

ORIGINAL PAPER

Explanatory models for homeopathy: from the vital force to the current paradigm



Silvia Waisse^{1,*} and Leoni Villano Bonamin²

¹Center Simão Mathias of Studies in History of Science (CESIMA), Pontifical Catholic University of São Paulo, Rua Caio Prado 102, São Paulo, SP, Brazil

²Research Center of Paulista University, Graduation Program of Environmental and Experimental Pathology, Rua Dr Bacelar 1212, São Paulo, SP, Brazil

Facing claims for and against the scientific status of homeopathy, one is entitled to ask: is there a scientific model for homeopathy? In this study we reconstructed the model put forward by Hahnemann. The results showed that it was essentially based on the assumption of a ‘vital force’ exclusive to living beings. While the vital force was a basic element of 18th-century science, the existence of such a *sui generis* force of nature was refuted with the formulation of the law of the conservation of energy by mid-19th century. As a function of that fact for homeopathic theory, we discuss the history of the rise and demise of the theory of the vital force from the last quarter of the 18th century to 1830. Finally, we call the attention to the paradigm shift biology underwent starting at the end of the 19th century as the framework for contemporary views on the functioning of living beings and consequently, of the effects of pharmacological agents on them. Homeopathy (2016) 105, 280–285.

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Introduction: scientific models and homeopathy

The notion of ‘scientific models’ and their difference vis-à-vis ‘scientific theories’ are a subject of much discussion. As a generic working definition, one might agree on that: they are logical systems, i.e., their components are articulated through the laws of logic, the ‘pieces’ being observations, axioms or postulates, which allow asserting under which conditions some assumptions occur, and thus allow inferring/postulating other possible facts by applying a given set of rules.

Models must necessarily be consistent (i.e., not contain contradictions) and complete (account for the full universe

of objects and phenomena within their scope). In addition, experiments and data should meet two intimately intertwined properties: repeatability/reproducibility (repeatability: same method on identical test material, under the same conditions; reproducibility: same method on identical test material but under different conditions – different operators, different apparatus, different laboratories and/or after different intervals of time)¹ and predictability.

Facing the countless claims for and against the scientific status of homeopathy, one is entitled to ask: is there a scientific model for homeopathy?

In this study we reconstructed the model put forward by Hahnemann. The results showed that it was essentially based on the assumption of a ‘vital force’ exclusive to living beings. While the vital force was, indeed, a basic element of 18th-century science, the existence of such a *sui generis* force of nature was refuted together with the formulation of the law of the conservation of energy by mid-19th century. As a function of the relevance of that fact for homeopathic theory, we discuss the history of the rise and demise of the theory of the vital force from the last quarter of the 18th century to the 1830.

*Correspondence: Silvia Waisse, Center Simão Mathias of Studies in History of Science (CESIMA), Pontifical Catholic University of São Paulo, Rua Caio Prado 102, São Paulo, SP, Brazil.

E-mail: swaisse@pucsp.br, leonibonamin@unip.br

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Finally, we call the attention to the paradigm shift biology began to undergo starting at the end of the 19th century as the direct framework for the contemporary views on the functioning of living beings and consequently, of the effects of pharmacological agents on them.

Hahnemann's model: the vital force as cornerstone

To have a clear understanding of the assumptions underlying Hahnemann's explanatory model for homeopathy, the most appropriate source is *Spirit of the homeopathic doctrine of medicine*, first published in 1813 (revised in 1833), which Hahnemann wrote to give the theoretical grounds underpinning his more practical-minded *Organon of medicine* (1st edition, 1810).¹

The first and foremost assumption in science concerns the ultimate nature of being, and within our context of interest it corresponds to the theory of matter. As it was almost the rule in the 18th and first decades of the 19th century, also Hahnemann adopted the vitalist perspective²:

"The material substances of which the human organism is composed no longer follow in their living combination the laws to which the material substances in lifeless state are subjected, but follow the laws of vitality alone; [...] here a nameless, all-powerful fundamental force (Grundkraft) rules [...]".³

Consistently, he defined health/disease/cure as the normal/abnormal/recovered functioning of the vital force:

"[...] it is evident that human diseases are caused by the dynamic and virtual influence of pathological harmful agencies; in essence, they cannot be but purely dynamic (can only operate in a spirit-like [geistig] manner) affections of the vital character of our organism".⁴

As it was common among 18th and early 19th century physiologists (see below), also Hahnemann admitted that 'forces', understood as the *causes* of motion, could not be investigated as such, but only through their effects: *"Whatever life might be, it can only be empirically discernible through its manifestations and phenomena [...]"*.⁵ Being that the causes could only be inferred from their perceptible effects, the only method valid in natural science

and medicine was the one based on observation and experimentation and the inferences directly resulting from them. This was a basic assumption of the 'new science' that had emerged in the 17th century, as we discuss below in more detail.

In short, these are the assumptions that underlie Hahnemann's model for health/disease/cure/therapeutics, as follows:

- **Disease**: abnormal working of the vital force; it is caused by anything able to disarrange the normal operation of the vital force; therefore, the nature of any cause of disease must be the same as the nature of the vital force: 'dynamic', spirit-like (*geistig*).
- **Cure**: real cures can only be achieved through the use of drugs necessarily able to act on the vital force and reinstate its normal functioning.
- **Actions and effects of drugs**: a medicine is thus any substance able to act on and modify the functioning of the vital force; therefore, their nature must be the same as the one of the vital force ('dynamic', spirit-like). When such a substance is administered to a healthy individual, it elicits a specific series of manifestations ('symptoms'); this procedure became known as 'proving' or 'pathogenesis' (and more recently, 'homeopathic pathogenetic trial' – HPT).⁶ Reciprocally, when that substance is administered to an ill person exhibiting a similar set of symptoms, it is able to cure him/her. Therefore, concludes Hahnemann:

"Both the [ability] to heal diseases and to pathologically affect the healthy are inseparably found in all the remedies, and both operations patently originate from one and the same source, namely, from their power to alter the human health in a dynamic manner; therefore, it is impossible that they might act according to different immanent natural laws in the sick than in the healthy; then, it follows that it is the same force in the remedies that which heals diseases in the sick and induces pathological symptoms in the healthy".⁶

The abovementioned assumptions led Hahnemann to formulate an *experimental hypothesis*, which might be phrased as follows: if substance X heals disease Y, then it elicits the symptoms of disease Y in healthy provers; and reciprocally, if substance X elicits symptoms Y in healthy provers, then it heals cases of disease that exhibit symptoms Y.⁷ Hahnemann tells us that he then set himself to demonstrate empirically this hypothesis. Unfortunately, his experimental notebooks did not survive, and we thus have to take his word as authoritative.

To summarize, according to Hahnemann the mode of action of the cause of disease and of its healing remedy is the same, the only difference being that the state induced by the former is 'natural', while the one elicited by the latter is 'artificial' (to notice, term 'artificial' had no pejorative connotation at that time, but merely meant 'made through art').⁸ Here, Hahnemann introduced the only *ad hoc*

¹Hahnemann C Geist der neuen Heillehre (1813), Geist der homöopathischen Heillehre (1833), in Schmidt JM, Kaiser D, ed. Gesammelte kleine Schriften. Heidelberg: Karl F Haug Verlag, 2001, p. 639–648 and p. 842–852, respectively; here the 1833 version was quoted, as representing Hahnemann's more mature views; only the 1813 version is available in English translation, Spirit of the homeopathic doctrine of medicine, in Dudgeon RE, The lesser writings of Samuel Hahnemann, London: W Headland, 1851, 696–711. All translations from German are ours, we translated in a way that makes sense to a present-day readership, see Schmidt JM, Vorwort der Herausgebers, in Hahnemann C Organon der Heilkunst (6th ed.). Neufassung mit Systematik und Glossar. 2nd ed. München/Jena: Elsevier/Urban & Fischer, 2006.

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