



Comment

Comment on B.O. Kerbikov, “The effect of collisions with the wall on neutron-antineutron transitions”, Phys. Lett. B 795 (2019) 362

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We are grateful to Boris Kerbikov for inviting us to comment on the difference between the conclusions in his work [1] and our works [2], [3] on the violation/conservation of coherence during the reflection of a neutron-antineutron superposition ($n/\bar{n}$) from a material surface. Indeed, this is an important issue for experiments on the search for neutron-antineutron oscillations ($n - \bar{n}$). For a comprehensive review of the theoretical status and experimental prospects of these activities, see [4]. The reflection of a coherent ($n/\bar{n}$) superposition from the walls would increase the observation time, and, therefore, the sensitivity of such an experiment.

In fact, the conclusions of all these works [1], [2], [3] are based on the same simple quantum-mechanical formalism for calculations of the amplitude of reflection of a particle from an absorbing potential step, well known from textbooks on quantum mechanics. However, this formalism has been applied for essentially different experimental approaches in the design of ($n - \bar{n}$) experiments.

In ref. [1] and other previous publications on this topic, the formalism for the calculation of the amplitude of $n/\bar{n}$ reflection is correct. However, the experimental design considered in these works is qualitatively different from that discussed in [2], [3]. To profit from the coherent effect of reflection of ($n/\bar{n}$) from the walls, [1] proposed to use the slowest, so-called ultracold neutrons (UCNs). Since UCN fluxes are limited, it was proposed in [1] to use the complete range of transverse velocities of ($n/\bar{n}$) for surface reflection. In this case, the ($n/\bar{n}$) with large transverse velocities penetrate deeper into the wall surface upon reflection, and the effect of any difference between the potentials of the wall material

for n and $\bar{n}$ can become quite large. Therefore, the author of [1] concluded that the effect of loss of coherence is large on average, and therefore the reflection of ($n/\bar{n}$) from the walls in experiments to search for ($n - \bar{n}$) oscillations is not useful. We agree with the conclusions of [1] as applied to this experimental design and set of assumptions.

In refs. [2], [3], the assumptions we make about the regime of operation of this experiment are qualitatively different from those chosen in [1], and that is the reason why we can come to a different conclusion while using the same fundamental underlying physics and formulae. We show that there are different experimental conditions under which the correct use of ($n/\bar{n}$) reflection from the walls is very beneficial. In particular, these conditions consist in the appropriate pre-shaping of the initial n spectrum and beam phase space so that the transverse ($n/\bar{n}$) velocities are significantly smaller than the critical velocity of the wall material (both for n and $\bar{n}$). In this case, the dephasing effect is minimal and can be calculated much more reliably. Moreover, a correct choice of wall material allows one to further reduce the effect of dephasing. Thus we have shown that, over a wide range of experimental parameters, the effect of coherence loss is negligible with respect to the $\bar{n}$ annihilation in the surface upon reflection. In combination with the use of large cold neutron fluxes and optimized experiment geometry, the effect of coherent reflection of ($n/\bar{n}$) from the walls can greatly increase the sensitivity of an experiment to search for ($n - \bar{n}$) oscillations, simplify its design, decrease costs and minimize theoretical uncertainties associated with the correction for the effect of loss of coherence when interpreting experimental results.

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