

## The Power of (But Not In?) Sexual Configurations Theory

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Rubin (1984), in her article, “Thinking sex: Notes for a radical theory of sexuality,” observed that “[i]t is difficult to develop a pluralistic sexual ethics without a concept of benign sexual variation” (p. 153). Nearly more than 30 years later, van Anders (2015) may have answered Rubin’s call for conceptualizing benign human sexual variation (making room for a pluralistic sexual ethics) by introducing Sexual Configurations Theory (SCT). Put simply, SCT provides a three-dimensional (3D) map of existing empirical complexities; this allows for a comprehensive conceptual understanding of contemporary sexual diversities by drawing from the grounded experience of individuals.

In this commentary, we evaluate van Anders’ SCT in terms of its contribution to interdisciplinary sexuality research and scholarship. We begin with discussing the ways that SCT has a powerful impact from which sexuality researchers and practitioners should benefit. At the same time, we suggest that notions of power and social justice should be made more visible in the theory, and ask how SCT can be tested. We conclude with recommending the development of additional theoretical, ethical, and methodological work to enhance the power and utility of SCT.

### The Power of Sexual Configurations Theory

van Anders (2015) argues that “each of us has a sexual configuration that is composed of locations in multiple sexual dimensions” (p. 1178). In contrast to the concept of sexual orientation,

which “bulldozes” important human variations “in ways that are neither scientifically useful nor reflective of lived experiences” (p. 1177), she moves discussions away from categories of sexual orientation and toward that of sexual diversity. In the process of doing so, van Anders offers an extensive, multidimensional, and inductive taxonomy of sexual variation that presses apart the well-worn heterosexual–bisexual–homosexual triad.

To build her case for SCT, van Anders provides a breathtaking overview of theories of sexuality and empirical observations of contemporary sexualities. To name a few, she draws from and critically reviews feminist, intersectional, and bioscience research, Kinsey’s scale of sexual orientation, and Money’s “lovemap” theory of sexual orientation. van Anders also highlights the importance of neuroendocrinology research, a field frequently overlooked by some sexualities researchers.

The infrastructure of SCT is built upon several new concepts introduced by van Anders. These include (1) updating the concepts of *sexual orientation* and *sexual identity* with that of *sexual configuration*; (2) introducing the concept of *gender/sex sexuality*; (3) replacing labels of *alignment/misalignment* with the less judgmental concepts of *coincident* vs. *branched* (to categorize connections between sexual identity and sexual practices); (4) applying the *coincident* and *branched* concepts to an individual’s number of partners (with *coincident* referring to both *erotic* and *nurturing* activities being found in the same partner, and *branched* referring to different partners fulfilling those different needs); (5) adding the concepts of *allosexual* and *non-allosexual* to document how important the number of sexual partners is for an individual; and (6) replacing the categories of *love* and *lust* with *nurturance* and *eroticism* (the latter of which encompass feelings and behaviors beyond those envisioned as needing of sexual “release” or of marital commitment). In the interest of space, we refer readers to van Anders’ article for more extensive definitions, empirical support and justifications for these additions, as well as 3D images to map out the theory.

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We see several important contributions of SCT to sexualities researchers. First, because SCT incorporates diverse sexualities in a non-judgmental manner across a variety of settings, it can be useful in and of itself as a prodiversity intervention. van Anders highlights this possibility as well, describing SCT as “potentially liberatory” because “one could argue that a progressive sexuality is one that recognizes sexual diversity, situates its own sexuality/ies among this diversity, and recognizes its and others’ situatedness (i.e., that recognizes how it is not the only, the right, or the natural version)” (van Anders, 2015, p. 1207). Just as was hoped for with Kinsey’s 7-point scale of sexual orientation, SCT may cultivate non-pathologizing and non-stigmatizing analyses of individuals situated outside of the “charmed circle” of sexuality (Rubin, 1984).

A second innovative aspect of van Anders’ SCT is that it opens up new avenues through which to view dominant sexuality categories such as heterosexuality. Through SCT, heterosexuality as a category can be viewed as far more variable and complex than is generally posited. While some scholars have attempted to show the variability, diversity, and constructedness of heterosexuality, SCT presses beyond previous attempts to “study up” on heterosexuality (Katz, 1995; Messner, 1996), while it may find points of congruence with some contemporary queer theorizing of heterosexuality (e.g., see Ward, 2015).

Third, van Anders provides a welcome historicization of sexualities by discussing the situatedness of sexualities over time that (can possibly) end with minority sexualities experiencing less inequality because they are integrated with and embedded within sexual majorities. For example, Fig. 1 of the article (van Anders, 2015, p. 1188) depicts how minority sexualities might progress to more equal social positioning relative to majority sexualities over time (although the mechanisms by which this occurs are not detailed; we return to this point later).

A final contribution that we raise here is van Anders’ introduction of an *erotic/nurturance* schema to replace common dramatic assumptions of a war between *love* and *lust*; we very much appreciate how this may move beyond the limitations of Judeo-Christian notions of dichotomous, hierarchical, and heteronormative notions of virtuous vs. shameful sexuality and toward sexual expressions which map more directly onto the nuances of lived experiences. With these exciting contributions in mind, we now turn to our concerns about the concept of power in SCT, and questions about the testability of SCT.

### The (Un-theorized) Power in Sexual Configurations Theory

While SCT is a powerful new conceptual tool for understanding human sexual diversity, our primary concern is that SCT, as currently constructed, may flatten the social power that is implicit in all sexual categories and/or configurations.

To be clear, several references to power do appear in the article. For example, van Anders (2015) recognizes that some individual and group sexualities are marginalized and others occupy more powerful positions, referring to this as a “sexual social location in a power hierarchy” (p. 1185). She also argues that her theory “explicitly attends to power dynamics, for example, one might consider heterosexuality and bisexuality alongside each other, paying equal attention to their shared and divergent complexities while recognizing that heterosexuality is a majority sexuality and bisexuality is a marginalized one—and what that means” (p. 1187). In addition, van Anders highlights that her interdisciplinary theory includes “literatures on polyamory, asexualities, intimacies, and social neuroendocrinology” (p. 1179), which we recognize as literatures (as seen in the disciplines of political economy, sociology, or anthropology) that often envision sexual categories as effects of power relations and cultural processes instead of sexual categories reflecting an intrinsic truth about individuals. And, as mentioned above, van Anders also examines “stages” of sexual diversity and discusses how marginalized sexualities can move from being “othered” to being seen as a part of a diverse set of sexual configurations, including “attention to particularities and generalities along with power differentials” (p. 1188).

While van Anders describes how analyses of social power relations are important in the development of SCT, it is not apparent to us where and how power is actually located within the diagrammed model and, more importantly, translatable to readers or users of SCT. The reason it is important to include power more explicitly in SCT is that this then more clearly illuminates connections between structures of opportunities (and their associated privilege and inequality) and individual sexual desires/practices. van Anders writes: “For example, someone might *want to* have no partners, one partner, two partners concurrently, or more” (p. 1193, emphasis ours). But often one’s sexuality is determined by more than just one’s individual wishes and desires, and rather is influenced directly through opportunity structures or barriers (Connell & Dowsett, 1999; Hirsch et al., 2007; Weeks, 1985). These power relations can have a range of impacts, including blocking access to desires (e.g., becoming celibate out of a lack of willing or interested partners) or producing opportunities and constraints which may be essentially victimless but still embedded within interpersonal, cultural, and institutional power relations (e.g., homogamy; polygamy). Severely unequal power relations (upheld by local political and cultural structures) may also produce and reinforce sexual opportunity structures which are harmful to others, such as child molestation within conservative religious contexts (Bottoms, Sharver, Goodman, & Qin, 1995) and high rates of sexual and physical violence against sex workers in places where prostitution is criminalized and stigmatized (Decker et al., 2015).

So this leaves us wondering: What is lost and gained in making SCT seem more like a power-neutral taxonomy—a model that in

and of itself may be empowering, but not necessarily useful for critiquing power relations? It is useful at this point to return to a comparison with Rubin's (1984) analysis that includes a diversity of sexualities in the context of critical power relations. Rubin makes the connection between sexual hierarchies and other forms of oppression clear: "All these hierarchies of sexual value—religious, psychiatric, and popular—function in much the same ways as do ideological systems of racism, ethnocentrism, and religious chauvinism. They rationalize the well-being of the sexually privileged and the adversity of the sexual rabble" (p. 152). While van Anders' (2015) inventory of sexual diversity is more extensive than what is found in Rubin (1984), the SCT taxonomy appears to do so without factoring in how these identities and practices are constructed, reinforced, privileged and/or stigmatized via power relations. Knowledge of SCT itself may be an empowering intervention that indirectly benefits sexually marginalized individuals and communities, but it is more difficult to ascertain from SCT how and where power relations intersect with the range of available "desires" or "choices."

### Testability, Measurability, and Scope

There is enormous value in creating a theoretical framework that documents and affirms benign sexual variation: In addition to including a number of continuums, branches, and parameters, SCT allows for possible interactions between these new concepts and intersectional aspects of any given social location due to race, class, gender, sexuality, disability, and beyond. This inclusivity of diversity, however, leads to a number of questions related to testability, measurability, and scope.

### Where and How Can Sexual Configurations Theory be Tested?

We concur with van Anders that if someone cannot locate themselves inside this model, then this should not invalidate the theory but rather just provide material for its expansion. But this then also poses questions about testability—which requires an embedded theory of change. In what ways, and under what conditions, might aspects of SCT be tested or "falsified"? This was not discussed in the article, while a great deal of complexity was offered. Thus, the greatest strength of this article—complexity and inclusiveness of all forms of sexual diversity—may ironically also be one of its greatest weaknesses. With the complexity found in SCT comes the difficulty in adhering to the strictures of testing within the scientific method. Even so, given its prodiversity contributions otherwise (as discussed above), testability, we believe, need not be the primary concern of advocates for SCT.

### How Can Intersectionality be Measured?

A related point concerns issues of intersectionality that van Anders (2015) mentions as an important concept that extends single axis understandings of sexuality. However, when examining intersectionality alone (without all of the other dimensions of SCT) has proven to be very methodologically challenging. Scholarship has been burgeoning in the area of intersectionality for many years, but the abilities of researchers to translate an intersectional framework into quantitative measures, solid study designs, and subsequent analyses have been sparse and have been deemed daunting by many (Bowleg, 2008, 2012; Cole, 2009; McCall, 2005). Scholars have recognized that it is one thing to realize that something matters for a fuller understanding of the social world and entirely another thing to measure it (Bowleg, 2012; Nash, 2008; Sen, Iyer, & Mukherjee, 2009).

Our comments above do not mean that it is impossible to measure intersectionality as it intersects with important dimensions of SCT—and some methodological innovation has certainly resulted in the area of intersectional frameworks, especially in the area of health (Hankivsky, 2012; Schultz & Mullings, 2006; Sen et al., 2009; Stirrat, Meyer, Ouellette, & Gara, 2008). However, researchers often measure intersectionality in terms of an interaction term which, it is argued, does not adequately capture the complexity associated with the simultaneity of multiple social axes (Bowleg, 2008; McCall, 2005; Weldon, 2006). While we realize that van Anders did not cover the need for methodological innovation or a how-to guide for study design and analysis implications of her work, we would appreciate hearing further from her on this point. We also think it best not to leave all of the methods' implications of this new model/enterprise to others due to the fact that scholars often erroneously import assumptions from an original theory into measurements that are inaccurate, show poor translation, or travel in ways other than the original author intended (Connell & Messerschmidt, 2005; Dworkin, 2015). Perhaps we can put forward a simple recommendation that there be a methods' follow-up to her theoretical paper so as to guide scholars who desire to test the theory quantitatively.

An additional related point is that intersectionality was not intended to be put forward solely at the level of individualized and/or community-level identities, both of which are levels of analysis that are recognized by van Anders. Intersectionality as a term in its original form also focused on how macrolevel structural and institutional factors shape inequalities and oppression (Baca-Zinn & Thorton-Dill, 1993; Hill-Collins, 1986, 1990, 1999). It is here where van Anders' more individual-level analysis and emphasis in her model (i.e., behaviors/desires/actions/practices) may lack analysis of large scale institutional, structural, or societal-level shifts that have also been an integral part of an intersectional framework at its inception (Baca-Zinn

& Thorton-Dill, 1993; Hankivisky, 2012; Hill-Collins, 1998). This is not to say that quantitative scholars have not found a way to examine how macrolevel and identity related factors interact using an intersectional analysis, and some would argue that this and multilevel analysis is certainly possible (Hankivisky, 2012); however, this level of work on intersectionality has only begun among health scholars who use the scientific method, and sexuality scholars may need to catch up in this regard.

### Intended Scope and Impact

van Anders does not define the intended scope of SCT, but it is presumably meant, at minimum, to cover North American sexualities. We are thus left with several additional questions: How flexible is this theory to account for changes over time and cultural/global variations? How can SCT not just better incorporate theorizations of power but theorizations focused on how sexual configurations themselves are shaped by race, class, gender, age, and more? How can SCT hope to achieve its liberatory aims when Kinsey himself had hoped that his own categorical configurations would lead to the same? Scholars and practitioners in sexuality studies can hardly argue that the expansive new continuum and categorization Kinsey put forward led to neutral moral stances or shifts in social valuations or power relations across categories (or would they?). What then might be needed to achieve a view of benign sexual variation, while also staying attuned to issues of power and abuse?

### Conclusion

We applaud van Anders' (2015) introduction of SCT. The model provides sexuality researchers and applied professionals with exciting new conceptual tools for understanding contemporary human sexual diversity. Simultaneously, we have lingering questions as to whether SCT is a theory with testable hypotheses embedded into it or simply a wonderful new heuristic device or taxonomy that makes space for novel research questions and might therefore “forge different kinds of answers” (p. 1206). And, while we agree that SCT likely does “resolve many of the existing limitations of current theories of sexual orientation” (p. 1179), we also presume that the complexity of this theory can be problematic in terms of the ease of carrying out the methodological innovations that will need to accompany these nuanced concepts and their inter-relationships.

Theorizing sexuality in terms of diversity rather than morality, frequency, or normativity is an empirically accurate and liberating proposition. And it is also potentially limited without including an understanding of methodological guidelines and, more importantly, power relations. Because we see SCT as an extremely valuable contribution to expanding understanding of sexual diversity, we hope that SCT can be expanded next with an eye toward illuminating the questions we have raised and also

to further the dialogue about the conditions under which sexual diversity might actually become benign variation.

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