Auger Recombination within Landau Levels in a Two-Dimensional Electron Gas

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A strong emission arising from states lying higher in energy than those optically pumped is observed under interband excitation into partially filled Landau levels of a modulation-doped GaAs quantum-well structure in a magnetic field. The intensity of this emission depends quadratically on the excitation power and is strongly influenced by magnetic field through the occupancy of the Landau levels. This effect demonstrates the high efficiency of Auger processes in partially filled Landau levels of a two-dimensional electron gas.

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A direct experimental proof of Auger recombination would consist of an observation of the related up-energy conversion. Such a process in which the energy released by one electron, when relaxing to a lower-lying state, is transferred to another electron, excited into a higher-lying state, has been evidenced for discrete atomic orbitals1 and also for band states of semiconductors2,3 but usually in an indirect way. We have investigated an atomiclike system which consists of the discrete equidistant Landau levels of a quasi-two-dimensional electron gas, as can be found in modulation-doped semiconductor heterostructures with a magnetic field applied perpendicular to the two-dimensional layers. In this case, particular states can be selectively optically excited and discrete lines are observed in emission. Furthermore, the number of electrons at each level can be tuned by the magnetic-field strength. We show in this Letter that, with interband optical excitation, an emission arising from states lying higher than those pumped by the laser can be detected. This emission is observed at low temperatures (kT=0.15 meV) and for low excitation powers (Pexc ≤ 10 W cm−2) and can be as high as 9 meV above the excitation energy. Strikingly enough, its intensity may be comparable to that of the luminescence arising below the excitation. This is in contrast with what has been reported for bulk semiconductors4 where the related intensity has been found to be several orders of magnitude lower than the intensity of the conventional luminescence. The up-conversion of energy is attributed to electron-electron scattering processes (shakeup of the Fermi sea5) occurring within the quantized Landau levels of the two-dimensional electron gas.

The results have been obtained on a one-side modulation-doped n-type GaAs/GaAlAs single quantum well with a well thickness of 250 Å and an electron sheet concentration of ne=7.6×1011 cm−2. In this sample the zero-electric subband is occupied and the Fermi level is located very close to the bottom of the first subband.6 Representative magnetoluminescence and magnetoluminescence-excitation spectra, for σ+ polarized light, are shown in Fig. 1(a).7 It is clear that one can easily assign the peaks related to the two-dimensional structure and separate them from the bulk luminescence. The Landau-level fan chart of the optically allowed transitions observed in luminescence and luminescence-excitation spectra is shown in Fig. 1(b). The Fermi-level position as determined from the onset of the excitation spectra [visualized with the dashed line in Fig. 1(b)] is in perfect agreement with transport data. The jumps of the Fermi level occurring at B = 5.3, 7.95, and 15.9 T correspond to full occupation of three, two, and one Landau levels, respectively (filling factor including spin degeneracy ν = 6, 4, and 2, respectively). Since the cyclotron energy for the valence band is relatively small, a single valence-band level is assumed in this paper.

At fields of around 9.5 T the lowest Landau level L0 is fully occupied, whereas the first Landau level L1 is partially empty. When we excite electrons into this L1 level, a strong emission at energies higher than the laser energy is observed together with the normal luminescence coming from L0 [Fig. 2(a)]. This higher-energy emission originates from the zero Landau level of the first electric subband, L0, which is the nearest empty electronic state of higher energy than L1. The excitation spectrum of the luminescence related to L0 [Fig. 2(a)] shows not only the usual pseudosorption transitions above the emission energy, but also a clear maximum below the detected energy, when the excitation energy coincides with L1.

A schematic model explaining our experimental results is shown in Fig. 2(b). Electrons from valence-band states are excited into the L1 Landau level and thereby empty states can be created in L0 when the L0 electrons recombine with photoinduced holes. Two electrons on L1 may interact, deexciting one to the lower L0 level, losing ϵωv, and exciting the second to the higher empty level.
$L_2$, gaining $\hbar \omega_c$, conserving energy in the process. Such mechanisms are always possible but are usually not experimentally observable because the carriers excited to $L_2$ by the Auger process will relax rapidly to the $L_1$ state before recombining optically. However, in this particular system, the carriers excited to $L_2$ can be observed since they can relax first to $L_0$ and then recombine, giving rise to a luminescence at energies above the laser excitation.

Recent experimental results\cite{6,8,9} show that $L_0$, which is associated with the first empty electric subband, has an excitonic character even in doped samples. Therefore, electrons on the $L_0$ level are strongly correlated with individual holes, leading to a remarkably efficient radiative electron-hole recombination compared to the thermalization of electrons towards states of lower energy. The emission peak related to the $L_0$ level is then always visible in “normal” (exciting at higher energies) luminescence spectra, even if empty states exist at lower energies [see Fig. 1(a)]. This allows us to use this excitonic recombination as a “trap detector” of Auger electrons.

To study more in detail the above-laser emission we have measured its intensity in the range of magnetic fields between 7.95 and about 12 T (when the Fermi level is pinned to the $L_1$ Landau level) and also in the range between 5.3 and about 6.4 T (in this case the $L_2$ Landau level is partially empty and lies below $L_0$ and similar processes like those described in Fig. 2 may occur invol-

FIG. 1. (a) Intensity of the luminescence detected at $\hbar \omega_{\text{exc}}$, as a function of the exciting energy (left) and luminescence spectra at different excitation energies $\hbar \omega_{\text{exc}}$ (right). Two-dimensional and bulk structures are observed when the excitation energy corresponds to the peak of the two-dimensional density of states (solid line), and mainly bulk-related luminescence is visible when exciting in the gap between the two-dimensional levels (dashed line). (b) The Landau-level fan chart of the optically active transitions observed in luminescence (crosses) and luminescence-excitation (open circles) spectra. The size of the symbol reflects the transition intensity. The $L_0$ absorption line involves the light-hole level. The Fermi-level position is shown with the dashed line.

FIG. 2. (a) Luminescence spectra observed under excitation into the partially occupied Landau level $L_1$ ($\hbar \omega_{\text{exc}}$) below and above the laser energy (left) and intensity of the above-laser emission ($\hbar \omega_{\text{det}}$) as a function of the exciting energy (right). (b) Schematic picture of the recombination processes explaining the above-laser emission. The relevant processes are shown with solid lines, other relaxation-recombination channels with dashed lines. $n, n'$ ($n_h$) denote the electron (hole) concentrations on Landau levels $L_n, L'_n$ ($L_h$). $N_0$ = $2eB/h$ is the degeneracy of the Landau level.
ing now $L_2$, $L_0$, and the next empty Landau level $L_1$). The changes of $I_0$, the peak intensity of the above-laser emission, with magnetic field are shown in Fig. 3(a) (solid circles). In both cases ($v \leq 4$ and $v \leq 6$) a sharp onset is observed at lower magnetic fields followed by a saturation of the intensity at higher fields. The dependence of $I_0$ with excitation power $P_{\text{exc}}$ is quadratic on $P_{\text{exc}}$ in the range of low excitation powers [Fig. 3(b)] and linear on $P_{\text{exc}}$ at high excitation powers. The dependence of the intensity $I_0$ of the luminescence associated with $L_0$ is also shown in Fig. 3. In both cases (magnetic-field and power dependences) the variations of $I_0$ and $I_0$ are clearly different showing their different origin. Quantitatively, it is easy to reproduce the dependence of $I_0$ on $P_{\text{exc}}$ by solving the rate equations at a fixed magnetic field. This analysis gives the quadratic dependence of $I_0$ as long as the radiative recombination rate from the $L_0$ level is small compared to the thermalization rate down to the partially empty $L_1$ state, i.e., when the $L_0$-related emission is not a dominant recombination channel. This is no longer true for the highest excitation power when $I_0$ shows a linear dependence. As a matter of fact, the quadratic power dependence must saturate because otherwise the energy-conservation law would be violated.

To reproduce the magnetic-field dependence with the same quantitative analysis is more difficult because one should take into account the effects of nonparabolicity, broadening of Landau levels, filling-factor-dependent screening, etc., which is beyond the scope of this paper. However, the onset is clearly related to the field where empty states appear in the $L_1$ level at $v=4$ ($L_2$ at $v=6$). The saturation is explained by the magnetic-field-induced decrease of the electron concentration $n_1$ on $L_1$ ($n_2$ on $L_2$, respectively) which leads to a decrease of the Auger process efficiency.

Processes similar to those shown in Fig. 2(b) may occur for all Landau levels with indexes $n \geq 1$ but not for $n=0$. However, we have also observed a recombination from $L_0$ when exciting into $L_0$ for $B \geq 15.9$ T field beyond which the $L_0$ level becomes partially empty [see Fig. 1(b)]. Since, in this case, the emission intensity is at least 2 orders of magnitude lower than when Landau levels with higher indices are excited, this effect must be of a different origin. Indeed, under excitation of electrons into the $L_0$ level, a new emission appears in the gap, below the laser energy, at a distance approximately equal to the separation between $L_0$ and $L_0$ levels. This would indicate an impurity-assisted process, a virtual Auger process, or resonant Raman scattering.

Using cyclotron absorption saturation and cyclotron emission experiments in different bulk semiconductors, it has been established that the Auger process becomes an important mechanism in the recombination between Landau levels. Although we deal here with a very different situation, namely, having discrete Landau levels which are already populated even at thermal equilibrium and this population is only slightly changed under optical excitation, we can also directly see from our data the efficiency of the Auger recombination. In fact, at high excitation power (in the linear regime of the $I_0$ power dependence) the intensity $I_0$ of the above-laser emission is given directly by the flux of promoted carriers through Auger processes: $I_0 = n_p / \tau_{\text{Auger}}$, where $n_p$ is the quasistationary concentration of empty places on the $L_0$ level. The intensity $I_0$ of luminescence below the laser energy is equal to the sum of the flux of electrons deexciting by Auger processes and the flux of electrons relaxing with emission of photons or phonons, i.e., $I_0 = n_p / (1/\tau_{\text{Auger}} + 1/\tau_{\text{ph}})$. At $B=9.5$ T and at high excitation power [see Fig. 2(a)] the ratio of integrated intensities $I_0/I_0$ is 3, and therefore at this field $\tau_{\text{Auger}}/\tau_{\text{ph}} \approx 2$. In general, the Auger flux is a complicated function of magnetic field and excitation power and therefore it is impossible to give a single quantity for the Auger rate; instead, a full analysis of the field and power dependences can be given. Such an analysis is in progress but falls beyond the scope of this Letter. Under some simplifying assumption we have estimated that $\tau_{\text{Auger}} \approx 5 \times 10^{-11}$ s at $P_{\text{exc}}=10$ W/cm$^2$ and $B=9.5$ T i.e., when the electron concentration on the partially filled $L_1$ level...
is \( n_1 = 3 \times 10^{11} \, \text{cm}^{-2} \) and photocreated hole concentration is \( \sim 10^{11} \, \text{cm}^{-2} \). This time value would correspond to the electronic Auger lifetime obtained from cyclotron resonance experiments\(^2\) for bulk GaAs at \( n_1 = 5 \times 10^{14} \, \text{cm}^{-3} \).

An enhancement of the Auger recombination rate in two-dimensional systems may be expected due to the effect of reduced screening-enhanced correlation effects.\(^5\)\(^,\)\(^14\) Our observations are in agreement with recent experimental studies\(^15\) which show that electron-electron interactions yield the relevant contribution to carrier thermalization in GaAs modulation-doped quantum wells.

In summary, it has been shown that the observation of an emission arising from states lying higher than those optically excited can be understood in terms of Auger-type processes occurring within the electronic Landau levels of two-dimensional semiconductor structures. We believe that our observation, together with proper theoretical calculations, could lead to a deeper understanding of electron-electron interaction in two-dimensional semiconductor systems.

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\(^7\)We neglect in this paper the forbidden transitions discussed in Ref. 6 observed in luminescence (e.g., the lower component of the \( L_1 \)-related doublet which is observed in luminescence but not in excitation spectra).


