Soft Matter

Porosity of silica Stöber particles determined by spin-echo small angle neutron scattering

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Abstract

Stöber silica particles are used in a diverse range of applications. Despite their widespread industrial and scientific uses, information on the internal structure of the particles is non-trivial to obtain and is not often reported. In this work we have used spin-echo small angle neutron scattering (SESANS) in conjunction with ultra small angle x-ray scattering (USAXS) and pyncnometry to study an aqueous dispersion of Stöber particles. Our results are in agreement with models which propose that Stöber particles have a porous core, with a significant fraction of the pores inaccessible to solvent.

For samples prepared from the same master sample in a range of H2O : D2O ratio solutions we were able to model the SESANS results for the solution series assuming monodisperse, smooth surfaced spheres of radius 83 nm with an internal open pore volume fraction of of 32% and a closed pore fraction of 10%. Our results are consistent with USAXS measurements. The protocol developed and discussed here shows that the SESANS technique is a powerful way to investigate particles much larger than those studied using conventional small angle scattering methods.

INTRODUCTION

Silica particles have applications in a diverse range of industrial and technological applications. Examples include information and communications technologies, medicine, biology and environmental monitoring [1–3]. Since these applications often require control over the particle size and density, significant efforts have been applied to the accurate determination of these parameters [4]. Conventional size determination methods such as nanoparticle tracking analysis, transmission electron microscopy (TEM) and dynamic light scattering (DLS) are often used.

One of the most common and important methods of forming silica particles uses the process developed by Stöber and co workers in the 1960's [5], which is known to give superior control over the particle size dispersity- an advantage reflected in over 8000 citations (to date) on the original paper outlining the method. The excellent uniformity which makes Stöber particles so useful also makes them suitable for more detailed structural characterisation and a number of scattering experiments have been performed on these particles - the regularity of the process even allowing Small Angle X-ray Scattering (SAXS) and Ultra Small Angle X-ray Scattering (USAXS) measurements to be made during particle formation. These showed that the particles initially nucleate as a ramified fractal structure which then grow by aggregating silica from solution [6, 7] while becoming more compact as the reaction proceeds. Similar results were found more recently by Pontoni et al. [8] showing nucleation from a single small particle to a size of ≈ 20nm. Once fully formed the particles have been studied in greater depth [4, 9–11]. Proposed particle structures have been presented by several groups with larger silica particles formed by this aggregation and clumping of much smaller particles - with radii of the order 14nm [12]. In smaller Stöber particles (a few tens of nm) however, no core-shell structure is observed, rather a heterogeneous open structure is observed [13]. In most cases the polydispersity of Stöber particles is seen to decrease with increasing reaction time and in microscopy studies this has been associated with development of a pronounced smooth particle surface (see for example [14]).

Whilst a significant number of studies have looked at the structure of Stöber silica, very few have looked at the porosity although this would seem to be a necessary concomitant of the fast nucleation and slower growth model outlined above. In one study [9] helium pyncnometry was used to measure the Stöber silica densities, finding values initially in the

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50 range of 2.04-2.10 g/cm^3 for particles in the 80-900 nm size range, approximately a density

51 80% of that of crystalline quartz (2.65 g/cm^3). However, after rigorous washing and drying

52 at 90°C the measured density decreased to 1.9-1.95 g/cm^3. It has been postulated that

53 pyncnometry measurements do not measure the porosity of the entire silica particles as the

54 C_{18} from stearyl alcohol, which is sometimes used in the formation process, can effectively

55 block the pores to the helium probe gas [9].

56   In order to investigate the structure of colloidal Stöber particles we have applied the

57 relatively new technique of Spin-Echo Small Angle Neutron Scattering (SESANS) [15–17] .

58 Briefly SESANS uses a series of magnetic fields to encode the scattering angle information

59 into the polarisation of a neutron beam, a more detailed description is presented in Appendix

60 A. The structural length scale probed depends upon the applied magnetic field strength

61 and the neutron wavelength squared. On a time of flight neutron source where a range

62 of wavelengths are used this allows a corresponding range of length scales (termed spin

63 echo length, z) to be probed simultaneously. This technique has the ability to probe both

64 the inter-particle and intra-particle structure in suspensions of solvents, by measuring the

65 transverse projection of the real-space Debye correlation function G(z), rather than its

66 Fourier transform that is obtained in the more familiar technique of Small Angle Neutron

67 Scattering (SANS). At spin echo lengths much greater than the particle radius the spin echo

68 signal depends very simply upon the difference in scattering length density (SLD) between

69 the particle and solution [18] allowing this difference to be determined very accurately. In this

70 study the particles were suspended in either pure H_2O or a mixture of H_2O and D_2O allowing

71 the neutron contrast between the particle and solution to be changed in a predictable way

72 and the particle density to be inferred with similar accuracy with an absolute minimum of

73 structural assumptions or free parameters. It is also important to note that the SESANS

74 technique allows the measurement of the total scattering in absolute terms (equation 11

75 in Appendix A) and unlike other neutron techniques the structural signal is not seriously

76 affected by incoherent (non-structural) scattering.

77   The SESANS technique is capable of examining much larger length scales (up to 10's

78 of microns) than traditional SANS and is comparable in the upper range to the accessible

79 length scales probed by ultra small angle neutron scattering (USANS) [19]. The approach

80 has a major advantage over the latter technique in that it can be applied to high concen-

81 tration samples, as multiple neutron scattering effects may be taken into account exactly

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[20] whereas USANS is a dilute solution measurement. The technique does not change the geometry of the sample, the scan ranges are determined by the applied magnetic fields and since the scattering is encoded in the beam polarisation rather than determined from angular deviations SESANS can also employ rather divergent beams, allowing efficient use of the available polarised neutron flux.

EXPERIMENTAL METHODS

A sample of monodisperse silica particles was synthesised using the method reported by Stöber and co-workers [5]. For the synthesis, ethanol (30.0 g), deionised water (5.0 g, 18 MΩ) and ammonium hydroxide (3.0 g 28-30% NH_3) (Aldrich) was added to a round bottom flask and stirred for ten minutes at room temperature followed by the rapid addition of Tetraethyl orthosilicate (3.0 g 98% TEOS) (Aldrich). The solution was left to stir at 250 rpm for 24 h at room temperature. Silica particles were purified by centrifugation at 3000 rpm for 1 Hr $3 \times$ into ethanol then $3 \times$ into deionised water, (18.2 MΩ) H_2O (ELGA Purelab Option-Q) being used exclusively in the preparation. A fraction of the prepared silica was weighed then dried over 24 hours to determine the mass fraction in solution. This was determined to be 15%.

A number of different techniques were used to fully characterise the Stöber silica particles in conjunction with our primary SESANS measurements. Dynamic Light Scattering (DLS) was performed using a Zetasizer NanoZS (Malvern instruments) to give values for the intensity-average and number-average hydrodynamic diameters of the silica particles. Silica dispersions were analysed using disposable cuvette cells and the results were averaged over three consecutive runs. Prior to measurement the silica dispersions were diluted with deionised water (18 MΩ) and filtered through a 0.20 μm filter membrane (to remove any dust). An LM10 particle tracker (Nanosight) was used to measure the size of a large number of single particles via tracking the individual particle tracks, which act as point scattterrers and move via Brownian motion. The video footage was analysed using the inbuilt particle tracking analysis software, which gave a particle hydrodynamic radius of 73 nm. DLS measurements were also used to check the polydispersity of the samples the was measured to be 1%, suitably mono disperse for our sample requirements here.

Density measurements were made using an AccuPyc 1330 helium pycnometer (Micromet-

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112 rics) with a 0.1 cm^3 sample cell. Our silica particles were dried for 24 Hr in an oven at 100°

113 C to produce a dry powder sample suitable for analysis. Once dried the samples were then

114 dispersed into H_2O and further diluted with D_2O as detailed below to make the different

115 solution volume fractions. The gas pycnometer measured a density of 2.32 g cm^{-3} which is

116 only 12.5 percent lower than the value for crystalline SiO_2 (2.65 g cm^{-3}) indicating Stöber

117 particles of good quality. SANS investigations have returned a range of density values de-

118 pending on sample conditions and preparation and an accepted value of good colloidal silica

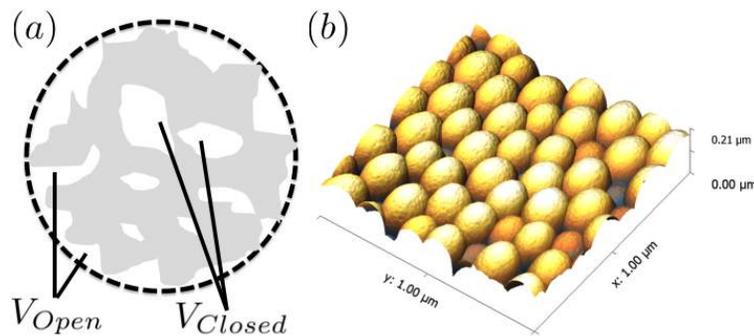119 particles is in the region of 2.26 g cm^{-3} [21]

FIG. 1. (a) Schematic of porous particle, the dashed line designs the particle radius R with the volume of inaccessible voids termed V$_{Closed}$ and the accessible voids V$_{Open}$ and (b) AFM height image for an ensemble of spin coated SiO_2 nanoparticles.

120 The SESANS measurements were performed on the Offspec instrument [22] at the ISIS

121 pulsed neutron and Muon source (Oxfordshire, UK). The data was normalised to the in-

122 strumental polarisation using a blank (pure solvent) sample of the same thickness. Similar

123 measurements were obtained on the instrument SESAME at the Low Energy Neutron Source

124 LENS (Indiana, USA) [23, 24] and are detailed in Parnell et al. [25]. In order to conclusively

125 check for systematic differences in the solvent scattering a series of H_2O and D_2O solvent

126 blanks were run on the SESAME instrument in SESANS mode to check for changes in in-

127 strumental polarisation. No changes were observed between pure D_2O and pure H_2O for

128 blanks of 5mm path length, confirming that, as expected the incoherent background which

129 normally arises from using H_2O in conventional neutron scattering measurements does not

130 affect these SESANS measurements. Here the G(z) for the samples was determined from a

131 comparison of the spin echo signal with and without the sample (for details see Appendix

132 A)

133   USAXS measurements were performed on the beamline ID02 at ESRF and SANS mea-

134 surements were performed at the LENS SANS instrument. For the dilute samples necessary

135 for USAXS measurements a sample in H_2O was diluted in concentration down to a volume

136 fraction of $\approx$ 1%. For the SANS measurements the H_2O sample was dried and redispersed

137 into D_2O to reduce incoherent scattering. The redispersed sample was sonicated for 2 hours

138 and checks were made visually to observe that the sample was fully re-dispersed.

139 **RESULTS**

140   A series of SESANS measurements were performed for various different combinations of

141 concentration and solvent scattering length density (SLD). They are shown in figure 2 and

142 the data were fitted using the theory presented in the appendices with the appropriate form

143 and structure factors for uniform density spheres as given in Pedersen [26]. In the process of

144 fitting the data two facts become immediately apparent. The first is that when simulating

145 the undiluted sample it has a larger radius than that determined by our DLS measurement

146 and secondly that simulations of the shape of the curves cannot model the shape of the dip

147 observed at $z=$ 150nm due to the excluded volumes, which are more pronounced in the higher

148 silica concentration sample. Attempts to simulate the data to the measured mass fraction

149 (0.15) and radius (73 nm) determined from the DLS were unsuccessful. Good agreement

150 was found for a volume fraction of 0.1 rather than the 0.06 value which would be expected

151 from the measured mass fraction with the silica of the density measured by pyncnometry.

152 In order to accurately simulate the asymptotic value at long spin echo length the porous

153 structure model described in the appendix was used with two additional parameters for the

154 volume fractions for the accessible and inaccessible voids in the silica particles, these are

155 V_{Open} and V_{Closed} respectively. Good agreement was found with values of V_{Open}=0.32 and

156 V_{Closed}=0.10. and the resulting fits are shown in figure 2.

157   While very accurate for measurements of overall scattering power SESANS is somewhat

158 less sensitive to small changes in particle radius compared to other techniques such as tradi-

159 tional scattering techniques and hence our best estimate of the Stöber particle radius is from

160 the dilute sample measured on ID02 at the ESRF. The measured USAXS data is shown in

161 figure 3 with a simulation to a hard sphere model with a radius of 83±1nm. This value was

162 used in the SESANS modelling, although fits if similar accuracy can be obtained for R $\approx$
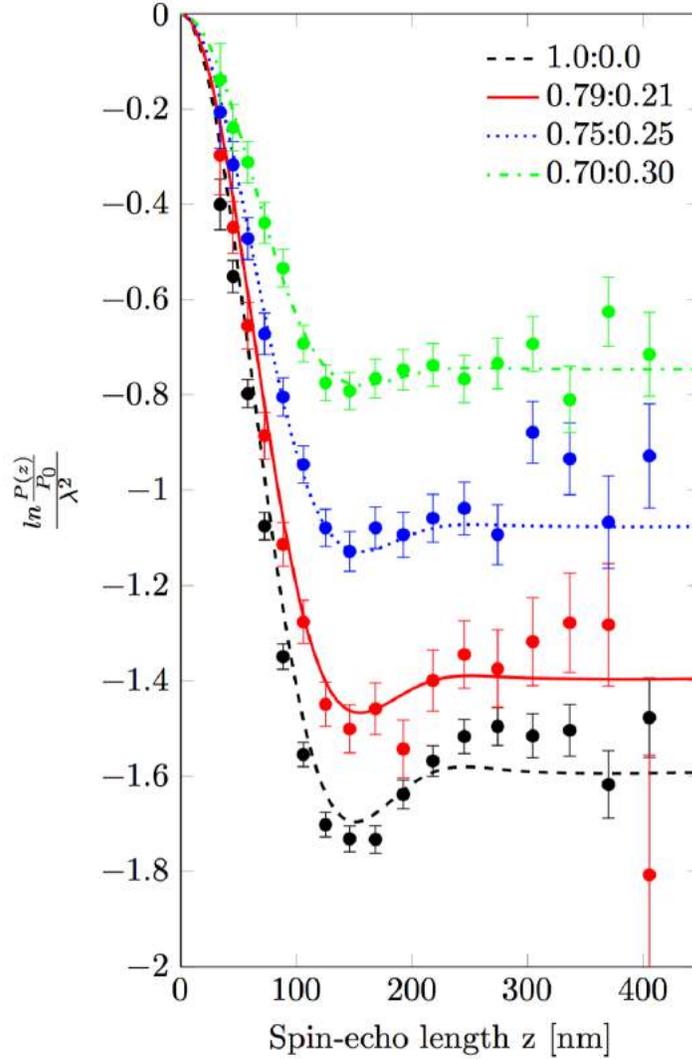
FIG. 2. The normalised spin-echo signal as a function of spin-echo length for various different dilutions of H_2O and D_2O. Note the legend indicates the ratio of H_2O to D_2O. The undiluted sample has a mass fraction of 0.15. The solid lines are calculated from the model discussed in the text.

163 82.5± 2.5nm, however these do change the total porosity and porous fractions due to Σ_t
164 being dependent on R via equations 4 and 11.

165   Finally in order to achieve information on the surface of the particles SANS was measured
166 at LENS from a dilute (volume fraction 1.2%) sample of the same particles in D_2O. Fitting
167 to the observed Porod surface scattering region at this higher Q is shown falling off into
168 the incoherent background signal (4). The structural scattering intensity in this data falls
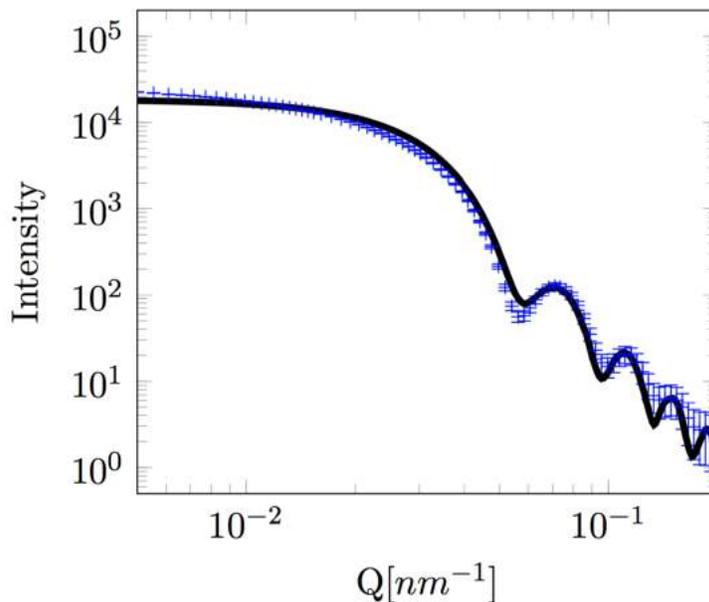
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FIG. 3. USAXS measurement of the silica Stöber particles in H_2O, with a volume fraction of 0.01, measured on the beam line ID02 at the ESRF. The line is a fit to a hard-sphere model with radius of 83±1 nm.

169 of as the scattering vector to the power -3.90 ± 0.03, very close to the -4 expected from a
170 perfectly smooth sharp particle surface.

171 **DISCUSSION**

172   Our model fits show clearly in figure 2 that the Stöber nano-particles can be well described
173 as porous with both open and closed pores. The agreement between the particle radius
174 derived from SESANS and USAXS is consistent, however both scattering methods return
175 values significantly higher than that determined by our DLS measurements.

176   The inaccessible void structure is similar to that recently deduced from gas adsorption
177 measurements by Li et al. [10]. The predicted value from SESANS of 10% inaccessible
178 pores is close to that predicted by pyncnometry of 13%. While in an earlier SESANS
179 investigation [27] no porosity changes were observed and the SLD used for the particles was
180 in good agreement with that obtained with bulk measurements. However in this case the
181 silica particles were also covered by a sterically stabilizing layer of polyisobutene, 4±5 nm
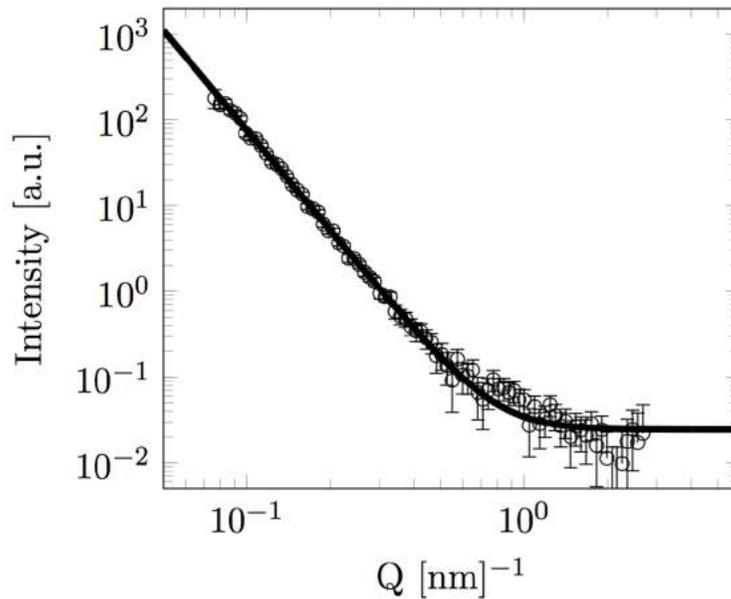182 thick . This disagreement with our results could be due to differences in the method used

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FIG. 4. SANS data for a low concentration solution of Stöber silica particles in D_2O. Line is fit to Porod scattering with a fractal index (n) of 3.90 ± 0.03.

183 for particle formation or the hydrophobic coating blocking the pores and resulting in only
184 closed pores, which appears more likely.

185   We observed scattering from smooth surfaces, which is consistent with earlier electron
186 microscopy [14] and measured fractal indexes of Stöber particles with a long reaction time
187 [7], unlike fractal surface previously observed by others [11, 28], albeit for larger particles.

188 **CONCLUSIONS**

189   The work shown in this communication, highlights the applicability of the SESANS tech-
190 nique to both the study of colloids in solution and also porous media. The relatively trivial
191 model used here allows for the extraction of both the inaccessible and accessible void volume
192 fractions. The advantages of this technique arise from the unambiguous determination of
193 the total scattering as given by the normalised spin-echo signal which is obtained at long
194 spin-echo lengths. Also due to the insensitivity of the technique to incoherent scattering a
195 series of samples can be prepared in H_2O and D_2O from the same master sample allowing the
196 volume fractions to be determined as a ratio from one data set to another. This approach
197 avoids the problem of separately determining the volume fraction and the contrast which

198 often plagues conventional SANS.

199   The technique can also be applied to larger Stöber particles and also to look at changes in

200 internal pore sizes where calcination is used to seal surface pores, however the concequence

201 of this upon the internal pore structure has yet to be investigated [29].

202   We have also shown that SESANS can easily be used to work with hydrogenous sam-

203 ples without the additional complications of incoherent scattering, unlike traditional SANS

204 experiments. Furthermore by analysis of the asymptotic value for the polarisation at long

205 spin echo length we are able to easily interpret the results without complex calibration and

206 corrections as would be required for the analysis using traditional small angle and ultra

207 small angle techniques.

208 **APPENDIX A - SPIN-ECHO SMALL ANGLE NEUTRON SCATTERING**

209   The SESANS theory has now been described in a number of publications [18, 30]. We

210 briefly summarise the salient points. The accessible spin-echo length for a neutron of wave-

211 length λ for our setup utilising a series of magnetic field is given by ;

$$z = cBL\lambda^2 cot\theta \tag{1}$$

212 where c is a constant, L is the separation between the prisms and θ is the inclination angle of

213 the magnetic field boundary and the beam axis as defined in ref [31]. Therefore in any time

214 of flight experiment in which multiple wavelengths are used, a range of spin echo lengths are

215 probed simultaneously. In time of flight measurements the extent of this range is usually

216 chosen by selecting a particular static magnetic field strength (B).

217   The SESANS method encodes the scattering angle in the polarisation of the neutron

218 beam and the resulting change in polarisation from the scattering (P(z)) is given by;

$$P(z) = \exp(\Sigma_t[G(z) - 1]) \tag{2}$$

219 where Σ_t is the fraction of neutrons that are scattered once by a sample of thickness t and

220 G(z) is a a correlation function, related to the Debye-type correlation function, $\gamma(r)$ given

221 by [30];

$$G(z) = \frac{2}{\xi} \int_z^\infty \frac{\gamma(r)r}{(r^2 - z^2)^{\frac{1}{2}}} dr \tag{3}$$

222 where ξ is a normalising constant, given by;

$$\xi = 2 \int_0^\infty \gamma(r)dr \tag{4}$$

For a sample which scatters isotropically G(z) is related to the neutron scattering cross section per unit volume of sample $(d\sigma/d\Omega)$, as measured in a conventional SANS experiment by [30];

$$G(z) = \frac{\lambda^2 t}{2\pi\Sigma_t} \int_0^\infty J_0(qz)\frac{d\sigma}{d\Omega}(q)qdq \tag{5}$$

where $J_0(x)$ is the zeroth order cylindrical Bessel function. For homogeneous particles of SLD ρ the scattering cross section is related to the quantity $I(q)$ defined by Andersson et al. [30] as;

$$\frac{d\sigma}{d\Omega}(q) = \langle\Delta\rho^2\rangle I(q) \tag{6}$$

here $\langle\Delta\rho^2\rangle$ is the average of the squared scattering contrast as defined by Feigin and Svergun [32] for a system with either two or three scattering components as;

$$\langle\Delta\rho^2\rangle = \sum_{i\neq j} \phi_i\phi_j(\rho_i - \rho_j)^2 \tag{7}$$

where ϕ_i and ρ_i are respectively the volume fraction and SLD of the i'th component. Also using the more conventional SANS notation the scattering cross section is written as;

$$\frac{d\sigma}{d\Omega}(q) = \frac{N}{V}\langle\rho - \rho_0\rangle^2 S(q)|F(q)|^2 \tag{8}$$

where $\frac{N}{V}$ is the particle number density and S(q) and F(q) are the structure and form factors respectively We use the equations for hard spheres, these are reproduced for clarity from reference [26] as suggested by the referees. Which for a hard sphere system S(q) is calculated with the Percus-Yevick closure relation.

$$F(q, R) = \frac{[sin(qR) - qRcos(qR)]}{(qR)^3} \tag{9}$$

$$S(q) = \frac{1}{1 + 24\phi G(Rq)/(Rq)} \tag{10}$$

In this equation;

$$\begin{aligned}
G(A) =&\alpha(sinA - AcosA)/A^2 \\
&+ \beta(2AsinA + (2 - A^2)cosA - 2/A^3 \\
&+ \gamma[-a^4cosA + 4((3A^2 - 6)cosA + (A^3 - 6A)sinA + 6)]/A^5
\end{aligned}$$

and

$$\alpha = (1 + 2\phi)^2/(1 - \phi)^4$$

$$\beta = -6\phi(1 + \phi/2)^2/(1 - \phi)^2$$

$$\gamma = \phi\alpha/2$$

237   where ϕ is the volume fraction of hard-spheres.

238   Finally the total (single) scattering probability (Σ_t) for a sample of thickness t is given

239   by;

$$\Sigma_t = \frac{\lambda^2 t}{2\pi} \int_0^\infty \frac{d\sigma}{d\Omega}(q) q \, dq = \lambda t \langle \Delta\rho^2 \rangle \xi \quad (11)$$

240   **APPENDIX B- MODEL OF AN ISOTROPIC POROUS PARTICLE**

241   In order to correctly model the silica Stöber particles we developed the following model,

242   which is valid for any homogeneous particle with open and closed pores. Assuming that

243   the volume fraction of accessible and inaccessible voids is V_{Open} and V_{Closed} respectively and

244   that the overall particle volume is V_P. The number of particles per unit volume of sample

245   is N we can write the mass fraction (MF) of the particles.

$$MF = \frac{NV_p(1 - V_{Open} - V_{Closed})d_p}{NV_p(1 - V_{Open} - V_{Closed})d_p + (1 - NV_p(1 - V_{Open}))d_L} \quad (12)$$

246   Where d_p is the mass density of the silica and d_l the mass density liquid. The term NV_p

247   is ϕ which is the volume fraction of the particles.

248   The density of the particles determined from the gas pyncnometer measurements is given

249   by.

$$d = \frac{(1 - V_{Open} - V_{Closed})d_p}{(1 - V_{Open})} \quad (13)$$

250   The contrast difference defined in equation 7 can be written in terms of the scattering

251   length densities of the particle (ρ_p) and the liquid (ρ_l) given as;

$$\rho_p - \rho_l = (1 - V_{Open} - V_{Closed})\rho_S - (1 - V_{Open})\rho_l \quad (14)$$

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