

Chess-Sinthome: A New Approach To Bobby Fischer's Psychosis

Jorge Luis Zirulnik^{1*} and Miguel Angel Pagano²

¹Infectology/ AIDS Unit, J.A.Fernandez Hospital, Buenos Aires, Argentina

²Neurology Unit, J.A.Fernandez Hospital, Buenos Aires, Argentina

*Corresponding author: Zirulnik JL, Staff Psychiatrist, Infectology/ AIDS Unit, J.A.Fernandez Hospital, Buenos Aires, Argentina, Tel: 54-11 58072198; E-mail: jorzirulnik@gmail.com

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Abstract

In this brief theoretical work, a new conceptual model is proposed to explain the psychosis of American chess player Bobby Fischer. Based on the pioneering work of psychoanalysts, we introduce the concept of *sinthome*, taken from the Lacanian topology of the Borromean knot, with its three registers: real, symbolic and imaginary [RSI], and its fourth stabilizer knot at the breaking of the symbolic. Here we call it chess-sinthome to designate the antipsychotic role fulfilled the ultra-competitive chess, in life and in the minds of some great players.

Keywords: Psychosis; Psychoanalysis; Sinthome

Introduction

The psychology of chess players has called the attention of several researchers for more than a century. Classical works like those of Jones and Fine, in line with Freud's theory, were based on the unconscious motivations of the mind in order to explain the psychosis of great chess players from the 19th century such as Paul Morphy and William Steinitz [1,2].

However, there is a notable lack of scientific works with a plausible hypothesis about Bobby Fischer's paranoid psychosis and its relationship with his prodigious performance. Bobby Fisher was a North American chess player, world champion in 1972.

Consistent hypotheses have been written about in old Freudian psychoanalytical papers, although not directly related to the Fischer case. In an article wrote by Ernest Jones [1], which was submitted to the British Psychoanalytical Society, he links 19th Century American Grandmaster chess player, Paul Morphy's psychosis with Oedipus complex severe distortions and failure of the sublimation mechanisms. Fine [2], a psychologist and a great chess player himself, presented in his book named "The Psychology of the Chess Player", new concepts and ideas that reinforce the previous Jones' thesis [1,2].

Mental Illnesses of Morphy and Bobby Fischer

The lives and mental illnesses of Morphy and Bobby Fischer can be treated in parallel by applying the same conceptual axes. The two chess players had a prodigious ascent to reach the top, leaving then competitive chess to enter a period of ostracism and seclusion, in which both developed a severe paranoid psychosis. P. Morphy was invincible in the US at the age of twelve. Nine years later, he became a virtual world champion facing and emerging victorious in several games with the European elite of chess players from the second half of the 19th Century, including the great Anderssen. Staunton, a British chess player, was the only one who avoided his challenge, due to Morphy's young age and lack of experience. Similarly, Bobby Fischer won the US Open Chess Championship at age fourteen, and then embarked in an unstoppable race with the exclusive goal of beating the

Soviet Chess School, led at that time by Botvinnik. Fischer won the World Championship in 1972 after a final match with the Soviet Boris Spassky, in the context of the Cold War [3-6].

Both Morphy and Fischer fell into overt psychosis after reaching the summit and as a corollary of abandoning the high-level competitive chess. In both cases the symptoms were related to paranoid delusions but also property damage and poisoning, in the case of Morphy and persecution/conspiracy in the case of Fischer. Morphy was admitted to a religious-retirement asylum, where he managed to escape from after a few days. On the other hand, Fischer had never accepted psychiatric care [3-5].

Jones was the first to construct a coherent speculative hypothesis about Morphy's psychosis, based on the categories of psychoanalysis. Chess is a game that works as a substitute for war. Its ulterior goal, the checkmate, is the result of sublimation on the board of hostile oedipal fantasies of killing one's father. Morphy's falling into a severe paranoid psychosis is linked, by Jones, to the frustrated match with the arrogant Staunton, elevated to the place of *archi* - parental imago. At that point, chess was no longer the ideal sublimatory ground for Morphy's father complex. Without chess, his mind was at the mercy of terrible aggressive fantasies projected especially in his brother in law, executor-attorney of the estate of his father [1].

Fine agrees with Jones' developments regardless of the Staunton matter. The American psychologist proposes another axis of analysis based on a moral issue. Morphy could not become a professional chess player considering this new identity as spurious and degraded. Chess should be retained as an amateur game, just as entertainment. If that was not possible, he would be abandoned. Then the regression took its place: previously hidden psychosis came to the surface. Indeed, the practice of chess rejected psychosis. As we shall see, our new hypothesis on the Bobby Fischer's case pivots on these two Fine's ideas [2].

Recently, another American psychologist named Joseph Ponterotto, in his excellent attempt to perform a psychological autopsy of Bobby Fischer, presented the psychiatric diagnosis that raises from the mental condition of the chess player. It is, according to his point of view, a paranoid personality disorder on which a delusional disorder with

anti-semitic and anti-American content was added. The category of schizophrenia, such as Asperger syndrome, is discarded in this work. Ponterotto also adds progressive interesting questions about what had happened with Fischer's talent, if he had been intervened with psychotherapy techniques, family counselling or neuroleptics use [7].

A new way to approach the Bobby Fischer's case is taking the notion of *sinthome**, developed by the French psychoanalyst Jacques Lacan in his topology of the subject. Lacan, in his Seminar "Le *sinthome*" (1975-1976), extends the second topography of the mind, known as the three registers: real; symbolic and imaginary [RSI], linked in the form of Borromean knot, to a fourth node called the *sinthome*. It stands as substitute of the psychic reality, the Oedipus complex or the name of the Father in absence or deficit of the symbolic. So this fourth node maintains the psychic structure in operation (although precarious), holding the subject in its relation to the object and with the other. In this seminar, Lacan applies the new concept of *sinthome*, in his study of the Irish writer James Joyce (Figure 1) [8].

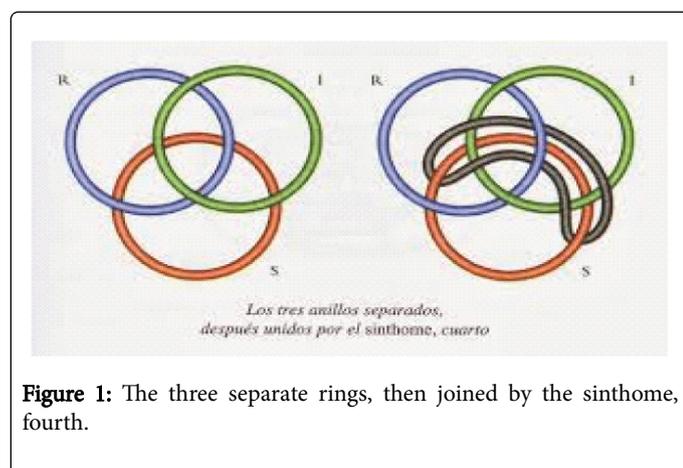


Figure 1: The three separate rings, then joined by the *sinthome*, fourth.

We think that the practice of chess functioned as *sinthome* in Bobby Fischer's mind. His intense dedication to the game in childhood and adolescence, and his competition at the highest-levels kept the three registers tied giving integrity to his mind, thus allowing the display of his enormous talent. While there were falls in anti-social or impulsive behaviours, during the heyday phase with chess (1960-1972), Fischer managed to stay in a competitive realm to a peak in 1972 as the World Champion.

After his extraordinary triumph over Russian Boris Spassky, Fischer gave up competitive chess. He dodged to defend his title against A. Karpov three years later, and save his poor performance re-match with Spassky again, in Montenegro (during the Yugoslavian civil war) in

1992, he entered a period of seclusion, private and public ostracism [4,5].

Conclusions

Then the regression took its place: previously hidden psychosis came to the surface. Indeed, the practice of chess rejected psychosis. While competitive chess was in activity, his mind remained tied. With the disappearance of that stage and with the victory over the soviet hegemony, his chess-*sinthome* faded unleashing the full force of its latent psychosis. Something similar happened in the mentioned case of Morphy: once defeated the group of elite of European players, the competitive chess lost meaning for him, becoming sullen and withdrawn, with the subsequent failure to enter the professional world of lawyers. Until then, chess had rejected psychosis [2].

The fischerian chess-*sinthome* was operating as a stabilizer of the chess player's mental structure. The three RSI registers thus held together compactly. When its reason for being extinguished ultracompetitive chess, aggressive oedipal fantasies, contained before by the game, fierce and deadly projected on the Other, leading to paranoid psychosis. The *sinthome*, along the phallogocentric signs of chess of that time such as the soviet great masters Botvinnik, Petrosian and Spassky, all of them held as Names of the Father as per Fischer, had actually disappeared in a definite and final way.

This category of chess *sinthome* that was brought to our analysis by lacanian theory could be presented as a new second-generation paradigm to explain Bobby Fischer's psychosis, after the pioneering works were already studied. The ability to predict its clinical appearance in the near future shall be a fascinating perspective.

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