Dreaming are inseparable – if by “inseparable” they have in mind the strict variety discussed in this commentary. It follows from this that the authors are free to pursue a relaxed perspective on the inseparability condition. Now this does not entail that the authors cannot substantiate their push for an enactive neurophenomenology, as they do in §§30–46. But what I have said, if correct, does suggest that getting clearer about the ontological dreaming, and its relationship with imagining and perceiving, is necessary for a proper development of their enactive neurophenomenological program.

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Dreams: An Experimental Laboratory of Phenomenology
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Embodying dreams?

In their article, Elizaveta Solomonova and Sha Xin Wei propose a research project undertaking the study of dreams through a collaboration of the first- and third-person perspectives, theoretically grounded in the ideas of Maurice Merleau-Ponty’s phenomenology of embodiment and Evan Thompson’s enactivism. The authors suggest a view of dreams as a kind of creative mind-wondering or even a performative process, by which they intend to absolve the phenomenon of dreaming from its association with pathologies such as delusions.

While being very much in favour of the proposed research programme, I nevertheless like to point out some unclear points associated with the applied theoretical framework and the proposed methods. Most of all, however, I would like to show that a more detailed rethinking of the epistemic position of the researcher might not only improve the understanding of dreaming but also make the research of dreams an important factor in the research of lived human experience.

In recent years, interest in enactivism as a theoretical framework for understanding and research in cognitive science has flourished. Consequentially, various interpretations of the concept have been put forward, with authors punctuating different segments of the basic definition. Broadly speaking, one can identify three main emphases in the understanding of enactivism:

- the idea that cognition is a construction rather than a representation of a “world, independent of our perceptual and cognitive capacities” (Varela et al. 1991: xx);
- the view of cognition as embodied activity, calling for a consideration of the entire physiology rather than just the brain when studying cognition (probably the most widespread use of the term);
- an interpersonal, embedded view of cognition as mutual sense-making (i.e., De Jaegher & Di Paolo 2007).

At first sight, we might expect that the first (constructivist) emphasis would be the most appealing for dream researchers (if experience is not a representation of the world but rather the organism’s construction, this would place dreams on equal ground with any other kind of experience). Surprisingly, however, the authors focus on the other two emphases, especially embodiment:

The first fundamental position of the enactive approach is the view that the mind is strongly embodied: consciousness is not the property of the brain, but of the whole organism, with its nervous system, sensory, and life-regulation processes.

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The authors suggest “focusing on the depth of interpersonal experiences in dreaming” (§29). Unlike in the case of “sensations of the sleeping body,” here there can be no doubt about the level of the research: the authors appeal for the research of the dream experience that the participant (or researcher?) experiences as interpersonal.

«8» If this is the case, we must pose the question as to whether this is indeed in accordance with the assumptions and research goals of enactivism or its derivations, such as, for example, participatory sense-making. There seems to be a considerable difference between studying the emergence of cognition through a communication situation and studying the emergence of cognition through the experience of a communication situation. The latter view would mean that, for example, the processes of participatory sense-making could be explored without the need to study the third-person “outside” view of interpersonal dynamics. Instead it would suffice to study the individuals’ interpretation of given communication situations. Participatory sense-making thus becomes purely phenomenological research. I am not sure whether this is what the authors mean, but I can say that the concept of internalised intersubjectivity is an interesting and by no means new research idea (cf. Mead 1934 and, in some ways, also Husserl 1982).

«9» The article as a whole relies heavily on the neurophenomenological linking of first- and third-person data, leaving no doubt that the authors do not want to remain only on the phenomenological level. As far as this interdisciplinary aspect is concerned, a more detailed explanation of how the authors plan to make both sides of the explanatory gap come together would be most welcome. We know that even research of simple physiological correlates of experience is quite complicated, even in conditions when the participants can report about their experience in real time (e.g., Kühn et al. 2014). Such synchronisation is even more difficult to achieve while dreaming. EEG and eye tracking research of the architecture of sleep can only render very sketchy data (mostly) about the intensity of experience (and even this has been recently called into question, as the authors explain). Perhaps the most sophisticated research design, attempting to link both perspectives known so far, was reported by LaBerge (1990; LaBerge et al. 1981). In EEG research of lucid dreams, trained dreamers managed to communicate with researchers by blinks of their eyelids in pre-agreed patterns when entering a given oniric modality. However, not even such an advanced form of participatory research can guarantee exact alignment between physiological signals and experiential content.

«10» Should the starting point of the proposed neurophenomenological dream research perhaps be more modest? Could we begin the research of dreams as embodied activity by exploring more general oniric moods and attempting to find parallels with the observation of body positions and basic physiological parameters (such as galvanic skin response and heart rate)?

Acknowledging dreams through phenomenological reduction

«11» Solomonova and Sha introduce their neurophenomenological research proposal by stating that simply taking “both physiological and subjective data seriously” (§36) does not suffice. The authors continue by expressing their agreement with the need to…

«12» Unfortunately, this is one of few places in which the authors call for a phenomenological turn. In the concretisation of their research proposal, they settle for a milder version of first-person research, which does not require such a radical move. The authors envisage collecting phenomenal data using well-established second-person techniques (such as the elicitation interview, Petitmengin 2006). They suggest research of the “depth” of dream experiences, focusing on the “how” of experience, with reduced emphasis on the “what.” The idea of inquiring about the experiential aspects of dreams is not new. A plethora of authors have been dealing with this perspective in various ways: from qualitative phenomenological research (Madjoni 2005; Schweitzer 1996) and efforts to quantify and classify the phenomenological modalities of dreams (Parker & Alford 2010), to research on the existential dimensions of dreaming (Busink & Kuiken 1996).

«13» It would seem that Solomonova and Sha intend to join the ranks of the aforementioned researchers, none of whom contemplate a fully fledged move towards phenomenology: a so-called phenomenological turn. Such a move calls for a more radical uptake of phenomenological ideas; it means a critical examination of our everyday theories, beliefs and attitudes about the world and the origins of experience. Edmund Husserl (1982) used the expression “natural attitude” to designate the totality of presuppositions and theories commonly applied in our apprehension of the world. According to him, pure contact with experience is possible only by bracketing this natural (or everyday) attitude. Such bracketing might, among other things, lead us to suspend the view of experience as a product of the physical world, thus going epistemologically much further than the embodied proposal to shift the research of cognition from the brain to the (motivated and affective) body.

«14» The phenomenological turn requires an acceptance of the primary nature of experience, resulting in a phenomenological description “concerned with those aspects of the noema that remain the same irrespective of whether the experience in question is veridical or not” (Beyer 2015). If we bracket the idea of the physical world as the origin (or condition) of the existence of consciousness and look at experience as it presents itself to us, we might start perceiving the experience of dreams on exactly equal terms, and with exactly the same level of relevance, as any other type of experience.

«15» Solomonova and Sha mention the “bizarre/impossible scenarios that often characterize dream content” (§17). Experience can be bizarre or impossible only from the point of view of our conceptions about the world and its functioning. Once we bracket these assumptions, such assessments and comparisons of different types of experience become void. Such a view would probably be a much bigger step in the depathologisation and de-pathologicalisation of the status of dreams than the authors’ proposal to view dreaming as a creative imagination process.
Dreams as a mirror of the natural attitude

If we bracket the self-evidence of everyday assumptions about the world and abandon the belief that our everyday waking (intersubjectively tested) experience is correct and that any deviation from this norm is bizarre, wrong or even pathological, we must then face a very interesting question. How is it that dream scenarios, which in the waking everyday modus operandi of consciousness would be dubbed impossible, are accepted in dreams without question and as self-evident: just as self-evident as the existence of the world in which we believe in waking life?

The fact that we can fly in our dreams, and that this newly gained skill does not appear (overly) unusual, hints at a profound and all-permeating influence of some fundamental building block of our experience: a block in charge of sense-making and the continuity of our lifeworld. From this point of view, it would appear that the experience of dreams is no exception. Even lucid dreams cannot avoid this organising and explaining feature: although in a lucid state we might no longer believe in the reality of what goes on in dreams, we immediately become conscious of and firm believers in the reality of the world in which we are lying on a bed and dreaming a lucid dream.

The training of in-depth phenomenological research as understood by Natalie Depraz, Francisco Varela and Pierre Verrmersch (2003: 24) is training in bracketing (epoché) our expectations about the world and consciousness, redirecting the focus of attention and accepting the lived experience. Solomonova and Sha assume the participants in their research to be persons trained in the recollection of dreams. For a valid phenomenological study, they should add the training of epoché to the skill set of participants. Since it is probably too late to carry out epoché post festum – i.e., when recalling dreams – the full-blown phenomenological research of dreams would probably also require training participants in the skill of carrying out phenomenological reduction while dreaming. I see such training as a continuation of the wakeful epoché, perhaps not very different from the preparations for lucid dreaming. Instead of attempting to remember that she is dreaming (while dreaming), the phenomenological researcher of dreams would attempt to remember redirecting the dreaming attention towards the “how?” of experience.

While Solomonova and Sha do mention that training in keeping a dream diary positively affects the quantity of recollected dreams (§6), they do not describe how directing the focus of research might influence the entire oneric formation: the dreams of trained dreamers are not the same as the dreams of untrained ones. The suggested enhanced version of phenomenological research would deepen this phenomenon even further. It would be most interesting to see what influence an attempt to bracket the natural attitude while dreaming might have on dreams.

It would certainly seem that the suggested, more radical, phenomenological approach might open up the area of dreams as a possible experimental laboratory for a better understanding of one of the core characteristics of experience. It is normally presupposed that the structure of beliefs within the natural attitude is more or less constant. Christian Beyer writes: “[A] given subject’s lifeworld consists of the beliefs against which his everyday attitude towards himself, the objective world and others receive their ultimate justification,” adding in brackets: “However, in principle not even beliefs forming part of a subject’s lifeworld are immune to revision” (Beyer 2015).

By analysis and mutual comparison of the feeling of the self-evidence of different (dreaming and waking, etc.) worlds, such a view might be revised. Beliefs contained within the natural attitude might prove to be quite flexible. A new approach to research of the natural attitude might shed light on its capacity for the continuous and adaptable organisation of experience, as well as its ability to forge undoubted belief in the world thus constructed.

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Enactive Consciousness and Gendlin’s Dream Analysis

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A neuropsychological approach to the enactive account of consciousness in general is supported by an account of how the brain functions in creating imagery of non-present objects and situations. Three types of nonsensory imagery are needed to ground our consciousness of sensory imagery: proprioceptive imagery, motor imagery, and what Eugene Gendlin calls the “felt sense” of a situation. Dreams show clearly how we image situations without sensory input, a process that is clearly enactive rather than reactive. This enactive account of imagery then supports Gendlin’s method of interpreting dreams by comparing their “felt sense” to the felt sense of waking situations.

Dreaming consciousness presents one of the most interesting cases for the enactive approach to consciousness, precisely because, for the most part, we do not engage in obviously overt bodily actions while dreaming. Yet action routines are continuously orchestrated in the brain very similarly to the way they would be when awake. While in their target article Elizaveta Solomonova and Sha Xin Wei warn against confusing “embodiment” with “embrainment,” the case of dreaming also reminds us that the brain is part of the body, and that what is required for enactive consciousness is not simply overt action, but rather the forming of motor imagery, which is largely an action of the brain, although of course the actions that are being imaged are motivated by the total organismic system.

The condition of the body during sleep resembles a form of paralysis, primarily because the amount of acetylcholine (ACh) initiated in the pons area of the brainstem is greatly reduced (see Stickgold & Walker 2009). As a result, ACh, necessary for overt movement, is not delivered in much quantity to the afferent and efferent nerve fibers throughout the body. While awake, we un-