desorption temperature of 200 °C, the effects of hydrogen are approached with model structures MgNiH, MgNiH<sub>2</sub> and MgNiH<sub>3</sub>. From full geometry optimization and calculated cohesive energies obtained within DFT, the MgNiH<sub>2</sub> composition close to the experimental limit is identified as most stable. Charge density analysis shows increasingly covalent character of hydrogen: MgNiH (H<sup>-0.67</sup>) → MgNiH<sub>2</sub> (H<sup>-0.63</sup>) → MgNiH<sub>3</sub> (H<sup>-0.55</sup>). While Mg–Ni bonding prevails in MgNi and hydrogenated model phases, extra itinerant low energy lying Ni states appear when hydrogen is introduced signaling Ni–H bonding which prevails over Mg–H as evidenced from total energy calculations and chemical bonding analyses.

**Keywords:** Hydrogen, Equiatomic MgNi, Iono-covalent Character, Bader Charge, Chemical Bonding

## Introduction

In spite of the large hydrogen sorption capacity (7.6 wt.-%), the strong metal-hydrogen bonding in ionic like MgH<sub>2</sub> prevents its use, and other Mg based compounds were studied as

candidates for hydrogen storage. It was found early that introducing nickel leads to materials with reversible adsorption ability such as in  $\text{Mg}_2\text{NiH}_4$  [1].

The Mg-Ni system comprises  $\text{Mg}_2\text{Ni}$  and  $\text{MgNi}_2$ , but no report on the equiatomic composition has been published [2]. Recently, Kamata *et al.* [3] obtained equiatomic MgNi under HP/HT (5 GPa / 300 °C) conditions. The structure is tetragonal with CuTi-type and small distortion with respect to cubic CsCl. The equiatomic was readily hydrogenated into  $\text{MgNiH}_{1.6}$  and found to absorb and desorb hydrogen reversibly at 200 °C [3]. This result characterizes it as a hydride with 1.9 wt.-% H capacity, smaller than the rate of  $\text{Mg}_2\text{NiH}_4$  (~3.6 wt.-% H). However, from earlier work on amorphous nanostructured Mg-Ni a higher H content of 2.2 wt.-% in the equiatomic region was reported, *i. e.* with the composition  $\text{MgNiH}_{1.84}$ , close to  $\text{MgNiH}_2$  [4]. Yet this amount of maximum hydrogen uptake is the lowest among nickel based binary equiatomic compositions such as YNi which can absorb up to 4 H per formula unit (FU) [5].

In the context of our continuing investigations of candidate compositions for hydrogen storage, focusing on the electronic structure of hydrogenated nickel based intermetallics (*cf.* refs. [5, 6] and works cited therein), we address the bonding properties in the equiatomic MgNi and its hydrogenated compound based on computations within the well established quantum theoretical density functional (DFT) framework [7].

## Computation Methods

Two computational methods within the DFT were used in a complementary manner. The Vienna ab initio simulation package (VASP) code [8, 9] allows geometry optimization and total energy calculations. For this we use the projector augmented wave (PAW) method [9, 10], built within the generalized gradient approximation (GGA) scheme following Perdew, Burke and Ernzerhof (PBE) [11]. Also semi-core  $2p$ -Mg states were accounted for beside  $3s$  valence states in the PAW potential construction. Preliminary calculations with local density

approximation LDA [12] led to a largely underestimated volume versus the experiment. The conjugate-gradient algorithm [13] is used in this computational scheme to relax the atoms. The tetrahedron method with Blöchl corrections [10] as well as a Methfessel-Paxton [14] scheme were applied for both geometry relaxation and total energy calculations. Brillouin-zone (BZ) integrals were approximated using special k-point sampling. The optimization of the structural parameters was performed until the forces on the atoms were less than 0.02 eV/Å and all stress components less than 0.003 eV/Å<sup>3</sup>. The scalar relativistic calculations were converged at an energy cut-off of 400 eV for the plane-wave basis set with respect to the k-point integration with a starting mesh of  $4 \times 4 \times 4$  up to  $8 \times 8 \times 8$  for best convergence and relaxation to zero strains.

Then all-electron calculations with GGA were carried out for a full description of the electronic structure and the properties of chemical bonding, using full potential scalar-relativistic augmented spherical wave (ASW) method [15, 16]. In the minimal ASW basis set, we chose the outermost shells to represent the valence states and the matrix elements were constructed using partial waves up to  $l_{\max} + 1 = 3$  for Mg and Ni, and  $l_{\max} + 1 = 1$  for H. Self-consistency was achieved when charge transfers and energy changes between two successive cycles were below  $10^{-8}$  and  $10^{-6}$  eV, respectively. BZ integrations were performed using the linear tetrahedron method within the irreducible wedge. In order to optimize the basis set, additional augmented spherical waves were placed at carefully selected interstitial sites (IS). Besides the site projected density of states, we discuss qualitatively the pair interactions based on the overlap population analysis with the crystal orbital overlap population (COOP) [17]. In the plots, positive, negative, and zero COOP indicate bonding, anti-bonding, and non-bonding interactions, respectively.

## Geometry Optimization, Cohesive Energies and Charge Transfers

MgNi is found to crystallize in the tetragonal CuTi type with space group  $P4/mmm$  and  $a = 2.997$ ,  $c = 3.166$  Å and  $V = 28.44$  Å<sup>3</sup> per FU which can be considered as a tetragonally distorted CsCl cubic structure [3]. Upon hydrogenation the structure becomes cubic,  $Pm\bar{3}m$  with  $a = 3.215$  Å and  $V = 33.23$  Å<sup>3</sup> per FU and a volume increase of  $\Delta V/V \sim 17$  %.

Inserting hydrogen in the cubic structure leads to a random occupation of the threefold  $3c$  positions within  $Pm\bar{3}m$ . However, this is difficult to model in computational situations in which one can assume the occupation of only two out of the three ( $3c$ ) positions in order to approach the experimental stoichiometry MgNiH<sub>1.6</sub>. Due to symmetry constraints the ( $3c$ ) positions split into ( $1c$ )  $\frac{1}{2}$   $\frac{1}{2}$   $0$  (model structure MgNiH with H2 in Table 1 and Fig. 1) and ( $2e$ )  $0$   $\frac{1}{2}$   $\frac{1}{2}$ ;  $\frac{1}{2}$   $0$   $\frac{1}{2}$  (MgNiH<sub>2</sub> with H1 in Table 1 and Fig. 1). The structure is then described within  $P4/mmm$  (subgroup of  $Pm\bar{3}m$ ). On the opposite, the full occupancy of the  $3c$  sites such as in the MgNiH<sub>3</sub> model structure keeps the cubic symmetry. In order to appreciate the distortion effects and to follow the progressive hydrogen introduction, the model compositions MgNiH, MgNiH<sub>2</sub> and MgNiH<sub>3</sub> besides MgNi have been examined. In the intermetallic CsCl-related structure the larger atom, *i. e.* Mg ( $r = 1.60$  Å), is expected to be found at the origin ( $0\ 0\ 0$ ), and the smaller one, *i. e.* Ni ( $r = 1.24$  Å) at body center ( $\frac{1}{2}$   $\frac{1}{2}$   $\frac{1}{2}$ ) position. The two positions are equivalent as long as no neighbors are introduced, because the CsCl structure is composed of two interpenetrating simple cubic substructures. In fact the calculations with *straight* and *inverted* structures in both cubic and tetragonal MgNi led to identical volumes and energies. The results of the geometry optimization are given in Table 1, 2<sup>nd</sup> column; they show that the calculated volume of  $28.32$  Å<sup>3</sup> per FU is in the range of the experimental value ( $V_{\text{exp.}} = 28.44$  Å<sup>3</sup> per FU). Close total energy magnitudes between the

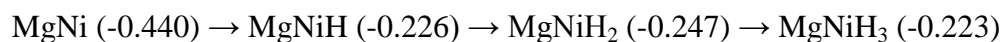
tetragonal and cubic structures are found, with the former identified as the ground state structure due to slightly lower energy, in agreement with experiment.

The introduction of hydrogen is modeled with the structures sketched in Fig. 1. They are characterized by Ni–H distances at  $\sim a/2$  shorter than Mg–H at  $\sim a\sqrt{2}/2$  and Mg–Ni at  $\sim a\sqrt{3}/2$ , considering a cube with an  $a$  edge for simplicity. Also from the positions of the hydrogen in the model MgNiH and MgNiH<sub>2</sub> the tetragonality ratios are expected as:  $c/a > 1$  (elongation) and  $c/a < 1$  (flattening), respectively. The results shown in Table 1 confirm the trends for the distances ( $d_{\text{Mg-H}} > d_{\text{Ni-H}}$ ) and the tetragonality  $c/a$  ratios close to 1, *i. e.* to a cubic structure. The volume increases following the series with additional inserted hydrogen atoms.  $V_{\text{calc.}}(\text{MgNiH}_2) = 34.4 \text{ \AA}^3$  is slightly larger than the experimental value of  $33.23 \text{ \AA}^3$  due to 2 H instead of 1.6, but the agreement allows to assume a correct modeling of the experiment. In spite of starting with the assumption tetragonal structure with H1 and H2 at different hydrogen sites in model MgNiH<sub>3</sub>, the calculations result in the cubic structure for the ground state which resembles the perovskite structure.

Nevertheless, for the sake of completeness, we further hypothesized the interchange of Mg and Ni positions in hydrogenated MgNi. This resulted in a substantial rise (destabilization) of the total energies, shown with ‘INV’ labels in Table 1, as a function of the amount of introduced hydrogen. The energy differences per atom in eV/FU units are then:  $\Delta E(\text{MgNiH}) = 0.13$ ,  $\Delta E(\text{MgNiH}_2) = 0.58$  and  $\Delta E(\text{MgNiH}_3) = 0.79$ , *i. e.* the higher the hydrogen content, the larger the destabilization. This confirms the stable configuration of the Mg (0 0 0) and Ni ( $\frac{1}{2} \frac{1}{2} \frac{1}{2}$ ) positions with shorter Ni–H *versus* Mg–H distances, and the trend of hydrogen to bind with nickel preferentially.

The cohesive energies are obtained from energy differences between the total energy of the compound and those of the atomic constituents Mg and Ni and dihydrogen which have

the following energies from PAW-GGA calculations (in eV units per atom): Mg (-1.543), Ni (-5.539) and H<sub>2</sub> (-6.577). The resulting cohesive energies in eV/atom are given in Table 1:



This trend can be interpreted as a destabilization of the intermetallic upon the introduction of hydrogen, but the least unstable composition is the one with 2H. This resembles the experimental data where the observed MgNiH<sub>1.6</sub> composition [3] is the closest to our model MgNiH<sub>2</sub> which has the largest cohesive energy among the three model structures.

Focusing on MgNiH<sub>2</sub> the other twofold insertion sites *2f* and *2g* were examined for the sake of completeness. Full geometry optimization led respectively to total electronic energies: -12.22 eV and -11.62 eV (with calculated  $z = 0.605$ ), *i. e.* to less stable structures than MgNiH<sub>2</sub> with H at (*2e*) positions (Table 1).

The analysis of the charge density issued from the self consistent calculations can be done using the AIM (atoms in molecules theory) approach [18] developed by Bader who devised an intuitive way of splitting molecules into atoms as based purely on the electronic charge density. Typically in chemical compounds, the charge density reaches a minimum between atoms and this is a natural region to separate them from each other. Such an analysis can be useful when trends between similar compounds are examined; it does not constitute a tool for evaluating absolute ionizations. Bader's analysis is done using a fast algorithm operating on a charge density grid. The program [19] yields charge densities obtained from high precision VASP calculations and generates the total charge associated with each atom. The results of computed charge changes ( $\Delta Q$ ) are such that they lead to neutrality when the respective multiplicities are accounted for; the values are given for each atomic species in Table 1.

Due to the large electronegativity difference between Mg ( $\chi = 1.31$ ) and Ni ( $\chi = 1.91$ ), a charge transfer is expected from Mg to Ni as observed for MgNi with a charge transfer of  $\pm 1.61$ . In view of such large charge transfer featuring a partially ionic character, one should rather assume that *s*-like charges departing from Mg are close to free electron as in normal metals and delocalized over the whole MgNi crystal. The trends for the hydrides are such that in MgNiH the charge transfer is from Ni to H resulting in  $H^{-0.67}$ . This iono-covalent (in between -1, ionic, and  $\sim < 0$ , covalent) character of hydrogen is shifted to more covalent in MgNiH<sub>2</sub> with  $H^{-0.63}$  and then to MgNiH<sub>3</sub> with  $H^{-0.55}$ . While in all three models the charge transfer is between Ni and H, the charge on Mg becomes slightly more ionic, changing from +1.61 to +1.66 and +1.73 along the series. At this point it becomes interesting to compare the relative charge results for cubic Mg<sub>2</sub>NiH<sub>4</sub> on the one hand and rutile-type MgH<sub>2</sub> on the other hand calculated with the same conditions. In MgH<sub>2</sub> the obtained charges of  $\Delta Q$  (Mg) = +1.64;  $\Delta Q$  (H) = -0.82 show a much more ionic character, close to -1 for H. By contrast, Mg<sub>2</sub>NiH<sub>4</sub> shows results closer to the presently studied model compounds:  $\Delta Q$  (Mg) = +1.63;  $\Delta Q$  (Ni) = -0.71 and  $\Delta Q$  (H) = -0.64. The charge carried by hydrogen is close to the one calculated for MgNiH<sub>2</sub>. The covalent character brought into the electronic structure is assigned mainly to nickel owing to its binding with hydrogen, as illustrated below.

### **Electronic Density of States and Chemical Bonding Properties**

Starting from the calculated crystal structure data in Table 1, the electronic density of states and the chemical bonding were analyzed for the four studied compounds. At self consistent convergence, charge transfers follow the above discussed trends with small residues  $\sim 0.15$  electron into the interstitial spheres IS.

Fig. 2 shows in four panels the site projected density of states (PDOS) for tetragonal MgNi and the three hydrogenated ternaries. Along the *x* axis the energy is with respect to the



Fermi level  $E_F$ . As expected from the electronic configuration with Mg ( $3s^2$ ) as a main group metal and Ni ( $4s^23d^8$ ) as a transition metal, the valence band (VB) is dominated by Ni  $3d$  states centered below  $E_F$  due to their large filling, Ni being at the end of the first transition metal period (Fig. 2a). Mg  $s$  states are distributed over the valence band with low intensity; this is also observed for hydrogen  $s$  states. The similar shapes of the respective PDOS signals a chemical bonding between the constituents. The character of the Ni PDOS changes along the four panels, becoming sharper -more localized- and showing extra structures in the hydrogenated compounds at the lower part of the VB due to the quantum mixing with hydrogen states. This is illustrated in panels b) – d) of Fig. 2 with the same shape of the Ni and H PDOS in the energy window  $\{-12, -6 \text{ eV}\}$  where itinerant states of Ni are found and translates the chemical interaction between Ni and H as discussed below. The compounds are all metallic with no gap between the valence band (VB) and the conduction band (CB) and the Fermi level is crossing a low intensity DOS mainly from Ni with smaller contributions from Mg and H.

Fig. 3 shows the characteristics of chemical bonding with one atom of each kind for the sake of comparison. For MgNi in panel a), Mg–Ni bonding is dominant over Mg–Mg and Ni–Ni bonding. Antibonding Mg–Ni COOP's are observed in the neighborhood of  $E_F$  and above. Then the structure is stabilized by Mg–Ni interactions which become anti-bonding in the neighborhood of  $E_F$  due to the already large filling of Ni  $d$  states. Upon hydrogen insertion -panels b) – d)- there are proportionally more electrons introduced and  $E_F$  is pushed further up in energy leading to populated antibonding states. This likely arises from the involvement of more Ni electrons in the bonding with hydrogen, so that fewer electrons are available for Mg–Ni bonding; also the Mg–Ni distance increases (Table 1) leading to less overlap between the valence states of Mg and Ni. The consequence is the progressive destabilization of the metal

substructure. Ni–H is the second bonding intensity interaction with much larger intensity than Mg–H which is vanishingly small because of the larger Mg–H distance and because Mg–H bonds are non-directional in as far as only *s*-like orbitals are involved.

## Conclusion

For equiatomic MgNi, the effects of hydrogen uptake on the electronic structure and the ionic-covalent character of bonding have been approached using model structures. Hydrogen insertion leads to a destabilization of the metal substructure through its binding with nickel. In agreement with experiments, the most stabilized hydrogenated model structure is MgNiH<sub>2</sub>, close to the experimental value (MgNiH<sub>1.6</sub>) in which hydrogen is found to carry a charge of H<sup>-0.65</sup> with substantial covalent character. This is concomitant with a medium absorption/desorption temperature of 200 °C whereas in ionic hydrides like MgH<sub>2</sub> the corresponding temperature is ~350 °C.

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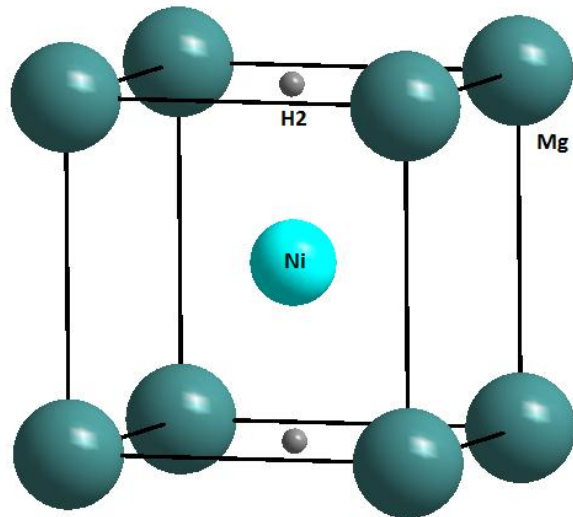
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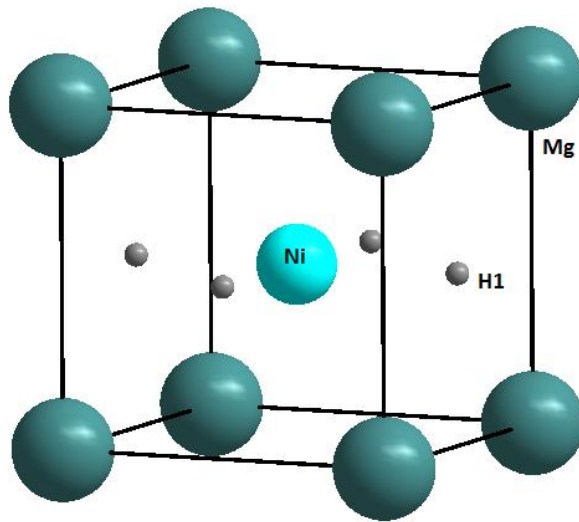
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Table 1. Calculation results for geometry optimizations and energy quantities for the studied compounds.

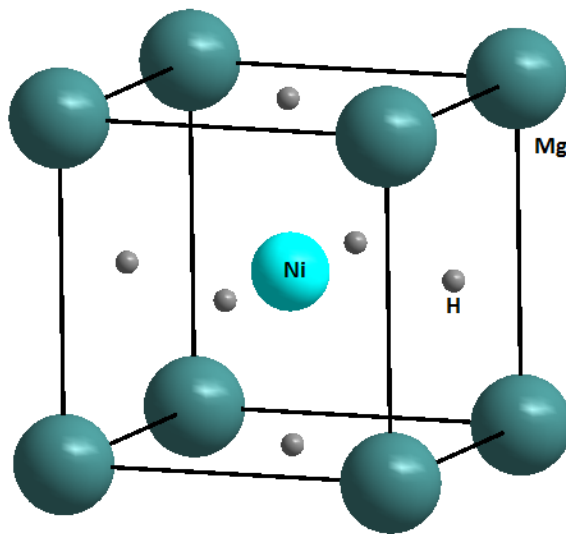
Symmetry		MgNi	MgNiH	MgNiH <sub>2</sub>	MgNiH <sub>3</sub>
<i>Pm</i> $\bar{3}$ <i>m</i> (cubic)	$a$ , Å	3.05	–	–	3.32
	$V$ , Å <sup>3</sup>	28.32 (exp. 28.44)			37.01
	$d_{\text{Mg-Ni}}$ , Å	2.64	–	–	2.88
	$d_{\text{Ni-H1/H2}}$ , Å				1.66
	$d_{\text{Mg-H1/H2}}$ , Å	-			2.34
	Total energy per FU (eV)	–7.45	–	–	–18.07 INV (-14.65)
	Cohesive energy per atom (eV)	–0.435	–	–	–0.223
<i>P4</i> / <i>mmm</i> (tetragonal)	$a$ , Å	2.987	3.09	3.26	–
	$c/a$	1.047	1.055	0.994	
	$V$ , Å <sup>3</sup>	28.30 (exp. 28.44)	31.08	34.4 (exp. 33.23)	
	$d_{\text{Mg-Ni}}$ , Å	2.63	2.72	2.82	–
	$d_{\text{Ni-H1/H2}}$ , Å		1.63	1.63	
	$d_{\text{Mg-H1/H2}}$ , Å	-	2.18	2.30	
	Total energy per FU (eV)	–7.46	–11.09 INV (-10.71)	–14.65 INV (-12.31)	–
Cohesive energy per atom (eV)	–0.437	–0.226	–0.247	–	
Charge trends (in electrons)	$\Delta Q(\text{Mg})$	+1.61	+1.61	+1.66	+1.70
	$\Delta Q(\text{Ni})$	–1.61	–0.93	–0.41	–0.06
	$\Delta Q(\text{H1}) \times 2$	–	–	–0.63	–0.55
	$\Delta Q(\text{H2}) \times 1$	–	–0.67	-	–0.54



a)



b)



c)

Fig. 1. MgNiH<sub>x</sub>: the three model structures used in the calculations.  
 a) MgNiH, b) MgNiH<sub>2</sub>, c) MgNiH<sub>3</sub>.  
 The *c* tetragonal axis is along the paper sheet.

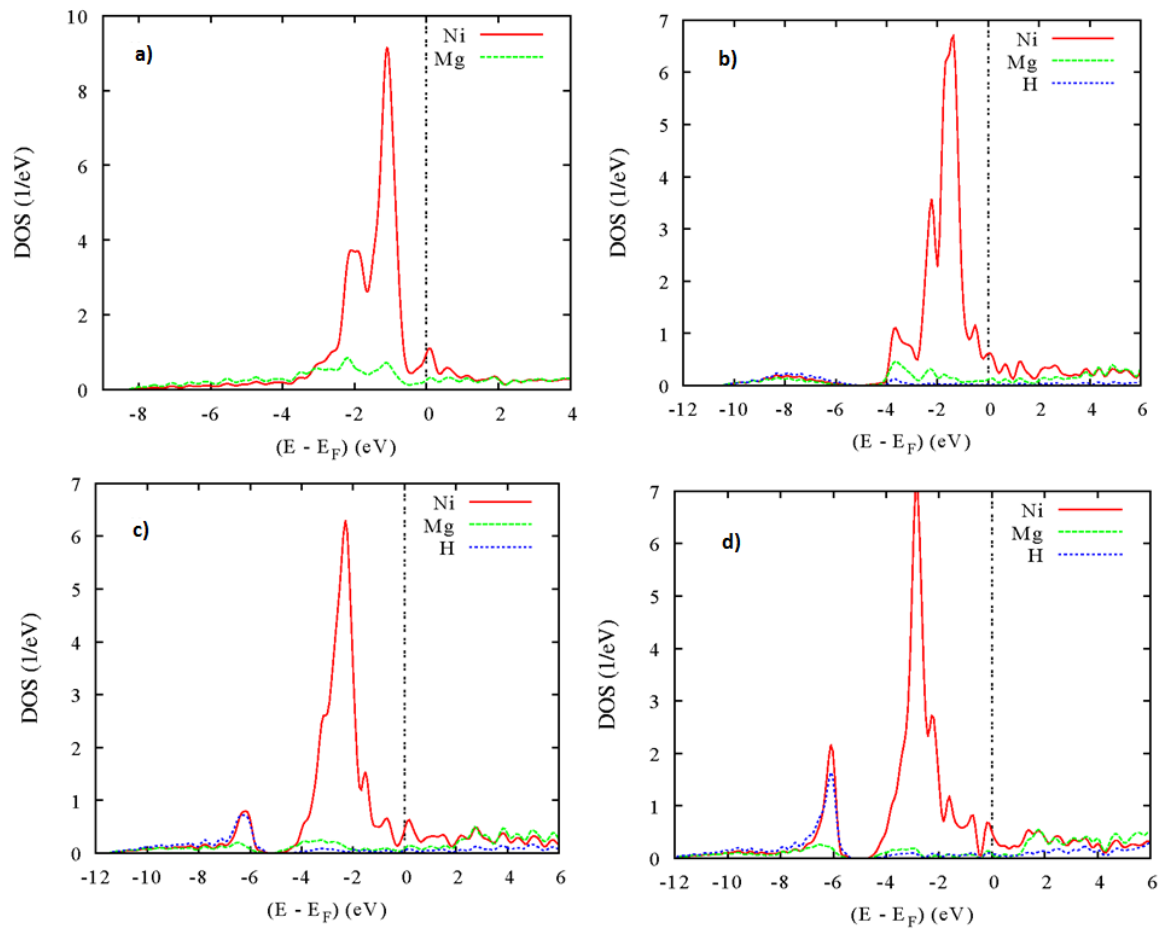


Fig. 2. (color) Site projected density of states: a) MgNi, b) MgNiH, c) MgNiH<sub>2</sub> and d) MgNiH<sub>3</sub>.

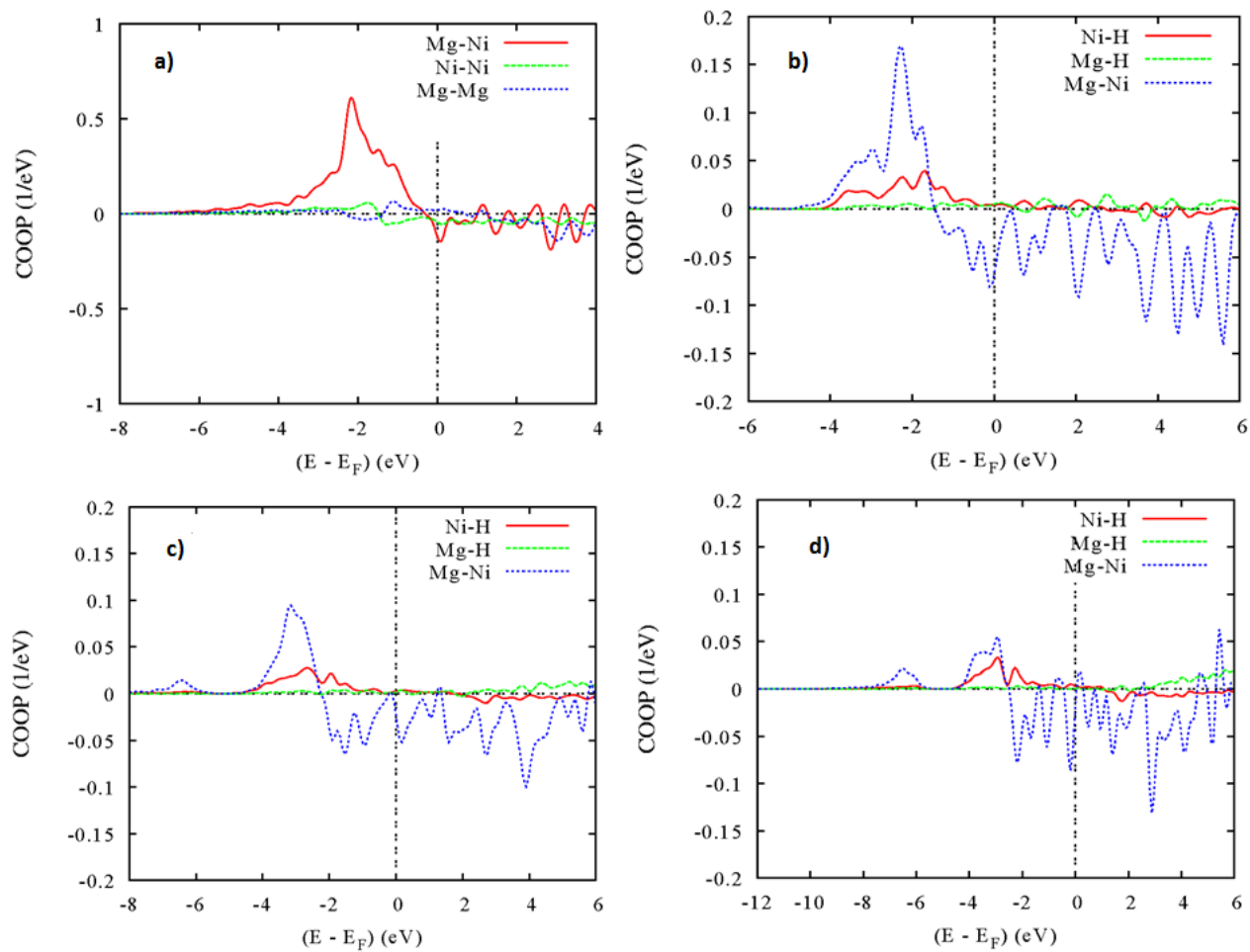


Fig. 3. (color) Chemical bonding for pair interactions (atom-to-atom) of a) MgNi, b) MgNiH, c) MgNiH<sub>2</sub> and d) MgNiH<sub>3</sub>.