01 Jan 2012

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Recommended Citation

M. Schulz et al., "Effect of Projectile Coherence on Atomic Fragmentation Processes," *Journal of Physics: Conference Series*, vol. 388, no. PART 10, Institute of Physics - IOP Publishing, Jan 2012.
The definitive version is available at https://doi.org/10.1088/1742-6596/388/10/102027

Effect of Projectile Coherence on Atomic Fragmentation Processes

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Synopsis We demonstrate that the projectile coherence can have a major impact on atomic fragmentation processes. This has been overlooked for decades in formal scattering theory and may explain puzzling discrepancies between theoretical and experimental fully differential cross sections for single ionization.

Several years ago a surprising symmetry breaking, strictly demanded by first-order theories, was reported in measured fully differential cross sections (FDCS) for single ionization by ion impact even for very small perturbation parameters η (projectile charge to speed ratio) [1]. Until today, the data could not even qualitatively be reproduced by any fully quantum-mechanical calculation. In contrast, treating the projectile – target nucleus interaction classically resulted in good agreement with the data [2]. This raises the question whether the fully quantum-mechanical calculations share a fundamental problem which has been overlooked so far. One feature which all of these calculations have in common is that they assume a completely delocalized projectile wave, i.e. a coherent projectile beam. This is a very unrealistic assumption for fast ion impact since there the projectile wave packet always has a width which is negligible compared to the size of the target atom. Here, we report experimental data which demonstrate that cross sections for atomic fragmentation processes can sensitively depend on the projectile coherence.

We measured the fully momentum-analyzed scattered projectiles in coincidence with the recoiling target ions for ionization in 75 keV p + H_2 collisions. From the data we extracted double differential cross sections (DDCS) for a fixed projectile energy loss of ε = 30 eV as a function of scattering angle θ. The width of the projectile wave packet (i.e. the transverse coherence length Δr) is proportional to $L\lambda/a$, where L is the distance between the collimating slit and the target region, a is the slit width, and λ the DeBroglie wave length of the projectile. The experiment was performed for L_1=50 cm and L_2=6.5 cm, which for a=0.15 mm corresponds to $\Delta r \approx 2$ a.u. and 0.3 a.u., respectively [3].

In the DDCS for L_1 we observe a pronounced interference structure, which is completely absent for L_2. The interference is due to indistinguishable diffraction of the projectile wave from the two atomic centers in the molecule [4]. However, it can only occur if the projectile wave packet is wide enough to illuminate both atomic centers simultaneously, i.e. if $\Delta r > D$ (inter-nuclear separation). This explains why the interference is absent for L_2 since there $\Delta r < D$.

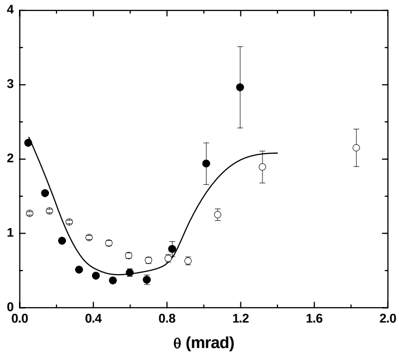

Figure 1. Cross section ratio for large to small slit distance for ionization (closed symbols) and capture (open symbols). Curve: theory for ionization

The closed symbols in Fig. 1 show the ratio R between the DDCS for L_1 and L_2, which assuming that at L_2 the projectile beam is incoherent to a good approximation represents the interference term. The solid curve shows a calculation of the DDCS assuming a coherent beam normalized to twice the DDCS for atomic hydrogen. Except for large θ this calculation qualitatively reproduces the data.

The finding that the interference structure disappears for an incoherent projectile beam was recently confirmed by equivalent data for capture in p + H_2 collisions (open symbols in Fig. 1). We thus have to conclude that it is crucially important to properly account for the projectile coherence length in theoretical calculations. For atomic targets the unrealistic assumption of a coherent beam probably results in artificial path interference between two impact parameters leading to the same scattering angle. This could quite possibly explain the theoretical difficulties in reproducing measured FDCS for single ionization by fast ion impact [1].

References

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