

ANIMAL MAGNETISM

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October 10, 2025

RECOMMENDED CITATION

mohammad looti (2025). *ANIMAL MAGNETISM*. PSYCHOLOGICAL SCALES. Retrieved from <https://scales.arabpsychology.com/?p=42607>

Animal Magnetism (Mesmerism)

Primary Disciplinary Field(s): History of Medicine, Pseudoscience, Early Modern Philosophy, Hypnosis

1. Core Definition

Animal Magnetism, historically known as Mesmerism, refers to a hypothetical, invisible, natural force that Austrian physician Franz Anton Mesmer (1734-1815) claimed existed in all living beings. Mesmer theorized that this fluid, which he called *magnétisme animal*, could be channeled and manipulated to produce healing effects. The core assumption was that the proper distribution and flow of this fluid throughout the body were essential for health, and illness resulted from its obstruction or imbalance. Mesmer believed that by restoring this balance--often through specific therapeutic techniques involving touch, passes, and magnetized objects--he could cure a wide range of ailments, classifying it as a universal physiological principle that connected the cosmos, the earth, and human beings.

Mesmer's theory proposed a grand, pervasive connection, suggesting that the fluid acted as a medium for reciprocal influence between celestial bodies, the earth, and all living matter. This complex cosmological view distinguished his work from simple vitalism; for Mesmer, health was literally dependent on the alignment of one's internal magnetic state with external astronomical forces. The fluid was purported to be highly subtle, capable of permeating all substances, and controllable by specific individuals (the mesmerists). This belief system dominated therapeutic practices in high society throughout late 18th-century Europe, creating a sensation that blurred the lines between empirical medicine and spiritual healing.

In contemporary popular culture, the term has often devolved into a metaphorical descriptor, suggesting a powerful, often mystical, physical or sexual attraction between individuals, particularly between males and females, as alluded to in the initial source material. This popularized usage strips the term of its complex 18th-century medical and cosmological framework, reducing it instead to an intense, inexplicable charisma or allure. However, the academic understanding of **Animal Magnetism** centers exclusively on Mesmer's original pseudo-scientific hypothesis regarding the ubiquitous energetic fluid and its therapeutic manipulation, which served as a crucial, albeit discredited, precursor to the development of modern hypnotism.

2. Etymology and Historical Development

The concept of **Animal Magnetism** emerged formally in 1779 when Franz Anton Mesmer published his *Mémoire sur la découverte du magnétisme animal*. Mesmer's theories were influenced by contemporary understandings of physics, particularly the recent discoveries

concerning electricity and mineral magnetism, as well as older philosophical concepts of vitalism and universal fluids, traceable back to figures like Paracelsus. He initially attempted to integrate his observations with traditional physics, arguing that the fluid operated according to laws similar to those governing astronomical bodies, notably the influence of the sun and moon on the tides. This blend of esoteric tradition and Enlightenment-era scientific language allowed his ideas to gain initial traction among intellectual elites seeking rational explanations for mysterious physical phenomena.

Mesmer first practiced successfully in Vienna, but his fame truly exploded after moving to Paris in 1778. In Paris, his methods evolved from individual treatments using mineral magnets to elaborate group sessions centered around the *baquet*--a large wooden tub filled with chemical and iron filings, from which magnetized iron rods protruded. Patients would hold these rods, believing the magnetic fluid would be transmitted into their bodies. These theatrical group sessions often induced highly emotional states, including convulsions, known as "crises," which Mesmer regarded as the critical release of blocked magnetic fluid necessary for healing. The intense, almost theatrical nature of these treatments, coupled with Mesmer's considerable personal charisma, led to massive public following, particularly among wealthy Parisian clientele desperate for cures.

The growing popularity and financial success of Mesmerism eventually prompted official scrutiny from the French government. In 1784, King Louis XVI commissioned two French Royal Commissions--one involving members of the Royal Society of Medicine, and another featuring distinguished scientists like Benjamin Franklin and Antoine Lavoisier--to investigate the claims of **Animal Magnetism**. These commissions conducted rigorous, controlled experiments, often utilizing blindfolded subjects, to determine if the therapeutic effects were due to the magnetic fluid itself or merely to suggestion and imagination. This landmark inquiry effectively utilized some of the earliest forms of blind testing in medical research, marking a crucial moment in the history of scientific methodology.

3. Key Concepts and Methodology

The practical application of Animal Magnetism relied on specific techniques designed to manipulate the fluid within the patient's body, primarily through the agency of the mesmerist. The therapeutic methodology was highly ritualized and differed significantly based on whether the treatment was administered individually or collectively through the famous *baquet* system.

The Universal Fluid: Mesmer's fundamental premise, positing an invisible, highly subtle fluid that permeates the universe and acts as a medium for reciprocal influence between celestial bodies, the earth, and living organisms. Health depended on the free circulation of this fluid, while disease resulted from blockages or disharmony in its flow.

The Baquet: The primary apparatus used in the Parisian group sessions. It served as a collective magnetic reservoir, allowing multiple patients to receive the fluid simultaneously. The *baquet*

included magnetized water and iron filings, providing a physical focus for the patients' belief and expectation, thereby amplifying the communal therapeutic effect and facilitating mass crises.

The Crisis (Crise): A violent, involuntary convulsion, fainting spell, or highly emotional physical reaction experienced by the patient during magnetization. Mesmer viewed the crisis not as a negative symptom, but as the necessary, sudden release of pathological blockages, comparable to the rupture of an abscess, leading toward the restoration of internal fluid harmony.

Magnetic Passes (Imposition of Hands): The core technique employed by the mesmerist, involving specific, deliberate hand gestures or light touch (or often passes near, without physical contact) over the patient's body. This action was intended to direct and restore the flow of the magnetic fluid, reinforcing the communication and dominance of the mesmerist over the patient's internal state.

4. Significance and Legacy

Although officially rejected by the scientific establishment in 1784, **Animal Magnetism** did not simply vanish into historical obscurity. Instead, its failure to prove the existence of a physical fluid paradoxically launched a new and profound line of inquiry into psychological phenomena. The Royal Commission's finding that the effects were purely due to "imagination" provided the first crucial scientific acknowledgement that subjective psychological factors, such as expectation and belief, could produce profound and observable physiological changes. This realization shifted the focus from external physical forces (the fluid theory) to internal mental mechanisms, laying foundational stones for clinical psychology.

The most lasting contribution of Mesmerism was its direct evolution into modern hypnosis. Followers of Mesmer, such as the Marquis de Puységur, recognized that the therapeutic effects persisted even when the magnetic fluid concept was abandoned. Puységur introduced the concept of "artificial somnambulism," a peaceful, highly suggestible trance state contrasting sharply with Mesmer's violent crises. This peaceful state demonstrated that the mesmerist's influence was psychological, not fluidic, and could be used to treat patients through verbal suggestion.

Later, in the 19th century, Scottish surgeon James Braid formally coined the term "hypnotism" (derived from the Greek word for sleep, *hypnos*) to describe the phenomenon observed during magnetic passes. Braid systematically detached the practice entirely from Mesmer's magnetic and fluid theories, establishing it as a psychological process centered on focused attention, fixation, and mental suggestion. Thus, Mesmer's controversial practices, though scientifically debunked, inadvertently provided the practical techniques and clinical observations necessary for the birth of experimental psychology and the legitimate therapeutic use of suggestion.

5. Debates and Criticisms

The primary and most enduring criticism of **Animal Magnetism** stemmed from its absolute failure to withstand empirical testing. The 1784 French Royal Commissions, employing rudimentary but highly effective blind procedures, demonstrated conclusively that the reported therapeutic effects vanished when the patients were unaware they were being magnetized or when the supposed magnetic source (like the *baquet*) was inert. This pivotal finding proved that the efficacy was not intrinsic to the alleged fluid but extrinsic, residing entirely in the power of suggestion, expectation, and belief, a phenomenon now universally understood and studied as the placebo effect. The scientific establishment rejected Mesmerism not on ideological grounds, but on the grounds that it lacked observable, measurable physical mechanisms, placing it firmly outside the bounds of Enlightenment-era physics and medicine.

Furthermore, Mesmerism faced significant social and ethical critique. The highly dramatic and public nature of the induced crises, combined with the intimate physical interactions often required during the magnetic passes (particularly involving male mesmerists manipulating wealthy, often hysterical, high-society women), led to widespread accusations of charlatanry, fraud, and moral impropriety. Critics argued that the practice exploited vulnerable individuals, relying heavily on theatrical display and mass hysteria rather than genuine medical intervention. These moral and ethical concerns reinforced the conclusions of the scientific commissions, solidifying Mesmerism's classification as a fringe pseudo-science, despite its lasting impact on the conceptualization of the unconscious mind.

6. Further Reading

[Franz Anton Mesmer \(Wikipedia\)](#)

[Animal Magnetism \(Wikipedia\)](#)

[Hypnosis \(Wikipedia\)](#)

[Antoine Lavoisier \(Wikipedia\)](#)