Conformational changes of a membrane protein determined by infrared difference spectroscopy beyond the diffraction limit

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Optogenetics is a revolutionary method for studying the neural activity exploiting the optical stimulation of neurons made possible by artificial genetic expression of light-sensitive transmembrane "gate" proteins. Evidence of functional conformational changes of the gate proteins can be obtained by difference infrared (IR) absorption spectroscopy triggered by light stimuli. Here we investigate the effect on the photocycle of the prototype optogenetic protein channelrhodopsin ChR2 of gold surfaces placed in close proximity to the protein molecules. In order to do this, we have brought difference IR spectroscopy to the nanoscale, using a platform based on the coupling of a tunable mid-IR quantum cascade laser and an atomic force microscope (AFM). Sensitivity to individual subwavelength-sized membrane patches, embedding less than a hundred ChR2 molecules, is achieved by taking advantage of a plasmonic field enhancement in the nanogap between the gold-coated AFM tip and an ultraflat gold surface used as sample support. We obtain relative difference absorption variations smaller than 10^{-2} and benchmark nanospectroscopy difference spectra against those taken with Fourier Transform IR spectroscopy (FTIR) technique on the same sample. We identify distinct simultaneous processes in ChR2 photocycle by performing singular value decomposition of the FTIR difference spectra, and use this procedure to compare IR nanospectroscopy data on individual membrane patches in contact with gold surfaces with those obtained on thick stacks of membrane patches unexposed to metal surfaces. ChR2 proteins maintain their gate function when placed in a 14 nm-wide gap between two gold surfaces, apart from minor modifications of their kinetics. Our results are relevant to optogenetic applications that require physical contact between nanoscale metallic probes/electrodes and the membrane of single neuronal cells. More generally, our work paves the way towards the spectroscopic study of transmembrane proteins at the nanoscale.

Introduction

Optogenetics, exploiting the temporal and spatial precision of optical beams to remotely control genetically modified cells [1], represents a revolutionary and promising tool for understanding the neural activity [2,3]. The control of electrically excitable cells including neurons is achieved by genetic expression of light-sensitive transmembrane proteins (TMPs) that, under illumination with visible light at specific wavelengths, undergo a cyclic sequence of conformational changes (also referred as the protein photocycle), opening and closing "gates" for ion transport through the cell membrane of their hosts [4]. Although optogenetics is undoubtedly a powerful technique, numerous scientific and technical challenges are yet to be met before this tool can be routinely used for the in-vivo study of the correlations between the neural activity and the observed behavior of living organisms [1,5-8].

In order to achieve a precise spatial-temporal interface with the neurons for light delivery and electrical signal readout, an optogenetic setup typically requires close contact between the cell membrane and the miniaturized probes and/or electrodes. One biophysics question worth to be addressed is whether there is an effect on the light-sensitive TMP functions due to proximal metal surfaces: in several of the proposed in-vivo optogenetic techniques, indeed, metal electrodes or metal-coated optical fibres are typically put in direct contact with the cell membrane [7-9], and it has been reported that these configurations can alter or even hamper the TMP photocycle [10,11]. A method of analysis of the detailed conformational changes of TMPs at the single neuron level, often required to understand the optogenetic gate function, is still lacking. Time-resolved optical

spectroscopies, in particular FTIR absorption spectroscopy at mid-IR wavelengths between 5 and 20 μm, can elucidate the sequence of molecular mechanisms of light-sensitive proteins [12,13]. However, the diffraction limit prevents the mid-IR investigation of TMPs in individual intact cells or even in artificially reconstituted lipid membrane patches.

In this work, we study the functional conformational changes of the light-gated ion channel Channelrhodopsin-2 (ChR2) [6], the most widely used optogenetic tool, by taking advantage of the IR nanospectroscopy approach based on the coupling of mid-IR lasers to atomic force microscopes (AFM) [14-17]. Among several IR nanospectroscopy methods [18-23], here we use the photothermal expansion method hereafter called AFM-IR [20-21], with which we recently reported on IR difference nanospectroscopy of the prototype TMP bacteriorhodopsin (BR) [17]. The experimental configuration of a membrane patch sandwiched between a gold-coated AFM tip and a gold surface represents the ideal scenario to investigate the effect of a metal surface put in direct physical contact with the cell membrane.

Results and discussion

AFM-IR of individual membrane patches

The samples measured by AFM-IR consist of lipid membrane assemblies of different thickness (hereafter called self-assemblies), containing the "slow mutant" of ChR2, named C128S [24], deposited on ultraflat template-stripped gold chips (see Supplemental Materials S1 for experimental details). A gold-coated tip of an Atomic Force Microscope (AFM) is employed to detect the nanometric photothermal expansion of samples induced by IR radiation. The IR source is a quantum cascade laser (QCL) whose emission wavelength can be scanned in the IR range of interest in order to recorder the AFM-IR spectrum (1800-1450 cm^{-1}) or fixed at a specific wavelength while the AFM tip scans the sample for the AFM-IR maps. The QCL emission repetition rate is set to be equal to the second bending mode of the AFM cantilever in order to enhance the deflection signal with the mechanical resonance technique. Moreover, it has been demonstrated that the combination of a gold-coated AFM probe tip and an ultraflat gold surface used as sample support produces a strong plasmonic field enhancement in the mid-IR, which in turn allows one to measure the nanometric photothermal expansion of few-nanometer-thick samples increasing the signal to noise ratio[14,15,17]. In our experiments, self-assemblies sandwiched between the gold-coated AFM tip and the ultraflat gold surface are used for the spectroscopic investigation of light-sensitive proteins under controlled morphological and electromagnetic conditions, a key condition for the unambiguous interpretation of the IR data [12,17].

In Fig. 1(a) (left panel) we report the AFM topography map of a representative self-assembly containing ChR2, which consists for a large portion of a single membrane patch (thickness around 7 nm), while on the left side there is an overlap of two and even three membrane patches. In Fig. 1(b) (left panel), for comparison, we show the AFM topography map acquired on a single native purple membrane patch containing the prototype light-sensitive protein BR. The homogeneity of the membrane patches in terms of protein embedding is demonstrated by the AFM-IR spatial maps in the right panels of Figs. 1(a) and 1(b). As reported in the Supplemental Material S2, the possibility to correlate mechanical and spectroscopic properties, which is characteristic of AFM-IR nanoimaging, allows also to discard non-membrane-shaped lipid aggregates, a common occurrence in artificial samples, and select only intact membrane patches (TMPs often lose or change their activity when removed from the lipid environment [25]).

The AFM-IR spectra acquired on ChR2- and BR-containing membranes of different thickness are plotted in Fig. 1(c). In agreement with FTIR results [26] (see also Supplemental Material S3), the AFM-IR spectra obtained on ChR2 samples show the two amide bands associated to the vibrations along the protein backbone of the mostly helical structure of ChR2 (amide-I peak at 1660 cm^{-1}, related to C=O stretching, and amide-II peak at 1550 cm^{-1}, related to N-H bending) [27]. A less intense band is found around 1740 cm^{-1}, related to the C=O stretching of the lipid ester bonds [28], present in eukaryote cells and bacteria that express ChR2 but not in *archea* that express BR (the class of organisms to which purple membranes belong) [29]. The high degree of vertical orientation of ChR2 molecules in our artificial membrane patches is confirmed by the fact that the amide-I and amide-II bands display the same peak frequency and comparable relative intensity in all spectra of Fig. 1(c) (apart from the non-stacked 150 nm-thick assembly). For reference, full vertical orientation of the BR-containing membrane patches has been verified previously [17], and full orientation of ChR2-containing patches is therefore assumed by analogy considering that the two proteins share the prototypical secondary structure of rhodopsins consisting of seven transmembrane helices, with the same helix orientation [4]. The electromagnetic simulations of Figs. 1(d) and 1(e) show a fully vertical, i.e. z-oriented, electric field orientation in films of thickness up to 21 nm. Moreover, the line profile reported in Fig. 1(a) confirms an oriented stacking

of the membrane patches in units of single membrane thickness of 7 nm (ChR2 assemblies up to 21 nm thickness, i.e. up to three stacked membranes have been observed). Therefore, the orientation of the ChR2 molecules in our artificial lipid membrane patches is comparable to that of BR proteins in native purple membranes.

AFM-IR difference nanospectroscopy

We then use the AFM-IR platform to perform a functional study of ChR2 by probing its light-activated conformational changes connected to the ion channel function (see Supplementary Materials S1 for experimental details). The retinal chromophore of ChR2, which is covalently linked to one of the seven helices of the protein spanning the lipid membrane, undergoes a photoisomerization from all-*trans* to 13-*cis* upon blue light absorption (maximum absorption at 470 nm) that, in turn, causes a cyclic sequence of conformational changes (the protein photocycle), resulting in the opening of the channel gate and consequent passive flow of cations. Under stationary light illumination conditions, present in our experiments as well as in several optogenetic applications, the photocycle of ChR2 increases in complexity due to secondary photoreactions. Such secondary photoreactions originate from the coexistence of two parallel photocycles with 13-*cis*,C=N-*anti* and 13-*cis,*C=N-*syn* retinal conformations, contrary to single-turnover conditions when proteins are excited by a short light pulse and the retinal adopts the 13-*cis*,C=N-*anti* conformation only [30,31]. In Fig. 2(a) we report a simplified four-state model adapted from the ChR2 photocycle recently proposed by Kuhne et al. in Ref. [13] as a unifying model describing both single-turnover experiments and recordings under continuous illumination. The protein conformational changes that characterize the intermediate states of the photocycle result in modifications of the lineshape and of the central frequency of most IR absorption bands, which can then be probed by measuring the IR absorption difference between the spectrum acquired under visible illumination that activates the proteins, and the spectrum acquired in dark conditions. Here we obtain a significant improvement of the signal-to-noise ratio of AFM-IR difference spectra, required to probe small light-induced absorption variations falling in the range of 10^{-3}-10^{-5} [12], thanks to the field enhancement in the plasmonic nanogap between the gold-coated AFM probe tip and the ultraflat gold surface. In addition, following an experimental protocol that we have recently pioneered and validated on the more common protein BR [17], we also average many spectra acquired during the ON/OFF reproducible photocycle of ChR2. This is made possible here by the use of the slow mutant of ChR2 named C128S, in which a substitution of the aminoacid cysteine in position 128 (Cys128) with a non-polar aminoacid removes a disulfide bridge from the molecule and this is known to "block" the protein in the open intermediate state (O_1 in Fig. 2(a)), which can be overcome with green light illumination. This effect enables an ON/OFF switching of the ChR channel gate by alternating blue and green light [24].

In Figs. 2(b) and 2(c), the AFM-IR difference-spectra obtained on ChR2 self-assemblies of thickness 150 nm and 14 nm are compared with the micro-FTIR difference-spectrum obtained on a different portion of the same gold support where the protein assembly thickness was larger than 1 micron and therefore not less than 10^7 proteins were probed. We focused on stacks of two-membrane patches (thickness of 14 nm), instead of monolayers, because we experimentally observed that prolonged contact-mode AFM measurements of the 7-nm thick single membrane patches yields physical degradation of the self-assembly. The difference-spectra are calculated as $\Delta A = A_{blue}(\omega) - A_{green}(\omega)$, where $A_{blue}(\omega)$ and $A_{green}(\omega)$ are the spectra acquired, either by AFM-IR or micro-FTIR, under blue and green light, at 470 nm and 505 nm respectively, provided by exactly the same visible-LED illumination setup. The micro-FTIR ΔA on the micron-thick assembly is used as benchmark for AFM-IR data taken on nanometer-thick self-assemblies. According to the model in Fig. 2(a), the positive bands of our experimental difference spectra ΔA mainly represent vibrations of a mixture of the open O_1 and O_2 states reached under blue illumination, while the negative bands can be assigned to vibrations of a mixture of the closed C_1 and C_2 obtained under green illumination. By comparing our spectra in Fig. 2 with the FTIR difference spectra of the O_1 and O_2 states reported by Kuhne et al. [13], we have found that our micro-FTIR ΔA spectrum shows spectral features of both the primary and the side cycle. The feasibility of probing the light-induced ChR2 conformational changes by AFM-IR is finally demonstrated by the good agreement between the micro-FTIR ΔA and the AFM-IR ΔA spectra acquired on the 150 nm-thick ChR2 sample (Fig. 2(c)). Most of the main spectral features, including the sharp C=C retinal stretching vibration peak (around 1555 cm^{-1}) and the two negative peaks in the carbonyl region around 1720 cm^{-1} and 1736 cm^{-1}, are indeed present also in the AFM-IR ΔA difference spectrum [32,33]. The AFM-IR ΔA spectrum acquired on a 14 nm-thick ChR2 self-assembly (stack of two membrane patches) shows the main spectral features of the ChR2 conformational changes with relative absorption variations smaller than 10^{-2}, confirming the photoactivation of ChR2 molecules in direct contact with gold surfaces. A dramatic decrease in the number of probed molecules compared to FTIR spectroscopy is demonstrated: under strong plasmonic field enhancement, the sample volume that generates the AFM-IR photothermal expansion signal corresponds to a cylinder located below the AFM tip apex [14,15,17], which contains approximately 120 ChR2

proteins (see Supplemental Material S4 for the details of this calculation), while a FTIR liquid cuvette can easily contain 10^{10} molecules.

In order to isolate and understand the effect of protein proximity to gold surfaces, we now compare our micro-FTIR and AFM-IR ΔA spectra obtained on micron-thick, 150 nm-thick and 14 nm-thick assemblies, using conventional FTIR data obtained on the same sample in a liquid cuvette as reference ΔA spectra. By adopting a singular value decomposition method [30], we calculated the superimposed contributions of the different simultaneous processes to obtain the pure kinetics and the spectral contributions of three independent processes. In Fig. 3 it is shown the reference ΔA spectra and relative kinetics calculated from conventional FTIR experiments. The first component mainly reflects adjustment of residues along protein backbone, i.e. the helices. The second component represents a parasitic "side photocycle" characterized by a less conductive open state [13], as hinted from its reaction kinetics described in detail in the Supplemental Material S5. The third component can be identified with the cyclic process of opening and closing the internal transmembrane channel gate [30]. We therefore refer to the corresponding three difference spectra as $\Delta A_{helix,}$ $\Delta A_{sidecyc}$ and ΔA_{gate}. We then fit to the experimental micro-FTIR and AFM-IR ΔA curves of Figs. 2(b) and 2(c) the following expression:

$$\Delta A = c_{helix}\Delta A_{helix} + c_{sidecyc}\Delta A_{sidecyc} + c_{gate}\Delta A_{gate},$$

where c_{helix}, $c_{sidecyc}$ and c_{gate} are the best-fit linear combination coefficients. One can observe a good agreement between the experimental and the fitting curves (grey curves in Figs. 2(b) and (c)), the main differences being the positive band at around 1640 cm^{-1} present only in the fitting curves, which may be due to the different hydration levels in the FTIR experiment with the sample in a liquid cuvette and the micro-FTIR/AFM-IR experiments with the sample drop-casted on a metal surface and let to dry in air [15]. Contrary to c_{helix} and c_{gate}, the coefficient $c_{sidecyc}$ decreases with the thickness t, already between t>1000 nm and t=150 nm (see Table 1). This result suggests a dependence of ChR2 photocycle branching ratio on the thickness. In particular, the reduction of $c_{sidecyc}$ with t hints towards the reduction of the probability to enter the parasitic side cycle for proteins that are in close proximity to gold surfaces. This result could be exploited to increase the efficiency of optogenetic gates by purposely approaching them with metal surfaces, e.g. with metal nanoparticles that can be safely bound to neurons even in in-vivo experiments. In any case, we can confirm the proper light-induced functional activation of ChR2 gates when the proteins are put in direct contact with gold surfaces.

	c_{helix}	$c_{sidecyc}$	c_{gate}
Micro-FTIR t>1000nm	0.017	0.15	0.33
AFM-IR t=150 nm	0.022	0.07	0.30
AFM-IR t=14 nm	0.022	0.03	0.28

Table 1. Absolute value of the best-fit linear combination coefficients $c_{helix,}$ $c_{sidecyc}$ and c_{gate}.

Conclusions

We have demonstrated that the infrared nanospectroscopy technique based on the photoexpansion effect (AFM-IR) can be used to push infrared difference spectroscopy of protein conformational changes well beyond the diffraction limit. Here we have studied one of the most important protein used in optogenetic applications, the light-sensitive transmembrane protein channelrhodopsn ChR2, by combining AFM-IR with the plasmonic field-enhancement in the nanogap between a gold-coated AFM tip and an ultraflat gold surface used as support for the individual artificially reconstituted lipid membrane patches

embedding the ChR2 molecules. We probed relative light-induced absorption variations smaller than 10^{-2} averaging over 10^2 membrane proteins only. This result represents a significant improvement of the sensitivity for IR functional study of proteins, since conventional IR experimental configurations require not less than 10^6 protein molecules to generate a difference spectroscopy signal. By benchmarking the AFM-IR difference spectra against those acquired by conventional infrared spectroscopy on the same sample measured in a liquid cuvette, we obtained evidence that proteins in proximity to gold surfaces may show a reduced probability to enter the known parasitic side cycle characterized by a less-conductive open-state. This result points towards higher efficiency in the conversion of light into charge transfer for protein adhering to metal surfaces, a configuration that could purposely be engineered to increase the efficiency of optogenetic gates.

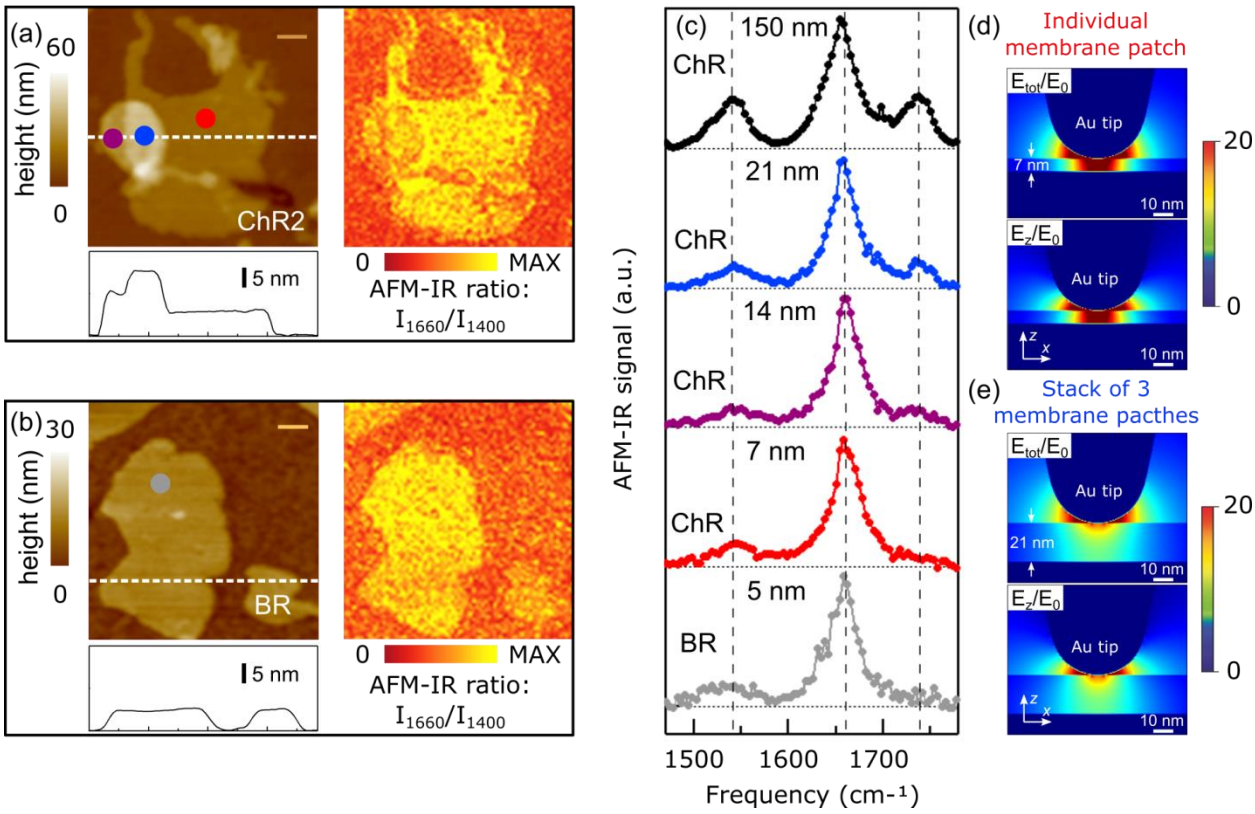

FIG. 1. (a),(b) Left: AFM topography map and line-profile of self-assemblies containing either ChR2 (a) or BR (b). The scale bar is 100 nm. Right: AFM-IR ratio maps I_{1660}/I_{1400} obtained by dividing the map acquired at 1660 cm^{-1} (amide-I band) by the map acquired at 1400 cm^{-1} (any IR absorption of the membrane). (c) AFM-IR spectra obtained on different locations of the ChR2-containg self-assembly and on the individual purple membrane. (d),(e) Simulated maps of electric field modulus (top panels) and electric-field z component normal to the gold surface (bottom panels) for an individual membrane patch (d) and a stack of three lipid membrane patches (e) containing ChR2.

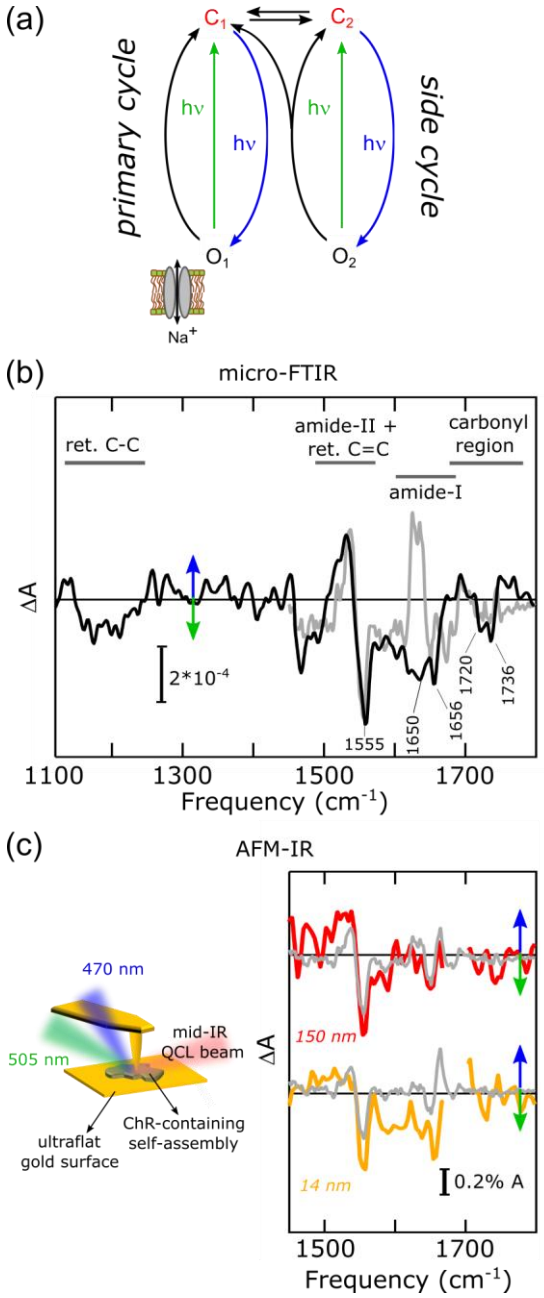

FIG. 2. (a) Four-state photocycle model which consists of a primary cycle (dark closed state C_1 and open conductive state O_1) and a side cycle (dark closed state C_2 and open conductive state O_2). Blue light initiates the photocycle. The C_1 and C_2 states can be accessed directly from O_1 and O_2 with green light. The black arrows indicate the thermal relaxation between the states. (b) Micro-FTIR ΔA obtained on a micrometer-thick area of a ChR2 self-assembly deposited on ultraflat gold surface. (c) AFM-IR ΔA obtained on 150 nm-thick and 14 nm-thick areas of ChR2 self-assemblies deposited on ultraflat gold surface. Grey curves in panels (b) and (c) are the best-fit defined as a linear combination of the three independent spectral components ΔA_{helix}, $\Delta A_{sidecyc}$ and ΔA_{gate} of Fig. 3.

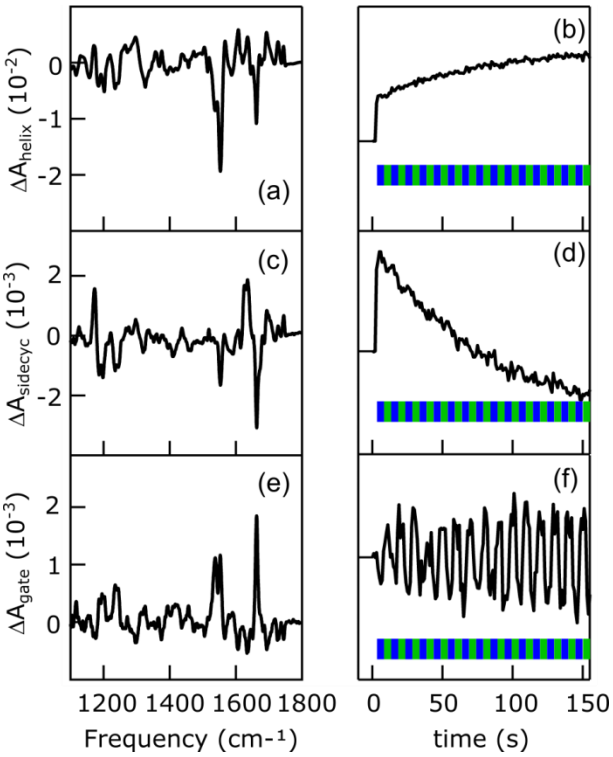

FIG. 3. Base spectral components ((a),(c) and (e)) and relative kinetic ((b),(d) and (f)) of the three independent spectral contributions characterizing the FTIR kinetic data of C128S during alternating blue and green illuminations. Singular value decomposition and rotation procedure were adopted to calculate the three components from the time-resolved FTIR dataset.

Conflicts of interest

The authors declare no conflicts of interest.

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