Multielectron Transitions Induced by Neutron Impact on Helium

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We explore excitation and ionization by neutron impact as a novel tool for the investigation of electron-electron correlations in helium. We present single- and double-ionization spectra calculated in accurate numerical ab initio simulations for incoming neutrons with kinetic energies of up to 150 keV. The resulting electron spectra are found to be fundamentally different from photoionization or charged particle impact due to the intrinsic many-body character of the interaction. In particular, doubly excited resonances that are strongly suppressed in electron or photon impact become prominent. The ratio of double to single ionization is found to differ significantly from those of photon and charged-particle impact.

A theme of central importance in atomic, molecular, and condensed matter physics is the understanding and description of electron-electron correlations. The simplest and most fundamental system featuring strong electron correlations is the helium atom. For the last half a century, it has served as the “Rosetta Stone” for correlated dynamics beyond the single-particle picture stimulating the development of a multitude of novel concepts ranging from many-body breakup laws and Beutler-Fano resonances to collective quantum numbers and provided the testing ground for novel theoretical methods such as many-body perturbation theory or hyperspherical-coordinate methods. As the two-electron problem, both in stationary states as well as driven by external fields, can nowadays be treated exactly by ab initio calculations, it allows us to explore dynamical correlations in unprecedented detail when probed by charged-particle or photon impact. The observables accessible by such probes are, however, limited by either exact selection rules or approximate “propensity” rules. For example, photoabsorption spectroscopy is strongly dominated by dipole-allowed transitions. In charged-particle impact, higher multipole transitions are allowed but are typically suppressed in “soft” collisions with small momentum transfers. Moreover, the long-range Coulomb interactions between the probing particle and the excited system may distort the excitation and ionization to be extracted by “postcollision” interactions which are typically beyond lowest-order perturbation (LOP) theory underlying linear response.

In this Letter, we theoretically investigate neutron impact ionization as a further probe for studying electron-electron correlations. The underlying idea is that neutron scattering at the atomic nucleus gives rise to a sudden simultaneous momentum boost for all electrons, effectively causing a true many-body transition, which can lead to multiple excitation and ionization of the atom. This is in contrast to photon and charged-particle interactions, where the LOP interaction is strictly a one-body operator.

We show that neutron impact leads to a very broad energy distribution in the final states including double ionization and, furthermore, that it can efficiently produce strongly correlated doubly excited resonances that are disfavored by other probing agents.

We assume that the only interaction in the neutron-helium collision is elastic scattering between the neutron and the nucleus, mediated by the strong nuclear force. The contributions of magnetic interactions of the neutron with the electronic and nuclear magnetic moment are small enough to be safely neglected. Neutron energies are kept sufficiently low in order to exclude any inelastic nuclear processes. The duration of the neutron-nucleus scattering event is much shorter than the typical time scale of the dynamics of electrons bound to the nucleus (∼ attoseconds) currently probed using ultrashort light pulses. Electronic transitions can therefore be described by an impulse or “sudden” approximation. Accordingly, the transition amplitude for elastic scattering of the neutron accompanied by an electronic transition \( i \rightarrow f \) is given by

\[
t_{if}(\Delta \hat{p}_{\text{nuc}}) = t_{if}^{el}(\Delta \hat{p}_{\text{nuc}})t_{if}^{el}(\Delta \hat{p}_{e}),
\]

where \( t_{if}^{el} \) is the transition amplitude for elastic nuclear scattering with momentum transfer \( \Delta \hat{p}_{\text{nuc}} = \hat{k}_f - \hat{k}_i \) and \( t_{if}^{el} \) is the matrix element of the collective boost operator

\[
t_{if}^{el}(\Delta \hat{p}_{e}) = \langle \Psi_f | \exp[i(\Delta \hat{p}_{e} \cdot (\hat{r}_1 + \hat{r}_2))]|\Psi_i \rangle
\]

with

\[
\Delta \hat{p}_{e} = -\frac{\Delta \hat{p}_{\text{nuc}}}{M_\alpha + 2}.
\]

and \( M_\alpha \) the mass of the \( \alpha \) particle in atomic units. Taylor expansion of the collective boost operator

\[
B_e(\Delta \hat{p}_{e}) = \exp[i(\Delta \hat{p}_{e} \cdot (\hat{r}_1 + \hat{r}_2))]
\]
shows that while the electronic transition matrix element, to first order in $\Delta p_e$, is equivalent to that of the one-body operator from photoabsorption or the Bethe-Born limit of soft charged-particle collisions, all higher-order terms represent a true many-body transition structurally different from photon or charged-particle interactions. Application of the collective boost to the exact helium ground state (Fig. 1) leads to a correlated displacement of the projected two-electron momentum distribution unlike the one-body boost operator $B_{1g}(\Delta p_e) = \sum_{i=1}^N \exp(i(\Delta p_e \cdot \hat{r}_i))$, governing, for example, Compton scattering or charged-particle impact on an $N$-electron atom. This property plays a key role in accessing states blocked by parity or propensity rules. Using neutron impact ionization, we can therefore directly probe the momenta of the electrons in the ground state of helium.

Differential cross sections for electronic inelastic processes accompanied by quasi-elastic neutron-alpha particle scattering are given by

$$
\frac{d\sigma_{\text{el}}}{d\Omega}(\Delta p_{\text{nuc}}) = k_f \frac{d\sigma_{\text{el}}}{d\Omega}(\Delta p_{\text{nuc}})[r_{\text{el}}(\Delta p_e)]^2.
$$

with $k_f = \sqrt{k_i^2 - 2\mu Q_t}$, $Q_t = E_f - E_i$ the internal excitation energy, and $\mu$ the reduced mass of the $n$-He system.

For the nuclear elastic scattering cross section $\frac{d\sigma_{\text{el}}}{d\Omega}$, we use the tabulated data from [14]. For the electronic degrees of freedom in helium, we perform full \textit{ab initio} calculations by solving the six-dimensional time-independent Schrödinger equation (five-dimensional after exploiting cylindrical symmetry), including all interparticle interactions. In our computational approach [15,16], we employ a close-coupling scheme, in which the angular variables are expanded in coupled spherical harmonics (with total angular momentum up to $L_{\text{max}} = 7$, and individual electron angular momenta up to $l_{\text{max}} = 9$). For the discretization of the radial components, we use a finite element discrete variable representation (FEDVR) [17]. The momentum boost operator Eq. (5) is implemented using a short iterative Lanczos (SIL) algorithm [18]. For the extraction of transition amplitudes, the direct projection onto final states would be most desirable but unfeasible as exact three-body Coulomb continuum states are not known. We therefore make use of an alternative approach [7,19], in which the Fourier transform of the boosted wave packet is effectively calculated by solving the inhomogeneous linear system

$$
(E - H)|\Psi_{\text{sc}}(E)\rangle = B_e(\Delta p_e)|\Psi_i\rangle,
$$

where $\Psi_{\text{sc}}(E)$ is the scattered wave function in the (time-independent) energy domain. Outgoing boundary conditions are enforced by an exterior complex scaling (ECS) transformation for each of the radial coordinates. For the calculations presented in this Letter, we chose an exterior scaling radius of 120 a.u. and an overall box size of up to 180 a.u. The ejected single and double ionization amplitudes can then be extracted from the scattered wave function by means of a surface integral within the nonscaled part of the grid [19].

The most frequently studied quantity in double ionization of helium, a paradigm for studying the role of electron correlation, is the ratio $R$ of double to single ionization cross sections (Fig. 2). This ratio has been probed for both charged-particle impact and photon impact over a wide range of energies, both experimentally and theoretically [20]. For photon impact, photoabsorption as well as Compton scattering have been studied [21–27]. The corresponding ratio $R_N$ for neutron impact ionization is obtained as a function of the kinetic energy of the incident neutron by integrating Eq. (6) over all accessible final states in the energy transfer ($\Delta E$)-momentum transfer ($\Delta p_e$) plane (inset Fig. 2). With increasing neutron energy, the ratio $R_N$ increases polynomially ($\propto a_1E_N + a_2E_N^2 + \cdots$) with

![FIG. 1 (color online). Projected two-electron momentum distribution $P(k_{1z},k_{2z})$ for (a) the ground state of helium, (b) the ground state wave function boosted by the one-body boost operator $B_{1g}$ with a momentum transfer $\Delta p_e = 1.0$ a.u., and (c) boosted by the collective boost operator $B_e$ [Eq. (4)] with identical $\Delta p_e$ (see text).](image1)

![FIG. 2 (color online). Absolute integrated double ($\sigma_{\text{DI}}$) and single ionization ($\sigma_{\text{SI}}$) cross section by neutron impact as a function of the neutron kinetic energy. Inset: Energy dependence of $R_N = \sigma_{\text{DI}}/\sigma_{\text{SI}}$ with magnification of threshold region. The nonrelativistic high-energy limits for photoabsorption $R_{\text{PA}}$, Compton scattering $R_{\text{C}}$, and charged-particle impact $R_Z$ are shown for comparison.](image2)
the neutron energy and eventually surpasses the well-known (nonrelativistic) high-energy limits for photoabsorption (1.66%) [22–25], Compton scattering (0.8%) [21,26,27], and charged-particle impact (0.26%) [20,28]. The reason is that for large energy transfers, the helium nucleus suddenly "disappears" from the electronic charge cloud, resulting in a high probability for double ionization.

Compton scattering, involving a high-energy neutral projectile, is expected to bear closest resemblance to the present case of neutrons. The ratio $R_N(\Delta \varepsilon)$, differential in energy transfer $\Delta \varepsilon$ to the electronic system, indeed, qualitatively resembles the calculated $R_C(\Delta \varepsilon)$ for Compton scattering near threshold (inset Fig. 3). Its absolute magnitude is, however, strongly enhanced by factors up to 25 depending on the kinetic energy of the incident neutron (Fig. 3). This difference is expected, as for neutrons the collective boost rather than the one-body boost controls the transition and, moreover, different regions in the energy transfer $(\Delta \varepsilon)$-momentum transfer $(\Delta p_e)$ plane are sampled. The most dramatic difference (Fig. 4) occurs for large momentum transfers due to the nonlinear dependence of the boost operator on $\Delta p_e$. In the limit $\Delta p_e \to \infty$, or more precisely when the momentum transfer is large compared to the width of the momentum distribution of the initial state, $\Delta p_e \gg \langle p_e^2 \rangle^{1/2}$ (i.e., the Compton profile), the ratio diverges, as the strongly displaced momentum distribution (Fig. 1) will effectively cease to overlap with bound states and double ionization dominates.

A more sensitive probe of the momentum shift of the two-electron momentum distribution by the collective boost is the energy spectrum of the ejected electrons in single and double ionization (Fig. 5). The impulsive momentum transfer leads to a broadband excitation (the upper cutoff due to the finite nuclear collision time $\sim 1/t_{coll}$ lies well beyond the spectral range shown in Fig. 5), resulting in a large number of doubly excited resonances embedded in the single ionization continuum. A zoom into the electron energy spectrum just below the $n = 2$ threshold [Fig. 5(c)] shows the multitude of Beutler-Fano resonances of different symmetries. Note that doubly excited states are not properly identified by the usual independent-particle labels but require collective quantum numbers (cf. [1] and references therein). However, for brevity, we use the traditional but imprecise labels ($nll'l'$) to describe the first few doubly excited states. The background from direct single ionization into the continuum is only strong in the channel with $^1P^o$ final symmetry, while it is suppressed in the other channels. This is a clear signature of the different dominant terms in the transition operator for different symmetries: in $^1P^o$, the first-order (one-body) part dominates, which couples efficiently to the single continuum but only weakly to doubly excited states. In $^1S^e$ and $^1D^e$, the dominant part of the boost operator is the second-order, two-body term. The latter couples the initial ground state more efficiently to the quasibound, doubly excited states than to the single ionization continuum. This is best seen in the $(2p)^2$ (both in the $^1S^e$ as well as in the $^1D^e$ channel) and $(2p3p)$ doubly excited states which feature the largest cross section. By contrast, these transitions are strongly forbidden in photoabsorption driven by the dipole operator [first term in Eq. (5)]. Exciting those resonances by photons would require a two-photon absorption process triggered by an intense beam with well-tuned frequencies, in reach with free-electron lasers [29,30]. Even within the dipole-allowed $^1P^o$ spectrum, neutron-impact ionization leads to a marked modification of the Beutler-Fano resonance profiles [3] compared to photoabsorption [Figs. 5(b) and 5(c)]. The latter is a signature of interference between the first and odd higher-order terms in Eq. (5).

It is instructive to compare the neutron-impact induced spectrum with the corresponding spectrum for electron impact [Fig. 5(d), taken from [31]]. While for charged-particle collisions, higher multipole transitions become allowed, the propensity for excitation of resonances of
It has been shown that a major difference between the two states lies in the expectation value of the angle $\theta_{12}$ between the two electrons. For the $(2s)^2$ state, the electrons are more likely situated opposite to each other, whereas in the $(2p)^2$ case they have a tendency to be located on the same side of the nucleus. For the quasi-instantaneous neutron kick, it is suggestive that both electrons will be pushed to the same side of the nucleus (Fig. 1) and will thus have significant overlap with this class of resonances. This behavior is less likely for excitation by an incoming electron which interacts with the bound electrons via the long-ranged Coulomb force and gives rise to transition matrix elements containing the one-body boost operator. The strong excitation can thus be directly attributed to the effective many-body nature of the neutron kick. In contrast to neutron impact, the collision with an incoming electron can also access triplet states due to spin exchange processes, which can be seen in Fig. 5(d) for the $3P^0(2s2p)$ state.

We finally turn to the prospects of experimental realization of neutron-impact ionization. The most easily accessible quantity is the ratio $R_N$ of double to single ionization. It only involves the integral detection of charge-state selected recoil ions without momentum resolution. $R_N$ is well suited to compare different excitation mechanisms (Fig. 2). A more challenging experiment would be the electron spectroscopy of doubly excited resonances (Fig. 5). Here, the momenta of both the ion and the electrons need to be measured in coincidence, which can be accomplished in a reaction microscope-like COLTRIMS setup [32]. Note that the detection of the quasicollastically scattered neutron is not needed in either case.

In conclusion, we have shown that neutron-impact ionization could serve as a novel tool to probe correlated electronic dynamics in many-body electron systems, specifically in helium. Key is the true many-body nature of the correlated boost operator which allows transitions that are either strictly forbidden or strongly suppressed in either photoabsorption or charged-particle excitation. Doubly excited resonances become prominent that are otherwise completely shielded in the electron scattering case. A tendency to be located on the same side of the nucleus (Fig. 1) and will thus have significant overlap with this class of resonances. This behavior is less likely for excitation by an incoming electron which interacts with the bound electrons via the long-ranged Coulomb force and gives rise to transition matrix elements containing the one-body boost operator. The strong excitation can thus be directly attributed to the effective many-body nature of the neutron kick. In contrast to neutron impact, the collision with an incoming electron can also access triplet states due to spin exchange processes, which can be seen in Fig. 5(d) for the $3P^0(2s2p)$ state.

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[14] The angular dependent differential cross section has been obtained from the sigma database at the National Nuclear Database Center (NNDC).