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Determination of aperture structure and fluid flow in a rock fracture by high-resolution numerical modeling on the basis of a flow-through experiment under confining pressure

Noriaki Watanabe, Nobuo Hirano, and Noriyoshi Tsuchiya

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A numerical model incorporating experimentally determined fracture surface geometries and fracture permeability is proposed for characterizing aperture structures and fluid flow through rock fractures under confining pressures. The model was applied to artificially created granite tensile fractures with varying shear displacements (0–10 mm) and confining pressures (10–100 MPa). The findings of the study were consistent with those obtained previously, which characterized experimentally determined contact areas and changes in shear stress during the shear process. While the confining pressures considered herein are higher than those of previous studies, experimentally obtained fracture permeability is important for understanding subsurface flow, specifically the fluid flow characteristics in aperture structures under different confining pressures.

Development of preferential flow paths is observed in all aperture structures, suggesting that the concept of channeling flow is applicable even under high confining pressures, as well as the existence of 3-D preferential flow paths within the subsurface fracture network.


1. Introduction

In the Earth’s crust, rock fractures are thought to play an important role in both fluid flow and material/heat transport within these fluids. Consequently, fracture permeability is expected to be greater than matrix permeability in fractured rock. In fact, the results of flow-through experiments in various types of granite fractures indicated that fracture permeability was usually considerably greater than matrix permeability, even under the relatively high confining pressures (normal stresses) of 10–100 MPa, and correspondingly, at relatively great depths of 400–4000 m [Watanabe et al., 2006b, 2006c]. The experimental observations suggest that interactions among flow and transport phenomena between shallow- and deep-seated fracture networks are therefore likely within the Earth’s crust, unless the networks are completely isolated from each other. Understanding of fluid flow through rock fractures under a wide range of confining pressures, exceeding the range of previous practical interest for water resources issues, has become a fundamental issue of considerable importance, not only for engineering activities targeting depths of several-thousand meters (e.g., developments of oil/gas fractured reservoirs), but also for relatively shallow activities targeting several hundreds of meters (e.g., geological disposal of high-level radioactive waste). For instance, the Japanese Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) has constructed an underground laboratory (tunnels) in the Mizunami granite body in Gifu, Japan, for regional groundwater flow survey at depths exceeding 1000 m (at confining pressures of more than 25 MPa) in order to examine geological disposal of high-level radioactive wastes. Lab-scale studies of fluid flow in rock fractures for a wide range of confining pressures are needed to interpret field observations and to develop a realistic model of a 3-D subsurface flow system.

Rock fractures are characterized as having a heterogeneous aperture structure and are characterized as having a three-dimensional distribution of local apertures formed by rough surfaces that, depending on the confining pressure, are in partial contact with each other with, presumably, preferential flow paths (i.e., the occurrence of channeling flow) in the aperture structure [Brown, 1987; Tsang and Tsang, 1989; Durham, 1997; Brown et al., 1998; Bruderer-Weng et al., 2004]. In general, fracture permeability not only changes with confining pressure, but also with shear displacement [Raven and Gale, 1985; Esaki et al., 1999; Chen et al., 2000; Gutierrez et al., 2000; Plouraboué et al., 2000; Olsson and Barton, 2001]. The changes indicate that the aperture structures of rock fractures and the resulting fluid flow are affected by both confining pressure and shear displacement. It is therefore important to investigate the heterogeneous nature of the aperture structures of rock fractures and the resulting fluid flow in these fractures as a function of geological conditions such as shear displacement and confining pressure. In previous studies, fluid flows through numerically generated aperture structures have been studied extensively, and channeling flows have been observed [Unger and Mase, 1993; Pyrak-Nolte and
containing single tensile fractures (100 mm × 150 mm) were used together with measurements of fracture surface geometries for the flow-through experiments to measure fracture permeability under various confining pressures. A 200 mm cubic granite block was fractured using a wedge to create a tensile fracture, which was then given a prescribed shear displacement. The block, which was fixed with concrete, was cored and cut to the prescribed dimensions. To investigate the effects of shear displacement on the aperture structures of a rock fracture and the resulting fluid flow, samples were prepared that contained either single tensile fractures with shear displacements of 1, 3, 5, and 10 mm (samples NC05, NC07, NC06, and NC09) or no shear displacement (0 mm; samples NC01, NC02, and NC03).

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2. Flow-Through Experiment

Seven flow-through experiments were performed under confining pressures of 10–100 MPa using a Rubber-Confining Pressure Vessel (R-CPV) experimental system developed by Hirano et al. [2005] (Figure 1). The R-CPV with the sample was placed in a pressing machine (maximum load: 25,000 kg). By controlling the load of the pressing machine, a prescribed confining pressure could be applied to the fracture of the sample. Distilled water (room temperature) was pumped into the R-CPV, and the differential pressure between the inlet and outlet sides of the fracture was measured using a differential pressure gauge. In addition, the flow rate was measured using an electronic balance. Since the relationships between the flow rate and the differential pressure were linear in the experiments, the hydraulic aperture, and consequently, the fracture permeability, could also be calculated for individual fractures at specific confining pressures on the basis of the cubic law assumption [Brown, 1987; Chen et al., 2000; Matsuki et al., 2006].
permeability was several orders of magnitude greater than that observed for a shear displacement of 0 mm, increasing with an increase in shear displacement (Figure 2b). While the fracture permeability for a shear displacement of 1 mm decreased with an increase in confining pressure, the fracture permeability for shear displacements exceeding 3 mm only decreased under relatively low pressures (approximately 10–30 MPa).

3. Numerical Modeling on the Basis of a Flow-Through Experiment

3.1. Outline

[10] In the present study, a numerical model incorporating experimentally measured fracture surface geometries and fracture permeability was proposed for determining aperture structure and resulting fluid flow for rock fractures under prescribed confining pressures. The model of the aperture structure was constructed using digital data of fracture surface geometries with shear displacement. The local cubic law (LCL)-based flow-through simulation was performed using the model under the same boundary conditions as those observed in a flow-through experiment. On the basis of the flow-through simulation, the permeability of the model was evaluated using the same equations as those employed for the flow-through experiment, and the obtained permeability was compared with the experimentally obtained fracture permeability. By comparing the numerically and experimentally derived permeabilities using a modification of the model simulating the normal displacement of a rock fracture, the aperture structures and the resulting fluid flow were determined for prescribed confining pressures.

[11] The accuracy of the results obtained using the proposed technique depends on the methods used to measure the fracture surface geometries used for constructing the aperture structure and flow-though simulation. The method selected for the measurement of fracture surface geometries was capable of producing a disturbed aperture structure, because two fracture surface geometries were measured separately. Even without shear displacement, the permeability of the fractures was considerably higher than that of the rock matrix under high confining pressures, indicating the existence of a disturbance. The disturbance could have been due to the removal of small rock particles generated during fracture. However, given the objectives of the present study, no other method could be applied. Therefore careful execution of this method is necessary in order to prevent the development of a significantly disturbed aperture structure. In addition, the methods employed to model the aperture structure and simulate flow-through in the present study were also selected based on
was then modified to simulate the normal displacement (close together) of a rock fracture to match the permeability of a model with experimentally determined fracture permeability. In the modification, all local apertures were uniformly reduced. Although the deformation of actual fracture surfaces depends entirely on stress conditions, the effect of deformation was neglected, except when the asperities of the fracture surfaces came into contact, because the deformation was expected to occur predominantly at these points. In addition, by vanishing overlapped asperities, the model simulated both elastic and permanent deformations of the contacting asperities and precluded the formation of local apertures [Brown, 1987; Power and Durham, 1997; van Genabeek and Rothman, 1999; Matsuki et al., 2006; Watanabe et al., 2005, 2006a].

3.3. Flow-Through Simulation

[14] Since solving the Navier-Stokes equation that governs the 3-D flow of an incompressible and viscous fluid (water) through an aperture structure of a rock fracture is beyond the capacity of most computers, flow was approximated using a 2-D (x-y) field and by incorporating mean flow velocities across the local apertures and ignoring the tortuosity of flow across the local apertures:

\[ \frac{\partial (e u)}{\partial x} + \frac{\partial (e v)}{\partial y} = 0, \]

where \( e \) is a local aperture, and \( u \) and \( v \) are the mean velocities in the \( x \)- and \( y \)-directions, respectively. In addition, the flow at a local point was approximated by flow through parallel plates with an aperture of \( e \):

\[ u = -\frac{e^3}{12\mu} \frac{\partial P}{\partial x}, \]

\[ v = -\frac{e^3}{12\mu} \frac{\partial P}{\partial y}. \]

where \( \mu \) and \( P \) are the viscosity and the pressure of the fluid, respectively. By substituting equations (2) and (3) into equation (1), the following equation (usually called the Reynolds equation) is obtained for laminar flow [Brown, 1987; Mourzenko et al., 1995; Yeo et al., 1998; Ge, 1997; Oron and Berkowitz, 1998; Lespinasse and Sausse, 2000; Pyrak-Nolte and Morris, 2000; Sausse, 2002; Brush and Thomson, 2003; Konzuk and Kueper, 2004; Watanabe et al., 2005, 2006a):

\[ \frac{\partial}{\partial x} \left( \frac{e^3}{12\mu} \frac{\partial P}{\partial x} \right) + \frac{\partial}{\partial y} \left( \frac{e^3}{12\mu} \frac{\partial P}{\partial y} \right) = 0. \]

[15] Since \( \mu \) is assumed to be constant, this parameter can be removed from equation (4). By solving equation (4) under given boundary conditions using the finite difference method, the 2-D velocity field could be determined by substituting the solution for pressure into the finite difference expressions of equations (2) and (3). In addition, a 2-D volumetric flow field could be determined using these velocities and local apertures. Although it has been reported that, when compared with the Navier-Stokes equation (or even with the Stokes equation), equation (4) may produce different velocities [Mourzenko et al., 1995; Ge, 1997; Oron...
where $W$ is the length of the boundary perpendicular to the macroscopic flow. The hydraulic aperture ($e_h$) was calculated using the following equation [Brown, 1987; Chen et al., 2000; Matsuki et al., 2006]:

$$e_h = \left( \frac{12\mu Q}{W(\Delta P/L)} \right)^{1/6},$$

where $L$ is the length of the boundary parallel to the macroscopic flow and $\Delta P/L$ is the macroscopic pressure gradient. In addition, permeability ($k$) was calculated using the following equation:

$$k = \frac{e_h^2}{12}.$$

### 4. Results

[18] The proposed technique was applied to artificially created granite tensile fractures (100 mm × 150 mm) with shear displacements of 0, 1, 3, 5, and 10 mm under confining pressures of 10–100 MPa. For each shear displacement, aperture structures and the resulting water flow were determined for confining pressures of 10, 60, and 100 MPa using the values for fracture permeability that were determined for the fractures in the flow-through experiments (Figure 2), and from the fracture surface geometries (250 μm square grid system) that were measured for the fractures before the experiments.

[19] For a shear displacement of 0 mm, the average fracture permeability for the three fractures (samples NC01, NC02, and NC03) and the fracture surface geometries of the fracture of sample NC01 were used. For shear displacements of 1, 5, and 10 mm, the fracture permeability and fracture surface geometries of the fractures with different shear displacements (samples NC05, NC06, and NC09, respectively) were used. Finally, for a shear displacement of 3 mm, the fracture permeability of the fracture with the shear displacement (sample NC07) was used. However, due to the lack of fracture data for sample NC07, fracture surface geometries were prepared numerically by applying a shear displacement of 3 mm to the fracture surface geometries of the fracture without shear displacement (sample NC02).

[20] Images of determined aperture structures, histograms, and semivariograms (in the directions parallel and perpendicular to shear displacement) of local apertures are shown in Figures 4, 5, and 6, respectively. In addition, the statistics of the aperture structures are presented in Table 1 together with the selected fracture permeabilities and the corresponding hydraulic apertures. The images shown in the figures are only those for shear displacements of 0, 1, and 5 mm, as the images for shear displacements of 3 and 10 mm were visually similar to that obtained for 5 mm. Similarly, only samples subjected to a confining pressure 10 MPa are shown, as changes in aperture structure with increasing confining pressure simply resulted in a uniform decrease of all local apertures. Since the histograms, except for minimum (1 μm) local apertures, were highly skewed and had long tails, the lognormal distribution, rather than the Gaussian distribution, was better suited for describing the
Figure 4. Numerically determined aperture structures at 10 MPa confining pressure for artificially created granite tensile fractures (a) without shear displacement, (b) with a shear displacement of 1 mm, and (c) with a shear displacement of 5 mm, together with water flow in aperture structures at confining pressures of 10, 60, and 100 MPa for the fractures. NF (normalization factor) shown below each water flow map is the maximum flow rate when a hydraulic pressure difference is 1 MPa.
mean apertures became monotonically greater with increased shear displacement. Conversely, nonmonotonic changes were observed for the contact areas and spatial correlation lengths. The contact areas decreased significantly only between shear displacements of 0 and 1 mm (Figure 7). The spatial correlation lengths parallel to shear displacement increased significantly between shear displacements of 0 and 1 mm and between shear displacements of 5 and 10 mm, while those that were perpendicular to shear displacement only increased significantly between shear

Figure 5. Histograms of local apertures for numerically determined aperture structures at a confining pressure of 10 MPa for artificially created granite tensile fractures (a) without shear displacement, (b) with a shear displacement of 1 mm, and (c) with a shear displacement of 5 mm.

distributions of local apertures. Therefore the distributions of local apertures are characterized by geometric mean apertures and geometric standard deviations calculated without the minimum local apertures, together with contact areas calculated as percentages of the minimum local apertures. The spatial correlation lengths in the directions parallel and perpendicular to the shear displacements were determined by fitting the semivariograms to the exponential model.

[21] Regarding the aperture structures for a confining pressure of 10 MPa, the histograms became wider and

Figure 6. The semivariograms in the directions parallel and perpendicular to the shear displacement of local apertures for numerically determined aperture structures at a confining pressure of 10 MPa for artificially created granite tensile fractures (a) without shear displacement, (b) with a shear displacement of 1 mm, and (c) with a shear displacement of 5 mm.
The nonmonotonic changes in the contact area remained the same. On the other hand, the correlation lengths increased when the shear displacement was 1 mm. Despite the occurrence of the same changes in the area of preferential flow paths with increasing confining pressure, the changes differed in response to differences in shear displacement. For example, the area of preferential flow paths for a shear displacement of 0 mm increased between confining pressures of 10 and 60 MPa, whereas the area of preferential flow paths decreased when the shear displacement was 1 mm. Despite different changes in the area of preferential flow paths with increasing confining pressure, the ratio of hydraulic aperture to mean aperture at all shear displacements decreased.

### 5. Discussion and Conclusions

The objectives of the present study were to propose a practical numerical technique for investigating aperture...
structures and the resulting fluid flow through rock fractures under various confining pressures by incorporating the results of a flow-through experiment. In doing so, we sought to obtain fundamental insights into the heterogeneous nature of aperture and flow structures of rock fractures with respect to various geological conditions, including relatively high confining pressures of 10–100 MPa. The novelty of the proposed technique lies in the incorporation of experimental measurements of fracture permeability into a numerical model, which is itself based on the most practical numerical methods (individual measurement of fracture surfaces, a 2-D flow-through simulation based on the LCL, and a simulation of normal displacement ignoring deformation of fracture surfaces, except for contacting asperities). However, the numerical modeling methods employed in the present study were relatively rudimentary when compared with those reported in recently published studies, as described in section 3. Here, the relevance of the obtained results was evaluated using physical data from other rock fractures before fluid flow in the aperture structures of rock fractures under the confining pressures was discussed.

Since the primary goal of the proposed technique was to model the permeability of an aperture structure with an experimentally determined fracture permeability under normal displacement and flow-through conditions, one method for evaluating the relevance of the obtained results could be to assess the relevance of contact areas in determined aperture structures. The aperture structures in the present study were represented using 2-D distributions of local apertures in 250 \( \mu \)m square grid systems, and the contact areas were percentages of minimum local apertures (1 \( \mu \)m-local apertures) for all local apertures in the aperture structures. The contact areas ranged between approximately 31% and 56% at a confining pressure of 10 MPa (Table 1). Conversely, Montemagno and Pyrak-Nolte [1999] determined the aperture structures in a 300 \( \mu \)m square grid system for fractures in coal using Wood’s metal injection method combined with X-ray CT. They demonstrated that the contact areas (percentages of local apertures less than 2 \( \mu \)m for all local apertures) ranged between 42% and 55% at a confining pressure of 5 MPa. Given the similarities in spatial resolution between the definitions for the contact area and confining pressure in the present and previous studies, the contact areas in the present study appear reasonable when compared with those reported previously. In addition, the contact area in the present study did not change significantly with an increase in shear displacement (Figure 7), and the nonmonotonic changes of the contact area were consistent with changes in shear stress (existence of constant residual shear stress) observed in granite fractures during the shear process under similar normal stresses (confining pressures) [Esaki et al., 1999]. Although further evaluations are required, no comparable physical data of aperture structures under conditions similar to those of the present study currently exists. At present, it appears that the results obtained using the proposed technique and numerical methods are reasonable.

The results of the flow-through experiments for the fractures indicated that fracture permeability was usually considerably greater than matrix permeability, even at a confining pressure of 100 MPa (Figure 2). Consequently, it is expected that natural rock fractures may play dominant roles in subsurface flow, even under confining pressures exceeding 100 MPa. Although relatively high confining pressures have not been considered in previous studies associated with water resources issues, the experimental results illustrate the importance of understanding fluid flow in the aperture structures of rock fractures under high confining pressures in order to understand the regional groundwater flow system. The numerical results in the present study can provide fundamental insights into the heterogeneities associated with the aperture structures and the fluid flow within them under various geological conditions. The development of preferential flow paths was clearly observed in every aperture structure (Figure 4),

![Figure 8](image)

**Figure 8.** The nonmonotonic changes of the spatial correlation lengths in the directions parallel and perpendicular to shear displacement with increasing shear displacement for numerically determined aperture structures at a confining pressure of 10 MPa for artificially created granite tensile fractures.

![Figure 9](image)

**Figure 9.** The nonmonotonic changes of the ratio of hydraulic aperture to the mean aperture with increasing shear displacement for numerically determined aperture structures at a confining pressure of 10 MPa for artificially created granite tensile fractures.
suggested that the concept of channeling flow is applicable for rock fractures, even under a wide range of confining pressures, and that 3-D preferential flow paths can exist in a subsurface fracture network. In order to understand fluid flow structure and its significance, channeling flow should therefore be carefully investigated as a function of geological condition (shear displacement, confining pressure, etc.) because significant differences in preferential flow paths can arise due to heterogeneities that exist within the aperture structures. The proposed technique is expected to be suitable for lab-scale investigations of channeling flow. However, since lab-scale rock fractures as described in the present study were small, permanent deformation (crushing) of contacting asperities may be more likely to occur than in larger natural rock fractures in the field [Raven and Gale, 1985]. The magnitudes of permeability, aperture structures, and flow structures of the natural rock fractures can therefore be different from those of the rock fractures in the present study. Lab-scale rock fractures do not adequately represent all natural rock fractures, and size effects on fluid flow through rock fractures are still considered to be a fundamental problem [Koyama et al., 2006; Matsuki et al., 2006]. Nonetheless, the proposed technique for analyzing rock fractures of various sizes under various geological conditions can contribute to a better understanding of the heterogeneous nature of fluid flow in aperture structures of natural rock fractures and realistic regional groundwater system in the Earth’s crust.

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N. Hirano, N. Tsuchiya, and N. Watanabe, Graduate School of Environmental Studies, Tohoku University, 6-6-20 Aramaki-aza-Aoba, Aoba-ku, Sendai, Miyagi 980-8579, Japan. (watanabe@geo.kankyo.tohoku.ac.jp)