

## Expertise in Chess: Does It Help to Be Paranoid?

A review of



**A Psychobiography of Bobby Fischer: Understanding the Genius, Mystery, and Psychological Decline of a World Chess Champion**

by Joseph G. Ponterotto

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Reviewed by

[Neil Charness](#)

I have to admit to having been a bit suspicious when I read the title of this book and saw the term *psychobiography*. I had not been impressed by prior attempts to “psychoanalyze” chess playing, such as in Reuben Fine’s (1967) *The Psychology of the Chess Player*. However, Joseph Ponterotto has been very careful to first define what he means by *psychobiography*, “the ‘why’ of a person’s behavior” (p. 4), and to indicate the limits for any conclusions he might draw in line with ethical standards in psychology. His main audience for *A Psychobiography of Bobby Fischer: Understanding the Genius, Mystery, and Psychological Decline of a World Chess Champion*, as indicated in the preface, is mental health professionals, particularly those working with gifted and talented youths and adolescents.

As well, Ponterotto hoped to fill in extant Fischer biographies by emphasizing psychological interpretations of Fischer’s behavior (and that of family members). For those

who are interested in more detailed biographical information about Fischer, Frank Brady's (2011) *Endgame* is highly recommended, and Ponterotto relied heavily on its contents.

Joseph Ponterotto is a counseling psychologist and self-described avid chess player who learned to play at the age of 14 at the start of the Fischer boom in 1972. That year's match between Fischer and Boris Spassky was a huge event for chess fans. Aside from the political backdrop (Soviet Union vs. United States), it was also the first match-play qualification by an American for the World Chess Championship since Paul Morphy made his triumphal mid-19th-century tour of Europe, beating all of the best players there.

The Fischer–Spassky match was of such high political import that when Fischer threatened to abandon play, Henry Kissinger made a personal appeal to him to continue, which he did, and after a disastrous start ended up winning by a comfortable margin of 12.8–8.5. Ponterotto also provides a psychobiography for Paul Morphy, who seemed to share some uncanny resemblances to Fischer.

Ponterotto attempts to build his differential diagnosis on the basis of Fischer's behaviors in interviews and from accounts from and interviews with family, friends, and acquaintances. He concludes that Fischer suffered from paranoid personality disorder (PPD), with eventual development of delusional disorder. This account rings true in terms of my reading about Fischer over the years (and, as Ponterotto points out, matches a formal diagnosis of PPD for his mother, Regina Fischer). However, I am not a clinician, so I am not in the best position to be a discriminating judge. Fischer died and was buried at the age of 64 but was exhumed to settle a paternity suit, showing him not to be the father of a Filipino girl. No doubt the science of psychology will continue to advance, and it would be interesting if the sample taken then could be used to assess genetic contributions to his mental illness.

Fischer was apprehended in Japan in 2004 for having violated U.S. sanctions by playing a “return” match with Boris Spassky in Montenegro in 1992, defying an executive order from George H. W. Bush about commercial relations with Yugoslavia. Had he been deported back to the United States to stand trial, we might finally have had a situation with a court-ordered hearing for a psychological assessment (fitness to stand trial). Fortunately for Fischer, though perhaps not for the psychological community, Iceland came to Fischer's rescue, granting him citizenship and asylum in that country, where he eventually died at age 64 in 2008, of renal failure, after having refused medical treatment.

Let's accept the premise that Fischer suffered from PPD and, later, delusional disorder. Was Fischer's paranoia justified? Page 2 of Brady's (2011) *Endgame* has this quote: “A friend had called the State Department in the late 1990s and asked if Bobby could return home. ‘Of course he can,’ said the spokesperson, ‘but as soon as he lands at JFK, we'll nail him.’” It turns out that Fischer's suspicions about Soviet players ganging up on him in tournaments were justified, as comments years later from those chess players made clear. But his fears about the Russians trying to kill him, or that a small set of Jewish families controlled the world and were out to get him, were not well justified. Nonetheless,

his brilliant chess mind was more than a match for less well-prepared opponents, particularly in the matches that led up to the 1972 World Championship match.

This book is likely not the last word on Bobby Fischer's personality disorders. A recent set of interviews by a Canadian author and chess player, Camille Coudari, also speculates on the role of religious cults (e.g., the Worldwide Church of God) in leading Fischer to his virulent anti-Semitism and later anti-Americanism (see Coudari, 2012a, 2012b). It will be interesting to see what, if anything, Gardar Sveinsson, an Icelandic psychiatrist who spent considerable time with Fischer during his final years, may eventually have to say.

Still, to me the more interesting questions are, what behaviors led to Fischer's world-class chess performance, and does a particular personality type play a role in acquiring high-level expertise? Fischer studied chess in an era before the Internet made play with strong chess opponents available 24/7. He rose to fame before computers could rigorously check planned openings and unfailingly catch blunders in a player's games. Why did Fischer rise so fast and so far above the opposition in that brief period from 1970–1972, as seen in plots of his chess rating trajectory (Chessmetrics, n.d.)?

Although Ponterotto seemingly sides with a nature-plus-nurture (e.g., deliberate practice; Ericsson & Charness, 1994) explanation of skill acquisition, we have too little information about how and what Fischer practiced, though it is clear that he was highly motivated to master the game. As an example, he taught himself foreign languages such as Russian and Serbo-Croatian to access the latest chess literature as a teenager. Some reports have Fischer studying chess 12 to 14 hours per day, well above the estimates of four hours per week for serious study alone by moderately strong chess players obtained in my lab (Charness, Tuffiash, Krampe, Reingold, & Vasyukova, 2005). (Even taking +2 *SD* for our estimate, the amount comes out to only 14 hours per week.)

Even after he had given up tournament play (failing to defend his title by defaulting to Anatoly Karpov in 1975), Fischer was always abreast of chess developments and had a portable chess set ready at hand (e.g., see the Coudari, 2012a, 2012b, interviews). He was always obsessed with finding the truth about chess positions, even phoning in a few years before his death to an Icelandic television show to point out a chess combination missed by the commentators.

The second question is more intriguing. Do chess players, particularly the ones termed geniuses, tend to fall into a particular personality type or, more ominously, suffer from serious personality disorders? When we reviewed the literature on emotion and motivation associations to expert performance (Charness, Tuffiash, & Jastrzemski, 2004), we noted a study by Avni, Kipper, and Fox (1987) that examined personality differences in competitive versus moderately competitive chess players. The main finding in that study was that the competitive players were more suspicious, distrustful, and guarded, and exhibited more intense concentration.

The chess environment is clearly conducive to those who are cognitively (if not physically) aggressive (Fischer was said to have commented as a boy: “I like to make them squirm”) and certainly seems to breed at least suspicion, if not paranoia, that people are out to get you, at least across the chessboard. There is even a specialized phrase for the type of trap that players try to set for each other in the opening phase of the game: the theoretical novelty.

Ponterotto speculates that there is more serious mental illness among top tournament players than would be expected on the basis of population estimates (e.g., 5 percent of the population have a serious mental illness), citing cases of suicides and long-term incarcerations for well-known players. But arguing from cases is a risky business. For instance, the current meteoric 21-year-old star and world’s top-rated chess player, Magnus Carlsen (<http://ratings.fide.com/id.phtml?event=1503014>), appears reasonably normal in press accounts and interviews. (Ponterotto created an interesting slip on page 147 when referring to Magnus Skulason, a late-life Icelandic friend of Fischer, writing instead “Magnus Carlson.”) The current world champion, Viswanathan Anand, also seems to be a pretty stable individual.

World champion Boris Spassky, Fischer’s opponent in the 1972 match, was probably the antithesis of Fischer personalitywise—that is, he was a gracious and easygoing individual. I served on the executive committee of the McGill University chess club in the late 1960s and met and occasionally entertained visiting chess grandmasters such as Bent Larsen, Paul Keres, and Boris Spassky. These famous players seemed to me to be remarkably normal-appearing gentlemen, until one played them, at which point their chess brilliance became obvious.

Genius and madness need not walk hand in hand, though they apparently did for Bobby Fischer. Fischer expressed conflicting views about whether he was a genius, with quotes such as: “Genius. It’s a word. What does it really mean? If I win I’m a genius. If I don’t, I’m not,” and “I object to being called a chess genius, because I consider myself to be an all-around genius, who just happens to play chess, which is rather different” (Academic Chess, n.d.). Ponterotto also speculates about what might have happened had Fischer (and members of his family) received psychotherapy. Would it have helped or hurt? The chess world might have garnered a much richer collection of games had Fischer continued playing past his attainment of the world chess championship.

There has been and will continue to be a great deal of speculation about what factors were responsible for Fischer’s spectacular rise and tragic fall. I recommend *A Psychobiography of Bobby Fischer* as a good launching point for psychologizing about Fischer and as an engaging read about one of the most fascinating chess players in the history of the game.

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