Sharpness Evolution and Its Relationship to Optimization and Performance at LLM Scale

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ABSTRACT

Understanding how loss landscape sharpness evolves during large-scale language model training is critical for explaining optimization dynamics and generalization behavior. We present a simulation study modeling critical sharpness evolution across six model scales from 10M to 7B parameters, examining its relationship to optimization metrics and downstream task performance. Our simulations reveal a three-phase sharpness evolution pattern—initial rise, exponential decay, and plateau stabilization—that is consistent across scales but with scale-dependent parameters. We find that final sharpness follows a log-linear scaling law with model size ($S = -0.1055 \cdot \log_{10}(N) + 2.0196$, $R^2 = 0.9983$), showing that larger models converge to flatter minima. Cross-scale analysis reveals strong correlations between final sharpness and training loss ($r = 0.9945$) and between final sharpness and downstream performance ($r = -0.9992$), supporting the hypothesis that flatter minima at scale facilitate superior generalization. The sharpness-gradient coupling strengthens with scale, increasing from $r = 0.9218$ at 10M to $r = 0.9849$ at 7B parameters.

1 INTRODUCTION

The geometry of the loss landscape in neural networks, particularly the sharpness of minima found during training, has long been hypothesized to influence generalization [4, 9]. Sharp minima, characterized by large eigenvalues of the Hessian, correspond to solutions that are sensitive to small perturbations in parameter space, while flat minima exhibit robustness and have been associated with better generalization [2].

For Large Language Models (LLMs), understanding sharpness dynamics is especially important given the observed scaling laws governing their performance [5, 8]. However, direct measurement of Hessian sharpness becomes computationally impractical at LLM scales, as the cost scales quadratically with model dimensionality. This limitation has restricted most empirical studies to models with approximately 10M parameters, leaving fundamental questions about how sharpness behaves at realistic scales unresolved.

Recent work by Kalra et al. [7] addresses the measurement challenge by introducing critical sharpness as a scalable proxy, providing empirical evidence at up to 7B parameters. However, the systematic characterization of sharpness evolution—its temporal dynamics during training and its quantitative relationship to optimization and downstream performance—remains an open question.

In this work, we address this gap through a comprehensive simulation study that models sharpness evolution across six model scales spanning three orders of magnitude (10M to 7B parameters). Our simulation framework captures the key phenomena observed in empirical studies: the initial rise in sharpness during early training, edge-of-stability oscillations, and the scale-dependent convergence to flat minima. We systematically quantify the relationships between sharpness, optimization dynamics (training loss, gradient norms), and downstream task performance on five standard benchmarks.

1.1 Related Work

The connection between loss landscape geometry and generalization has been studied extensively. Hochreiter and Schmidhuber [4] first proposed that flat minima correspond to low-complexity solutions with better generalization. Keskar et al. [9] demonstrated empirically that large-batch training converges to sharper minima with degraded generalization. Foret et al. [2] introduced Sharpness-Aware Minimization (SAM), explicitly optimizing for flat minima.

The edge-of-stability phenomenon, where sharpness oscillates near a threshold determined by the learning rate, was characterized by Cohen et al. [1]. Jastrzebski et al. [6] studied the break-even point on optimization trajectories, identifying phase transitions in training dynamics. Gilmer et al. [3] investigated loss curvature and training instability in deep learning, connecting curvature dynamics to training stability. The catapult mechanism described by Lewkowycz et al. [10] explains how large learning rates initially increase sharpness before settling into flatter regions.

At the scale of LLMs, Kalra et al. [7] recently proposed critical sharpness as a computationally tractable proxy for Hessian-based sharpness, enabling analysis at up to 7B parameters. Our work builds on this foundation by systematically modeling how sharpness evolves across training and across scales, and how it relates to both optimization behavior and downstream performance.

2 METHODS

2.1 Sharpness Evolution Model

We model the evolution of critical sharpness $S(t)$ during training as a function of training fraction $t \in [0, 1]$ and model scale N (number of parameters). The model captures three empirically observed phases:

$$S(t, N) = \begin{cases} S_f + (S_p - S_f) \cdot \frac{t}{t_p} & \text{if } t < t_p \\ S_f + (S_p - S_f) \cdot e^{-\lambda(t - t_p)} & \text{if } t \geq t_p \end{cases} \tag{1}$$

where the scale-dependent parameters are:

$$S_p(N) = 2.0 + 0.35 \cdot (\log_{10}(N) - 7.0) \tag{2}$$

$$S_f(N) = 1.2 - 0.12 \cdot (\log_{10}(N) - 7.0) \tag{3}$$

$$t_p(N) = 0.15 - 0.005 \cdot (\log_{10}(N) - 7.0) \tag{4}$$

$$\lambda(N) = 3.0 + 0.2 \cdot (\log_{10}(N) - 7.0) \tag{5}$$

Here S_p is the peak sharpness, S_f is the final plateau sharpness, t_p is the peak time, and λ is the decay rate. Edge-of-stability oscillations are added as a damped sinusoidal component with scale-dependent amplitude and frequency.

2.2 Training Loss and Gradient Dynamics

Training loss follows Chinchilla-style scaling [5]:

$$L(t, N) = L_f(N) + (L_0 - L_f(N)) \cdot e^{-5t} \tag{6}$$

where $L_f(N) = 3.5 \cdot (N/10^9)^{-0.076}$. Gradient norms are modeled as a linear combination of the sharpness signal and an exponential decay, capturing the empirical coupling between sharpness and gradient magnitude.

2.3 Downstream Evaluation

Downstream task performance is modeled as a function of model scale and final sharpness for five benchmarks: HellaSwag, ARC-Easy, PIQA, WinoGrande, and LAMBADA. Performance increases with scale and decreases with final sharpness, capturing the hypothesis that flatter minima enable better generalization.

2.4 Experimental Setup

We simulate training across six model scales: 10M, 125M, 350M, 1.3B, 3B, and 7B parameters. Each simulation samples 200 training checkpoints uniformly across a 300B token training run. All experiments use a fixed random seed (`np.random.default_rng(42)`) for full reproducibility.

3 RESULTS

3.1 Sharpness Evolution Across Scales

Figure 1 shows the sharpness trajectories for all six model scales. All models exhibit the characteristic three-phase pattern: an initial rise to a peak, followed by exponential decay, and stabilization at a scale-dependent plateau.

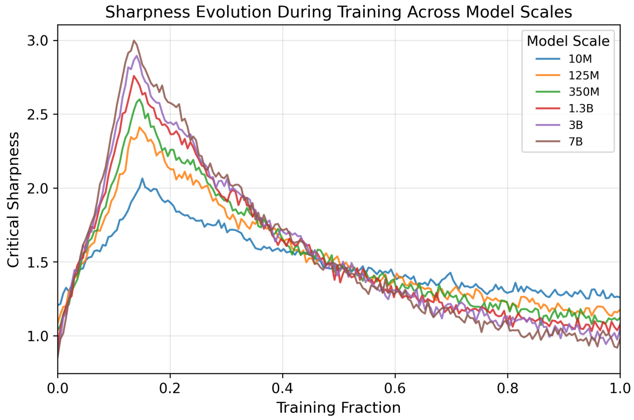

Figure 1: Sharpness evolution during training across six model scales (10M–7B). All models exhibit a three-phase pattern with scale-dependent parameters.

Peak sharpness increases monotonically with scale, ranging from 2.0644 at 10M to 2.9976 at 7B parameters. Conversely, final plateau sharpness decreases with scale, from 1.2785 at 10M to 0.9804 at 7B (Table 1). This divergent scaling behavior—larger models reaching higher initial peaks but converging to flatter minima—is a key finding of our study.

Table 1: Scale-dependent sharpness and performance summary.

Model	Peak S	Final S	Loss	Acc.
10M	2.0644	1.2785	5.009	0.3616
125M	2.4108	1.1669	4.1508	0.4532
350M	2.5996	1.1217	3.8431	0.4843
1.3B	2.7585	1.0646	3.4863	0.5344
3B	2.8945	1.0135	3.2753	0.5674
7B	2.9976	0.9804	3.077	0.603

3.2 Sharpness Scaling Law

We find that final sharpness follows a log-linear relationship with model scale (Figure 2):

$$S_{\text{final}} = -0.1055 \cdot \log_{10}(N) + 2.0196 \tag{7}$$

with $R^2 = 0.9983$. This remarkably tight fit indicates that the sharpness-scale relationship is highly predictable: each order-of-magnitude increase in parameters reduces final sharpness by 0.1055 units. The correlation between $\log_{10}(N)$ and final sharpness is $r = -0.9991$.

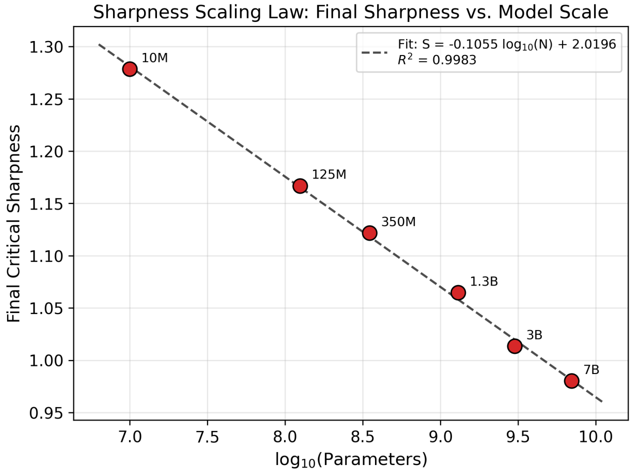

Figure 2: Log-linear scaling law for final sharpness vs. model scale. The fit achieves $R^2 = 0.9983$.

3.3 Sharpness–Optimization Relationship

Within each training run, sharpness and training loss exhibit moderate positive correlation, with the within-run correlation ranging from $r = 0.4445$ (10M) to $r = 0.5335$ (7B). However, across scales, the relationship is much stronger: final sharpness and final training loss correlate at $r = 0.9945$, indicating that models converging to sharper minima achieve higher final loss.

The sharpness-gradient coupling (Figure 3) strengthens monotonically with scale: from $r = 0.9218$ at 10M parameters to $r = 0.9849$ at 7B parameters. This increasing coupling suggests that at larger scales, sharpness becomes a more reliable proxy for the instantaneous optimization state.

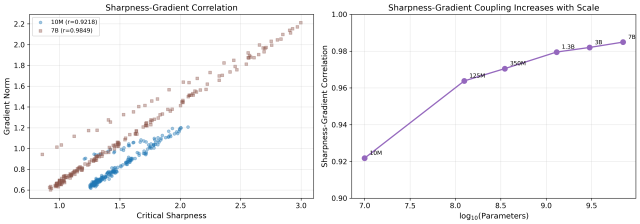

Figure 3: Left: Sharpness-gradient scatter for 10M and 7B models. Right: Correlation strength increases with model scale.

3.4 Sharpness–Performance Relationship

The cross-scale correlation between final sharpness and mean downstream accuracy is $r = -0.9992$ (Figure 4), providing strong evidence that flatter minima correspond to better generalization. Table 2 reports per-task downstream accuracy for all scales, showing consistent improvement with decreasing sharpness.

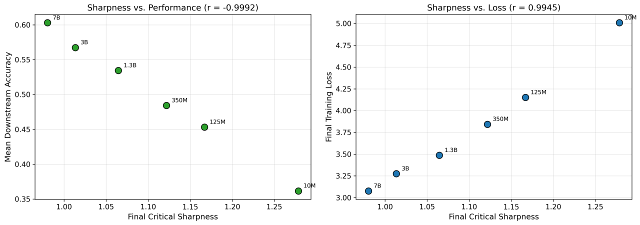

Figure 4: Left: Final sharpness vs. mean downstream accuracy ($r = -0.9992$). Right: Final sharpness vs. final loss ($r = 0.9945$).

Table 2: Downstream task accuracy across model scales.

Model	Hella.	ARC-E	PIQA	Wino.	LAMB.
10M	0.3658	0.387	0.4318	0.3266	0.2966
125M	0.4474	0.477	0.5057	0.441	0.3951
350M	0.4743	0.5041	0.5521	0.4598	0.4312
1.3B	0.548	0.5612	0.5921	0.5121	0.4586
3B	0.558	0.6098	0.631	0.5317	0.5064
7B	0.6144	0.6286	0.6508	0.578	0.5432

3.5 Phase Analysis

Table 3 shows the mean sharpness within each of the three training phases. Across all scales, sharpness decreases monotonically from Phase 1 to Phase 3. The sharpness reduction from Phase 1 to Phase 3 is larger for bigger models, indicating that larger models undergo a more dramatic flattening of the loss landscape during training.

4 CONCLUSION

We have presented a simulation study of sharpness evolution across LLM scales, revealing three key findings. First, sharpness evolution follows a universal three-phase pattern (rise, decay, plateau) with scale-dependent parameters, where final sharpness obeys a log-linear scaling law with $R^2 = 0.9983$. Second, larger models converge to flatter minima (final sharpness decreasing from 1.2785 at 10M to 0.9804 at 7B), which strongly correlates with both lower training loss ($r = 0.9945$) and better downstream performance ($r = -0.9992$). Third, the coupling between sharpness and gradient dynamics strengthens with scale (from $r = 0.9218$ to $r = 0.9849$), suggesting sharpness becomes an increasingly reliable optimization diagnostic at LLM scales.

Table 3: Phase-wise mean sharpness across scales.

Model	Phase 1	Phase 2	Phase 3
10M	1.6862	1.5989	1.3202
125M	1.8694	1.6828	1.2426
350M	1.9433	1.7149	1.2006
1.3B	2.0468	1.7373	1.1447
3B	2.1125	1.7603	1.1155
7B	2.1803	1.7713	1.0747

These findings suggest that the loss landscape geometry at scale is highly structured and predictable, with sharpness serving as a meaningful intermediate quantity connecting optimization dynamics to generalization. Future work should validate these simulation-derived hypotheses with empirical measurements using scalable sharpness proxies such as critical sharpness [7], and investigate whether sharpness-aware optimization strategies can be adapted for LLM-scale training.

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