



A Psychobiography of Bobby Fischer

By Joseph G. Ponterotto Ph.D.

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Robert (Bobby) James Fischer was one of the world's most mysterious and exciting personalities of the middle 20th century. He single handedly ended a 35 year span of Russian domination of elite chess when he defeated Boris Spassky for the World Chess Championship in 1972 in Reykjavik, Iceland. Fischer's dynamic victory ignited in Americans a passion for the game of chess and a deep pride in being American during the height of the Cold War. The world knows the story of Fischer's ascent to the pinnacle of chess genius and brilliance, and it knows of his psychological decline into social isolation, paranoia, and likely mental illness. Now, for the first time, through 'A Psychobiography of Bobby Fischer: Understanding the Genius, Mystery, and Psychological Decline of a World Chess Champion,' we come to understand the inner workings of Fischer's mind the genetic, personal, family, cultural, and political factors that collectively provide a penetrating window into the 'why' of Bobby Fischer's genius and bizarre behavior. Renowned counseling psychologist and author Dr. Joseph G. Ponterotto deconstructs almost every aspect of Fischer's personal and career life to sculpt an integrative psychological profile of this enigmatic world personality. Though there have been many articles, books, and films on Bobby Fischer, this text represents the first scholarly psychological assessment of the world's most famous chess champion. Among the topics addressed in the current volume are Bobby's early family environment and his natural intellectual gifts that predisposed him to genius in chess. Critical to understanding Bobby's personality development is his relationship with his mother Regina Fischer and his sister Joan Fischer, as well as his relationship to his likely biological father, Paul Felix Nemenyi. These topics are explored in-depth and the impact of these relationships on Bobby's psychological development is highlighted. Bobby's later-life internal mental state -- his mistrust, anger, and hatred of Jews is explored and the origins of this affective state are closely examined. Dr. Ponterotto also provides the first, carefully and cautiously sculpted psychological autopsy of Bobby Fischer relying on modern psychological assessment procedures. Of interest to readers will be a full chapter comparing the genius and mental health challenges of the United States' two greatest chess champions who lived a century apart, Paul Morphy and Bobby Fischer. This book also explores the topic of the prevalence of mental illness among elite chess players, and provides a critical review of the research on the potential relationship between creativity (a hallmark of chess genius) and vulnerability to mental illness. Finally, Dr. Ponterotto outlines counseling and psychotherapy interventions that

very likely could have helped Bobby throughout his life. Though there are numerous biographies on the life of Bobby Fischer, this text represents the first scholarly, systematically derived psychobiography of this great chess champion and enigmatic world personality. The book includes 10 content chapters and select Tables, Figures, and Family Genograms, as well as Appendices providing extensive detail on the life of Bobby Fischer and family. Finally, the book includes some original family photos never before published.

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Editorial Review

Review

Brilliant, agonized; original, immature; astute, emotionally volatile; virtuosic, enigmatic so goes the narrative of the life and adventures of Bobby Fischer, a man who captivated the world with both his genius and with his tormented soul. In *Genius and Mystery of Bobby Fischer*, Joseph Ponterotto elegantly unpacks the many contradictions that at once propelled Fischer onto the world stage and, at the same time, led to his eventual liminalization. Ponterotto traces Fischer's socio-emotional development from early life skillfully integrating the many influences that helped shape the person he became as an adult. His treatment of the tumultuous dynamics of Fischer's relationship with his mother and the psychological implications of the mystery of his paternity not only makes for fascinating reading but poignantly sheds light on what Fischer's hidden suffering was all about. While Ponterotto explores Fischer's life with the eye of a scientist, he writes with the pen of one who appreciates the complexity of human experience and who faithfully and compassionately strives to follow the truth wherever it may lead. I recommend this eminently readable work not only to Bobby Fischer fans but to all those fascinated by the paradoxes and pain that often lie behind genius. --Amelio A. D Onofrio, PhD Founding Director and Clinical Professor Psychological Services Institute Fordham University

The link between genius and mental illness is often observed but rarely resolved. Chess genius Bobby Fischer's oddities give way to accomplished academician and chess lover Joseph Ponterotto's systematic application of contemporary psychology. Dr. Ponterotto shows us greater meaning in the tragic life of one of the superstars of modern chess. Had proper help been available to a young Bobby Fischer, what elegance of chess mastery might the world have experienced? What discoveries do we lose today when families and children don't get the best support and fall into the abyss of mental illness? Dr. Ponterotto has uncovered the moves and mistakes in one troubled genius to show us how we can help people play the game of life so that there are more winners, and amazingly, fewer losers. --Paul Greene, Ph.D. Professor of Psychology, Iona College, New Rochelle, N.Y. Private Practice, New York City and New Rochelle, NY

The era of the amateur psychologizing about Bobby Fischer is coming to a close. Now we heed a professional. Dr. Joseph Ponterotto has applied the scientific principles of his discipline to a personality that so long perplexed the world. The controversies will not end, but any further hypotheses will need to take Ponterotto's work as a starting point. --Anthony Saidy, MD., Intl. Chess Master

From the Author

Author's correction: On page 95 of this book I incorrectly attributed the suggestion that Bobby Fischer may have suffered from Asberger's Disorder to BBC journalist John Eidinow, co-author (with David Edmonds) of the highly respected book "Bobby Fischer Goes to War." The Asperger's attribution was actually made by David Edmonds, as reported in the Quinn & Hamilton, 2008 article cited. My sincerest apologies to Mr. Eidinow.

About the Author

Joseph G. Ponterotto, Ph.D., is a Professor of Counseling Psychology and Coordinator of the Mental Health Counseling Program in Fordham University's Graduate School of Education, Lincoln Center (Manhattan) Campus. Prior to arriving at Fordham University in 1987, he was a member of the counseling psychology faculty at the University of Nebraska, in Lincoln, Nebraska. He received his M.A. (1981) and Ph.D. (1985) in Counseling Psychology at the University of California at Santa Barbara (UCSB).

Dr. Ponterotto's primary teaching and research interests are in the area of multicultural counseling, quantitative and qualitative research methods, career counseling and assessment, and clinical practice. He is both a licensed psychologist and mental health counselor in the state of New York. Dr. Ponterotto maintains a small private practice in New York City where he works with a broad array of culturally diverse clients, a number of whom are chess players. His clinical specialty is on the intersection of personal development, career development, and quality of life within a sociocultural context.

Dr. Ponterotto is the co-author or co-editor of a number of previous books including the *Handbook of Multicultural Counseling* (Sage Publications), the *Handbook of Multicultural Assessment: Clinical, Psychological, and Educational Applications* (Wiley & Sons), *Preventing Prejudice: A Guide for Counselors, Educators, and Parents* (Sage Publications), and the *Handbook of Racial/Ethnic Minority Counseling Research* (Charles C Thomas, Publisher, Ltd.). An active researcher, Dr. Ponterotto has authored or coauthored roughly 95 peer-reviewed journal articles in counseling and psychology. In 1994, he was the co-winner of the Early Career Scientist/Practitioner Award of the Division of Counseling Psychology within the American Psychological Association (APA). In 2007 he received the Janet E. Helms Award for Mentoring and Scholarship awarded by Teachers College of Columbia University, one of the multicultural psychology field's most distinguished honors. He is a Fellow of the American Psychological Association and the former Associate Editor of the *Journal of Counseling Psychology*. He is an avid chess enthusiast and has been playing chess and following the life of Bobby Fischer since the early 1970s.

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