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# Bobby Fischer in Socio-Cultural Perspective: Application of Hiller's (2011) Multi-Layered Chronological Chart Methodology

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### **Abstract**

This article presents a case study application of Hiller's (2011) Multi - Layered Chronological Chart (MLCC) methodology to the life story of former World Chess Champion Bobby Fischer. Designed for use in qualitative biographical studies, the MLCC is adapted here for psychobiographical research. In 1972, Fischer became an American Cold War hero as he wrestled the World Chess Championship from a half century of Soviet domination. His rapid rise to world fame was followed by infamy as Fischer abandoned competitive chess, grew increasingly Anti - Semitic and Anti - American, became a fugitive from U.S. justice, and died in relative isolation in Reykjavik, Iceland. Fischer remains one of the more enigmatic personalities of the 20th century and many questions remain regarding his psychological health. The MLCC method is used to contextualize Fischer's life in nine key topical domains across five developmental life stages. The value of the MLCC methodology to psychobiographical research is highlighted and suggestions for advancing this methodology are put forth.

### **Keywords**

Psychobiography, Case Study, Biography, Life History, Chess, Multi - Layered Chronological Chart, Bobby Fischer

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## **Bobby Fischer in Socio-Cultural Perspective: Application of Hiller's (2011) Multi-Layered Chronological Chart Methodology**

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The qualitative research tradition draws on a number of intellectual disciplines, including psychology, history, journalism, sociology, and political science to note a few (see Denzin & Lincoln, 2000). For researchers, the depth and variety of qualitative traditions to draw upon in informing research programs provides a sense of flexibility and excitement about the research endeavor (Ponterotto, 2005). On the other hand, the flexible and discovery-oriented nature of some (e.g., constructivist-interpretivist) qualitative approaches can prove confusing to novice researchers given the perceived lack of specific and structured methodological guidelines (Guba & Lincoln, 1994; Ponterotto, 2005). Recently, Hiller (2011) writing in *The Qualitative Report*, introduced the Multi-Layered Chronological Chart (MLCC) methodology as an organizing framework for single and multiple case study research across intellectual disciplines. Hiller's innovative work coalesces research traditions hailing from history, political science, psychology, and sociology.

The Multi-Layered Chronological Chart (MLCC) methodology was designed particularly for use in biographical studies, and Hiller (2011) provided a number of examples of its application for such purposes. In the present article, the MLCC methodology was adapted for use in psychobiography. Psychobiography can be defined simply as "biography that makes substantial use of psychological theory and knowledge" (Elms, 1994, p. 4). As both a topical focus and research approach, psychobiography holds a revered position in the history of psychology. Freud's (1910/1957) psychoanalytic profile of Leonardo da Vinci is often cited as the birth of the psychobiography emphasis in psychology, while Erikson's (1958, 1969) psycho-social profiles of Martin Luther and Mahatma Gandhi, respectively, are considered defining classics in the field (Elms, 1994; Runyan, 1982). More recent approaches to psychobiography have expanded both the theoretical anchors and methodological tools of the researcher (McAdams & Ochberg, 1988; Schultz, 2005). Examples of recent methodologically diverse psychobiographical studies include psychological profiles of

George W. Bush (McAdams, 2011), Barack Obama (Sharma, 2011), Truman Capote (Schultz, 2011), and John Lennon (Kasser, 2013).

Psychobiography represents an important approach to the study of individual persons, particularly those who can be perceived as “outliers” on the spectrum of personality development (Howe, 1997; Kőváry, 2011). Thus in both the study of “genius” and “mental illness” psychobiography can inform educators, administrators, policy makers, and mental health practitioners who work with both youth prodigy and youth at risk (Howe, 2007). The psychobiographical subject of interest to the present authors is Robert (Bobby) James Fischer (1943-2008), the eleventh (and the U.S.’s first) World Chess Champion. Fischer represents a good example of the intersection of the gifted prodigy at risk of developing mental illness (Chun, 2002; Kasparov, 2003; Ponterotto, 2012). September, 2012 marked the 40 year anniversary of Bobby Fischer’s World Chess Champion victory, and interest in his life appears unabated as reflected in new biographies (Brady, 2011; Ponterotto & Reynolds, 2013a), oral histories (Olafsson, 2012; Stankovic, 2010), psychobiographies (Ponterotto, 2012; Ponterotto & Reynolds, 2013b), documentary films (Garbus, 2011; Land, Proud, & Tarshis, 2004), Hollywood films (Chapa, 2009; Knight, Katz, McGuire, & Topping, 2010), and theatre productions (Ward, 2012).

The present authors are both biographers and psychobiographers of Bobby Fischer, and in this article we demonstrate the value of Hiller’s (2011) Multi-Layered Chronological Chart (MLCC) methodology in providing a fuller socio-cultural context to understand the conditions influencing Bobby Fischer’s psychological development. This article begins with a brief snapshot of the life of Bobby Fischer for those readers unfamiliar with his historical significance in chess and Cold War history. Next we highlight the role of the researchers in framing the project and we describe the basic elements of Hiller’s (2011) MLCC methodology. The results of the case study analysis focus on contextualizing Fischer’s life along the horizontal and vertical axis of the MLCC (see Figure 1). Finally, suggestions and modifications of the MLCC methodology are recommended to assist biographical and case study qualitative researchers hailing from diverse intellectual disciplines.

### **The Bobby Fischer Story**

Bobby Fischer remains one of the most enigmatic world personalities of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, and his life story is of interest to psychologists, sociologists, historians, political scientists, and of course millions of chess fans worldwide. Fischer’s story is mysterious -- a chess prodigy by 11 years of age, U.S. National Champion at 14 years of age, an International Grandmaster at the age of 15, World Chess Champion at the age of 29 years, and then a recluse and fugitive from US justice by middle adulthood (see Brady, 1973, 2011). Soon after capturing the world championship in 1972 after defeating Soviet champion Boris Spassky, Fischer virtually disappeared from public view, forfeited his title, and never played in a FIDE (International Chess Federation) sponsored tournament or chess match again. Fischer biographers refer to this time (from roughly 1973 to 1991) as his “Wilderness Years” (Brady, 2011). During his seclusion and isolation Fischer became increasingly anti-Semitic, ended relationships with most of his friends and at times, family members, and exhibited increasing paranoid ideation (Chun, 2002; Ponterotto, 2012). In his wilderness years, Fischer was unemployed, lived in run-down apartment sublets or motels, and survived chiefly off of his mother’s social security checks (Brady, 2011). During this period, Fischer became increasingly disheveled, and friends, family, and colleagues were concerned for his mental health (Brady, 2011; Ponterotto, 2012; Waitzkin, 1988).

Then, unexpectedly, in 1992, Fischer emerged from his seclusion to play a rematch (unsanctioned by FIDE) with his former chess nemesis Boris Spassky, in Yugoslavia. The players would split a purse of five million dollars, with the winner to receive over 3 million

dollars. Yugoslavia was, at the time, under international sanctions for war crimes and the U.S. Treasury Department forbade any American citizen from conducting business in the country. Bobby Fischer was ordered by the Treasury Department not to play the match; Fischer ignored the order, and in so doing, instantly became a U.S. fugitive. Fischer would never return to his country of birth for fear of arrest. He would live his remaining years in Japan, various European countries, and would settle for his final three years in Iceland, who in 2005 granted him full citizenship (Brady, 2011; Olafsson, 2012).

Many questions remain regarding the life of one of the 20<sup>th</sup> century's most innovative and brilliant minds. First, was Fischer a "genius gone mad" as often portrayed in the media (see particularly, Chapa, 2009)? Was mental illness held at bay through an intensive focus on chess? Was Bobby Fischer really paranoid, or were his high levels of suspicion and mistrust legitimate and warranted? Second, why was Fischer's intense anger directed primarily at his own cultural group, Jews, and secondarily to his native country, the USA? Third, why would Fischer forfeit his World Championship title in 1975 by refusing to compete against the FIDE selected challenger, Anatoly Karpov, representing the Soviet Union? At that point, Fischer was only 32 years old and at the height of his chess genius. Hiller's (2011) Multi-Layered Chronological Chart (MLCC) approach helps us examine these questions in socio-historical context.

### **Researchers' Horizon of Understanding**

We rely on Rennie's (1994) concept, *Horizons of Understanding* to frame our background, training, research approach, and long-term "relationship" with Bobby Fischer. The senior author is Professor of Counseling Psychology, a practicing psychologist, a qualitative research specialist, and an established psychobiographer of Bobby Fischer (Ponterotto, 2012). The second author is a mental health clinician and advanced Ph.D. student in Counseling Psychology who has been studying the life of Bobby Fischer for roughly two years. He has co-authored a biographical and psychobiographical profile of Bobby Fischer (Ponterotto & Reynolds, 2013a, 2013b). Below we shift rhetorical structure to first person to describe our interest in psychobiography and Bobby Fischer as well as our work together.

I (J. G. Ponterotto) am an avid chess player who has been following the life of Bobby Fischer since he was an American Cold War hero, and I was a teenager, in 1972. After Fischer all but disappeared from the chess world and public view in the mid-1970s, I had always wondered, "What happened to Bobby Fischer?" The month of Fischer's death, January, 2008, I decided to use my psychologist's lens and qualitative research skills to attempt to answer this question. From 2008 through 2011 I worked on the Fischer psychobiography. In the Fall of 2011, while teaching our program's Qualitative Research course, I learned of the strong interest of our second author in psychobiographical research. In reviewing recent issues of *The Qualitative Report (TQR)* during the class, I came across Hiller's (2011) Multi-Layered Chronological Chart (MLCC) article. Though by this time the psychobiography of Fischer was completed, I realized instantly how the MLCC could have helped and improved my psychobiographical research.

I (J. D. Reynolds) was born in 1983, 11 years after Bobby Fischer won the world chess championship. Chess was not a popular game in my family, culture, or generation, but I remember my father teaching me the game around the age of nine. Prior to 2011, I knew very little about the life of Fischer, except that he was a "chess genius" who sort of disappeared, and that there were movies about his life. My personal lived experiences motivated me to study counseling psychology, and my qualitative research training inspired me to acquire additional knowledge of psychobiographical methods. In researching and co-

creating the MLCC, I have gained an innovative framework for conceptualizing an individual's life within a historical and sociopolitical context.

Work on the present article began in late 2011 and continued to the present. During this time period, co-author J. D. Reynolds read the leading Fischer biographies and psychobiographies and studied documentary films on the subject. Procedurally, we met every two weeks for approximately one hour to discuss the "psychology of Bobby Fischer" and apply Hiller's (2011) model to his life story. Through this interaction we settled on the horizontal and vertical domain areas outlined in the next section and began to fill in essential MLCC detail. The broad psychobiographical proposal for this study was submitted to our university's Institutional Review Board (IRB) for review. The study was classified as "exempt" given the subject of inquiry was deceased and the research methods relied on archival information that was publicly available.

### Multi-Layered Chronological Chart Methodology

The Multi-Layered Chronological Chart (MLCC; Hiller, 2011) allows us to see the life of Bobby Fischer in full socio-cultural context, rather than from a single focus or perspective as, for example, in his chess genius and accomplishments or his likely descent into mental illness (see Figure 1). The horizontal axis of the MLCC traces Bobby's life chronologically from his birth (1943) in Chicago, Illinois (U.S.A.), through his death (2008) in Reykjavik (Iceland). The vertical axis of the MLCC is divided into nine content or domain areas that were deemed salient to Bobby Fischer's life through a content analysis of multiple biographies and documentary films on the world icon (e.g., Brady, 1973, 2011; Garbus, 2011; Land et al., 2004; Ponterotto, 2012): *Place of Residence, Education, Family, Chess Career, Personal, Political and Religious Views, Interaction with Prison System, Romantic Partnerships, and History*. Several of the domains would be pertinent for most individuals or adult case study subjects, such as *education, family, places of residence, romantic partnerships, and political and religious views*. Each of these domains provide relevant information affording the reader a basic understanding of an individual life (see Hiller, 2011). Other identified domains were specific to understanding the unique life of Bobby Fischer, namely *chess career* and *interaction with the prison system*. Further, the *history* domain is vital to understanding Fischer given the role of chess in Cold War politics in the 1960s and 1970s.

In selecting and naming the domains, the two authors worked together in an iterative fashion rotating between the documentary evidence and the descriptive writing. Over multiple meetings we used a consensus approach to select and fill in the specific domains. For example, an initial domain was "Personal Relationships" which encompassed *Family, Personal, and Romantic Relationships*. However, through on-going discussion and review of the archival records we deemed it important to separate out the three categories as free-standing domains for clarity and accuracy.

In interpreting the Multi-Layered Chronological Chart (MLCC) the goal is to simultaneously examine the chronological periods on the horizontal axis with the major domain areas in the vertical axis. For ease of interpretation it is helpful to cluster the horizontal axis into historical periods that follow a developmental sequence. In Fischer's case, his life can be organized along five such periods that we have labeled: *Seeds of Genius and Challenge* (1943-1948), *A Star is Born: Bobby's Rise on the National Chess Scene* (1949-1957), *International Grand Master, American Hero, and World Icon* (1958-1972), *The Wilderness Years* (1973-1991), and the *Fugitive and Final Years* (1992-2008).

As with the nine domain areas discussed previously, the developmental periods were established through our ongoing discussion, dialogue, and consensus procedures. More

specifically, through ongoing meetings and discussion, the authors came to consensus agreement of important periods in Fischer's life. By clustering the data, Fischer's life intuitively and organically split into these five areas. The five developmental periods transcended leading biographies and psychobiographies on the life of Fischer, and could also be conceptualized through an established developmental lens (e.g., Erikson's [1950] psychosocial stage theory; see Ponterotto & Reynolds, 2013b). We chose to divide Fischer's life into these five stages based on his goals/tasks, the occurrence of critical junctures/developmental shifts, and changes in behavior/thought processes. The first period is birth to approximately age 5 (prior to elementary school); the second period is age 6-14 (childhood into adolescence); the third stage is age 15-27 (late adolescence and emerging adulthood; Arnett, 2000); the fourth stage is age 28-47 (young adulthood into adulthood); and the fifth period is age 48 to Fischer's death at the age of 64 (adulthood into late adulthood). Due to the first author's well-developed knowledge of Fischer's life and previous psychobiographical work (Ponterotto, 2012), he initially suggested the titles of the developmental periods which were then discussed until a consensus agreement emerged.

In an effort to ensure quality and consistency throughout this analysis, the authors utilized a traditional consensus procedure (borrowed liberally from consensual qualitative research procedures; see Hill et al., 2005) upon arriving at important methodological decisions (i.e., choosing domains, periods, and details). Second, we followed the guidelines outlined in Hiller's (2011) landmark article in creating and interpreting the MLCC for case study analysis. Finally, we relied on the reading and re-reading of established biographies (Brady, 1973, 2011), psychobiographies (Ponterotto, 2012), documentary films (Garbus, 2011; Land et al., 2004), and oral histories (Olafsson, 2012; Stankovic, 2010) selecting triangulated data from the source material. Below we summarize critical life events and socio-cultural contexts across each of these five developmental periods.

## Results

### Early Years: Seeds of Genius and Challenge (1943-1948)

Looking down the vertical axis of life domains during Fischer's early years reveals a number of circumstances and life events that were likely very salient to his developing personality (refer to Figure 1 throughout this Results section). Bobby Fischer was raised by a single mother, Regina Fischer who was of Russian/Polish Jewish background and who had immigrated to the US with her parents and older brother in 1914 (Ponterotto, 2012). Mrs. Fischer excelled academically in both high school and college in the U.S., and then attended medical school in the Soviet Union from 1933-1938. While living in Moscow, Regina Fischer married the German-born scientist Hans Gerhardt Leibscher Fischer, and the two had a daughter, Joan Fischer (born in 1937). Fearing the Stalin purges and Nazi rise to power in Europe, Regina Fischer and daughter Joan returned to the United States in 1939 (Ponterotto, 2012). She did not complete medical school at this time, but would receive both MD and PhD (in Hematology) degrees in East Germany in later years (Ponterotto, 2012).

In 1943, while living in Chicago, Illinois, Mrs. Fischer gave birth to her son Robert (Bobby) James Fischer. At that time, Mrs. Fischer was a financially struggling single mother who often moved the family from city to city in search of gainful employment (Brady, 2011). It is important to remember that the lingering effects of the great depression were still being felt in the early 1940s and as a single mother who was Jewish, Mrs. Fischer faced societal stigma (Ponterotto, 2012).

Around the time of Fischer's birth, his mother became a subject of FBI investigation for suspicion of being a spy for the Soviet Union (Brady, 2011; Edmonds & Eidinow, 2004;

Nicholas & Benson, 2002, 2003). As World War II ended and the Cold War began, the fear of communist infiltration into U.S. society was very high and J. Edgar Hoover had many citizens with immigrant profiles similar to Regina Fischer's (multi-lingual, scientifically educated and having lived in Russia for an extended period of time) under surveillance (Ponterotto, 2012). FBI surveillance proved to be a marked intrusion into Regina Fischer's personal and vocational life and interfered with her ability to both find and maintain employment. Furthermore, this was a time in U.S. history when women were less likely to be taken seriously at work and earned wages far less than their male counterparts for comparable work (Ponterotto, 2012).

Clearly, an early life context for Bobby Fischer was a frenetic, unstable home environment (Brady, 2011). It is likely the stress of FBI surveillance, the weighing financial and work challenges, and the responsibilities of being a single parent in the 1940s, put a strain not only on Regina Fischer, but also on Joan and Bobby. In fact, FBI reports (summarized in Ponterotto, 2012) documented that Regina Fischer had received a court mandated psychiatric evaluation in 1943, soon after Bobby's birth and was diagnosed with a form of paranoid personality disorder (Edmonds & Eidinow, 2004; Ponterotto, 2012). From a behavioral genetics perspective, it should also be noted that Fischer's maternal grandmother, Natalie Wender, was a long-term psychiatric patient at Greystone Psychiatric Hospital in New Jersey from 1918 to 1921, the year of her death (see U.S. Census and death record review in Ponterotto, 2012).

A complicating factor with regards to Fischer's developing personal identity, discussed at length in recent biographies and psychobiographies (Edmonds & Eidinow, 2004; Ponterotto, 2012) and investigative reports (Nicholas & Benson, 2002, 2003), is the almost certain fact that Bobby Fischer's biological father was not Hans Gerhardt Fischer, his mother's husband and the father of his sister Joan, but rather Paul Felix Nemenyi, a Hungarian-born American scientist whom Regina met in the early 1940s in Colorado. Regina Fischer kept the knowledge of her son's true paternity a secret to the outside world, and perhaps to Bobby Fischer himself. It is likely that she was trying to protect young Bobby from the stigma of being born outside of marriage (Ponterotto, 2012). FBI and investigative reports confirmed both extraordinary intelligence and the presence of serious mental health concerns for both Paul Nemenyi and his son by another woman, Peter Nemenyi (Fischer's half brother; Nicholas & Benson, 2002, 2003; Ponterotto, 2012).

As highlighted in the "History" section of Figure 1, from a wider socio-cultural and historical perspective, this period in Bobby Fischer's life also witnessed Gandhi's Civil Disobedience movement in India and the dropping of two atomic bombs on Japanese cities toward the end of World War II. These historical markers likely had a significant impact on Regina Fischer, as she was a peace activist her whole life (Brady, 2011; Lehmann, 1966; Lyttle, 1966; Ponterotto, 2012; Targ, 2008). Psychobiographers have noted that Bobby felt abandoned by Regina's political causes which often required travel to peace protest and marches in different cities (Brady, 2011; Ponterotto, 2012).

To sum up this first historical period in Bobby Fischer's life, he was born into a single-parent household and had no stable father figure in his early life. His mother was often struggling financially and was under stress given ongoing FBI surveillance which hindered her ability to find steady employment. The Fischer family moved from city to city as Regina searched for work. In fact, the MLCC shows Regina, Bobby, and Joan Fischer living in six different cities during Bobby's first five years of life. Given Mrs. Fischer's often long work hours when she could find employment, Bobby was cared for quite often by his sister Joan, who was only five years his senior. Clearly, there was little stability or regularity in Bobby's early years, and he had no reliable anchor or salve, no steady companion, that is,



not until 1949 at the age of six years, when his sister Joan gave him his first chess set and helped him learn the moves.

### **A Star is Born: Bobby's Rise on the National Chess Scene (1949-1957)**

Bobby Fischer had shared with his chief biographer (Brady, 1973) that he always liked games as a young child, and that at first chess was like other games he had played before, just a little more complicated. By the age of eight, however, chess was clearly Bobby's game of choice and he had begun to play and study the game regularly; and by age 11, in his own words: "I just got good" (Brady, 1973, p. 1).

Regina Fischer encouraged her son to broaden his interest beyond chess, but this was to no avail as Bobby was now obsessed with chess. Out of concern for her son's chess obsession and his lack of interests in school or non-chess playing peers, Regina took Bobby to two different psychiatrists, Dr. Harold Kline and Dr. Ariel Mengarini (the latter also a Chess Master; Brady, 2011). Though the content of Bobby's sessions with the psychiatrists is not known (and would be confidential) we do know that he did not continue in treatment with either mental health professional (Ponterotto, 2012). According to Brady (2011), both psychiatrists had "normalized" Bobby's intense chess interest in telling Regina Fischer that many children develop obsessions with certain games or activities, and that in time, Bobby would likely grow out of the obsession and develop more balanced interests; they were wrong (Ponterotto, 2012). Despite Regina's concerns over Bobby's overly focused interest in chess, she did support Bobby's development as an elite chess player. She arranged for Bobby to meet other chess players, lobbied for funds to support his chess development and tournament travel, and was instrumental in finding him two chess teachers who became significant adult male role models in his life, Carmine Nigro from about 1951 to 1956 and then John (Jack) Collins, from about 1956 to 1970 (Brady, 2011).

As Bobby focused more and more on chess at the expense of more traditional social activities and academic studies, his grades and school behavior began to be impacted. He was also somewhat oppositional even as a child as he just started to learn the game. For example, around the age of six, Bobby was expelled from Public School 3 in Manhattan for kicking the school's principal, Mr. Sallen (Targ, 2008). In fact, Bobby would be enrolled in six different schools before his 10<sup>th</sup> birthday (Brady, 2011).

Bobby could be a temperamental and difficult child, and he was often at odds with his strong-willed mother Regina (Brady, 2011). His older sister Joan was a critical support and ballast in the family and it appears she helped both her younger brother Bobby and her mother Regina in both practical manners and emotional support (as outlined in Ponterotto, 2012). Though Bobby was struggling in school and had few friends or close peers outside of chess, at this time he was gaining self-esteem and a sense of mastery as his genius for the game of chess continued to rise. By the age of 13 Bobby was the U.S. Junior Chess champion, and by 14 years of age he was the U.S. Chess Champion, a title he would hold for the eight years (1957 – 1965) in which he participated in the tournament. Bobby Fischer was unquestionably the United States' best chess player, and the American chess community began to fantasize: could Bobby Fischer one day dethrone the mighty Soviets and reach the status of World Chess Champion? No North American had ever held the formal World Chess title, though American Paul Morphy in 1858/1859 (who had traveled to Europe and beat most of that region's top players) was considered by many to be the unofficial World Champion (Ponterotto, 2012).

As Bobby was marching toward clear North American chess supremacy in the early and mid 1950's, his likely biological father, Paul Felix Nemenyi, passed away of a heart attack while at a dance in Washington, DC in 1952. Bobby was nine years old at the time of

his biological father's death, and unresolved abandonment issues related to his father, who was Jewish, are hypothesized to have contributed to Bobby's psychological decline over the years (Fine, 1973/2008; Ponterotto, 2012).

In the wider U.S. historical spectrum, the 1950s witnessed the McCarthy anti-communist fervor; and American Jews Julius and Ethel Rosenberg were convicted (1951) and then executed (1953) for espionage. As noted by Chess Master and sociologist Shelby Lyman (2011), this was a period when being "Jewish" was equated in the minds of some as being pro-Soviet. The 1950s brought greater scrutiny of Regina Fischer by J. Edgar Hoover's FBI (Ponterotto, 2012). On the global stage, this developmental period in Bobby's life was simultaneous to the Korean War, and the start of U.S. involvement in the Vietnam War.

### **International Grand Master, American Hero, and World Icon (1958-1972)**

In 1958 Bobby Fischer was world renowned in chess circles; by September of 1972 he would be world renowned period. At the Candidates Tournament in 1958 held in Yugoslavia, 15 year-old Bobby Fischer placed fifth and was awarded the International Grandmaster title. Up until that point, Bobby was the youngest person to be granted that title. It was a major personal, intellectual, and career achievement for young Bobby Fischer; the significance of this achievement would be akin to a 15 year old American adolescent winning the Wimbledon Tennis Championship.

This developmental period in Bobby Fischer's life would represent the apex of his chess genius and accomplishments. With the exception of an 18-month hiatus from tournament play in the late 1960's, this period was Fischer's most active in elite international chess. After winning his first U.S. Chess Championship (in 1957) at the end of the last historical period, Fischer would win seven more U.S. titles during this life stage. This period also witnessed his historic but aborted match with Samuel Reshevsky, the U.S.'s prior hope for world chess recognition. Among his achievements during this 14-year period were leading the U.S. Chess team to a second place finish (behind the Soviets) in the 1960 World Chess Olympics, winning the Interzonal tournament in Palma de Majorca in 1970, and dominating the Candidates Matches (winning 20 games, drawing three, and losing only one) in the lead up to the World Championship challenge against Boris Spassky. Finally, in the summer of 1972, in Reykjavik, Iceland, Bobby defeated Boris Spassky (12 ½ to 8 ½) to become the United States' first official World Chess champion. Bobby received a hero's welcome back in New York City upon his return (see Brady, 2011).

Academically speaking, Bobby Fischer dropped out of Erasmus High School in Brooklyn, New York in 1960 at the age of 16. Though in later life stages Bobby would read widely, at this point in his life his academic and intellectual interest focused primarily on chess, though he did have a facility for languages and he read chess books and periodicals in multiple languages (Brady, 2011). It was also during this developmental stage that Bobby Fischer authored three respected books including the chess classic, *My 60 Memorable Games* (Fischer, 1968).

On the home and family front, Fischer's clashes with his mother Regina continued, and in 1960 she moved out of their Brooklyn apartment (likely at Bobby's request) leaving Bobby to generally care and fend for himself at the age of 16. Regina during this period would be involved in peace marches and protests (documented in Lehmann, 1966; Lyttle, 1966) and would return to medical school in East Germany to finish her medical training. Throughout this whole period Regina Fischer would continue to be a subject of FBI investigation and surveillance wherever she lived or traveled (Ponterotto, 2012).

On the personal front, Fischer was now actively involved with the Worldwide Church of God and his level of anti-Semitism increased. He was outraged at the journalist Ralph

Ginzburg (1962) for his published article in *Harper's Magazine* where Fischer believed his comments were taken out of context or not accurate at all (see Brady, 2011). In this period Fischer failed his mandatory U.S. Draft Board physical in 1964 for reasons never made public. One of Fischer's psychobiographers (Ponterotto, 2012) surmised that since Bobby was known to be in excellent physical shape during this period, that he may have failed due to either psychological reasons or because the military knew of the FBI investigation of his mother, thus eliminating him for military service candidacy.

On the wider historical and global arena, the Soviets launched Sputnik in 1958, heightening Cold War competition with the U.S. It is likely that in his march to the world championship title during this historical period, Fischer felt intense pressure to win as he was a lone American battling the dominant Soviet Chess machine and its world champion Boris Spassky. In fact, Henry Kissinger, then President Nixon's National Security Advisor, personally phoned Fischer to urge him on to victory against Spassky and the Soviet Union (Brady, 2011). Also occurring during this period was the Vietnam War and the political upheaval this caused in the US. This period was also marked by the Cuban Missile crisis, the Civil Rights turmoil and progress, and by the Kennedy brothers' and Martin Luther King Jr. assassinations.

### **The Wilderness Years (1973-1991)**

By the Fall of 1972, chess popularity in the U.S. was at an all time high. Membership in the U.S. Chess Federation grew rapidly, and chess masters found jobs as chess tutors and chess teachers in elementary and high schools. Bobby Fischer had transformed chess from a game played by the intellectually inclined to the world game. Chess was now as popular as soccer, and Bobby Fischer was one of the most famous living persons on earth (Ponterotto, 2012). Chess fans expected that the 1970s would be a decade of even greater achievements by Bobby Fischer on the individual level, and by U.S. Chess on a national level. In 1975, when Bobby Fischer refused to defend his title against Soviet challenger Anatoly Karpov, American hopes and aspirations for more amazing feats at the chessboard for Bobby Fischer were dashed. Bobby would never play in a FIDE sanctioned tournament again. Soon after the 1972 World Championship, Bobby relocated to the Los Angeles area on the campus of the World Wide Church of God. Though maintaining limited contact with trusted friends and his family, Bobby isolated himself more and more during this developmental period (Brady, 2011; Ponterotto, 2012).

Up until the early 1970s, Fischer's intellectual and academic interests focused almost exclusively on chess; during this period, however, Fischer began to read more widely. While maintaining interest in the latest chess news and tournament results, Fischer also began reading more broadly, particularly in the areas of international politics and world religions (see Brady, 2011; Ponterotto, 2012; Waitzkin, 1988). Unfortunately, some of this reading and study was focused on anti-Semitic literature and over the years Fischer's level of anti-Semitism would grow. In fact, at one period during the "Wilderness Years" Fischer had relocated to the Palo Alto, California area to live with his sister Joan and her family, but this stay was short-lived, as Joan and her husband Russell Targ (a physicist and parapsychology researcher, see Targ, 2008, 2012), asked him to move out as they did not want their young children to be exposed to Bobby's anti-Semitism (Ponterotto, 2012). It appears that as Fischer withdrew from the demands and structure of competitive chess, he lapsed into greater states of isolation and paranoia.

In 1981, while strolling down the street in Pasadena, California, Fischer was questioned by Pasadena Sheriff Officers because they thought he resembled a bank robbery suspect they were in search of (Brady, 2011). Initial questioning of Fischer did not go well

so the officers decided to arrest him for vagrancy. He spent two days in prison, an experience that was traumatic and humiliating for Fischer, as he vividly described in his self-published pamphlet, "I was Tortured in the Pasadena Jailhouse!" (Fischer, 1982). Interestingly, a few years earlier, his mother Regina, who continued her peace protests worldwide was arrested in Paris (1973) and in London (1977; see Ponterotto, 2012).

It was during this period in Fischer's life where he developed close relationships with women. He had a deep friendship with Shernaz Kennedy, an International Chess Master, who he communicated with for over a decade, primarily through letter writing and phone calls (Ponterotto, 2012). He had a relationship with Petra Sadler and spent time with her in Germany, and had a relationship with Zita Rajcsanyi (thought to be non-sexual; Brady, 2011), who is credited with encouraging Fischer to come out of isolation for his 1992 rematch with Boris Spassky in Yugoslavia (Brady, 2011; Polgar, 2005; Snyder, 2011).

For the first few years of this period, Bobby continued his affiliation with the Worldwide Church of God, but this association would dissolve in the mid-1970s. On the global stage, the Watergate scandal received world-wide attention, the Vietnam War continued until 1975, the amateur U.S. men's Olympic hockey team stunned the sports world by winning the gold medal in the 1980 Winter Olympic Games, the Gulf War came and went, and the former Soviet Union dissolved, thus effectively ending the Cold War.

### **The Fugitive and Final Years (1992-2008)**

Few people had seen a photo of Bobby Fischer since his 1972 World Championship triumph. Suddenly, in 1992 Fischer once again occupied the world's center stage as he began a rematch with Boris Spassky in the town of Sveti Stefan, Yugoslavia during the Serbo-Croatia War. By playing in Yugoslavia in a for-profit activity, Fischer was violating U.S. sanctions against business with or in the country. Not surprisingly, Fischer would ignore the U.S. State mandate not to play (he actually spat on the State Department Order as seen in the HBO Documentary, *Bobby Fischer Against the World* [Garbus, 2011]), and, as a result, he became subject to arrest and steep fines should he return to the U.S. (see Stankovic, 2010 for vivid descriptions of Fischer's life in the 1992-1993 period). Fischer decided not to return to his birth country, the country which hailed him as a hero in the summer and Fall of 1972. Bobby Fischer was now a fugitive from U.S. justice and would spend his remaining years in Yugoslavia, Hungary, Japan, the Philippines, and finally, Iceland, where he was granted full citizenship in 2005 (Brady, 2011).

During this final stage in Fischer's MLCC, both his mother Regina and sister Joan passed away in Northern California in a two-year span (1997 and 1998), and his only niece, Elisabeth Targ, passed away in 2002 (Ponterotto, 2012). Because Fischer was subject to immediate arrest upon landing in the U.S., he could not attend his mother's, sister's, or niece's funerals. During this period Fischer would occasionally appear on radio stations in Hungary or the Philippines where his virulent anti-Semitism and anti-Americanism would be heard by millions of listeners. It was during one of these radio broadcasts on September 11, 2001, just hours after the terrorist attacks on the US, where Fischer rejoiced in the attacks. More specifically, his comments included (available on Youtube.com):

This is all wonderful news. It's time for the fucking U.S. to get their heads kicked in ... Finish off the U.S. once and for all....This just shows you that what goes around, comes around, even for the United States. Fuck the U.S. I want to see the U.S. wiped out. I'm hoping for some kind of "Seven Days in May" (from the movie) scenario where the country will be taken over by the military; they'll close down all the synagogues, arrest all the Jews, execute

hundreds of thousands of Jewish ringleaders. I say death to President Bush. I say death to the United States. Fuck the United States. Fuck the Jews. The Jews are a criminal people, they mutilate their children, they are murderous, criminal, thieving, lying bastards. They made up the Holocaust, there is not a word of truth to it. Praise God, and Alleluia. This is a wonderful day, fuck the United States, cry you cry babies, whine you bastards, now you're time is coming.

As disturbing as it is to read these direct quotes from Fischer's 9/11/01 Philippine radio interview, they are important in understanding the depth and irrationality of Fischer's rage toward the Jews and the U.S.

Another event that enraged Fischer during this developmental period was when belongings and chess library/material were auctioned off by the Bekins storage facility in Southern California where he had rented a storage bin. Apparently, one of Fischer's friends forgot to keep up payments on the rental unit, and the whole unit was auctioned off. The loss of his possessions was devastating to Fischer as his extensive collection of chess books and memorabilia were part of his identity, and he railed about being robbed for years after in multiple radio broadcasts (Brady, 2011). Bobby associated his property being "stolen" as part of a Jewish conspiracy against him.

Significant women in Fischer's life in this final stage included Marilyn Young in the Philippines and her daughter Jinky (DNA tests ordered in estate litigation after Fischer's death in 2008 verified that he was not the biological father; Ponterotto, 2012). Fischer felt very close to Marilyn and Jinky and supported them to some degree financially with his winnings from his 1992 victory over Spassky (see also Olafsson, 2012). His final love, and his eventual only wife, was Miyoko Watai, a Japanese Chess master who married Fischer in 2005 while living in Japan. Japan was a mixed blessing for Bobby Fischer; he liked the culture and loved Miyoko, but he had a number of unpleasant run-ins with Japanese authorities resulting in two imprisonments, one in the year 2000 for 18 days, and then a 9-month imprisonment in 2004 for using a revoked passport while attempting to travel to the Philippines. It was during this second and much longer imprisonment when Miyoko along with some of Fischer's friends orchestrated his receiving full Icelandic citizenship in 2005, thus facilitating his release by the Japanese authorities (Brady, 2011; Olafsson, 2012).

Fischer settled in Reykjavik, Iceland for his final three years of life. He had a group of friends and supporters in Reykjavik, liked to take long walks, frequented his favorite restaurants, and spent a good amount of time reading widely. In 2007, Fischer developed serious kidney problems, but refused most forms of treatment (Targ, 2008). On January 17, 2008 he passed away, and he was buried a few days later in a country graveyard close to the town of Selfoss, Iceland (Brady, 2011; Olafsson, 2012). Upon his death a legal estate battle ensued with Miyoko Watai, his wife (though some questioned the legitimacy of the marriage claiming he married only in an attempt to avoid extradition back to the U.S. to face trial for State Department charges), his former girlfriend Marilyn Young and daughter Jinky, and his nephews in the U.S., Nicholas and Alexander Targ, all claiming some right to his estate. Eventually, the Icelandic Supreme Court awarded Fischer's entire estate to his wife, Miyoko Watai (see detailed account in Brady, 2011).

## Discussion

The purpose of this article was to demonstrate a psychobiographical case study application of Hiller's (2011) Multi-Layered Chronological Chart (MLCC) methodology. Bobby Fischer was a significant historical figure in the 20<sup>th</sup> century, and much of his life has

been a mystery to biographers, psychologists, and sociologists. A slate of new biographies and films has begun to shed a deeper light into the “psychology” of Bobby Fischer (Brady, 2011; Garbus, 2011; Olafsson, 2012; Ponterotto, 2012; Stankovic, 2010). The present application of the MLCC methodology has further extended our understanding of the life of Fischer through a snapshot picture of the socio-cultural context surrounding Fischer’s life period.

Fischer’s chess life and story has been characterized by a chess historian as “The Hope and Despair of Chess” (Ponterotto, 2012, p. 103). As a result of Fischer’s chess talent and accomplishments along with his autonomous and independent personality, chess in the early 1970’s became a “world game” that transcended cultures and social classes, rather than just a game reserved to Soviet Bloc countries and the intellectually elite. However, after Fischer’s withdrawal from the game in the mid-1970s, chess, particularly in the U.S., lost some of its appeal and popularity (see Brady, 2011; Ponterotto, 2012). Fischer’s story is a mysterious and sad one. His life was marked by great individual accomplishment and by lifelong psychological challenges. This Fischer case study can inform the work of educators and mental health professionals who work with both child prodigies and youth at risk (see Ponterotto, 2012 who outlines specific psychological interventions that could have helped the Fischer family).

### **Revisiting Select Fischer Mysteries**

At the start of this article we highlighted three Fischer psychological mysteries, and in this section we address each in turn relative to the use of the Multi-Layered Chronological Chart (MLCC; Hiller, 2011). Our first question is whether Bobby Fischer was mentally ill or just eccentric? Various authors have hypothesized a host of mental illnesses that Bobby Fischer may have had (e.g., Asperger’s Disorder, Quinn & Hamilton, 2008; Schizophrenia, Paranoid type, Krylov as cited in Kasparov, 2003). Though as indicated in the MLCC domain under “Personal,” Fischer consulted briefly with two psychiatrists as a child, he was never formally diagnosed with a mental illness. Recently, Ponterotto (2012) provided the first differential diagnoses of Fischer based on extant archival information and surmised that of all the psychological disorders that had been attributed to Fischer in the media, the strongest evidence was for paranoid personality disorder in mid-life followed by delusional disorder in later life. However, these diagnoses are only speculative as Ponterotto (2012) never formally met with and diagnosed Fischer.

In reviewing the MLCC chart and associated text, we note that from a behavioral genetics perspective that Fischer’s mother, Regina Fischer, and grandmother, Natalie Wender, both had been diagnosed with mental illness, and his (likely) biological father and half-brother, Paul and Peter Nemenyi, respectively, also presented strong evidence of mental illness symptomology (Ponterotto, 2012). Possible genetic predispositions for susceptibility to mental illness along with the unstable and stressed early childhood experiences (FBI surveillance on Regina Fischer, ongoing financial and living condition challenges) may have coalesced in the “diathesis stress model” (Zuckerman, 1999) to make Fischer quite vulnerable to the development of mental illness. Layered upon this vulnerability is the stress of three prison incarcerations and the loss of the structure and social support that accompanied his active chess career, all contributing to mental illness susceptibility.

A second lingering question relative to Fischer’s life was why his intense anger was directed primarily at his own cultural group, Jews, and secondarily to his native country, the USA? A review of the MLCC and related text highlights various conditions that may help explain the focus of Fischer’s rage toward Jews. First, the historical context of the 1940s and 1950s in the U.S. included an anti-communist fervor. As noted by Lyman (2011) who knew

Fischer and his family, at that time in the mind of many Americans, Jews and communists were automatically associated. Second, Fischer felt emotionally abandoned by his mother Regina Fischer and by his biological father Paul Nemenyi, who were both Jewish (Fine, 1973/2008; Ponterotto, 2012). Biographers Brady (2011) and Stankovic (2010) present vivid Fischer memories of his childhood when his mother Regina would host parties where her “Jewish Intellectual” friends would come over to their apartment and engage in various discourse, while Fischer waited in the bedroom for the guests to leave so that he could have some time with his mother. Third, Fischer long felt that the American Chess Foundation, who had numerous Jewish Americans among its leadership, was giving preferential treatment to Chess Grandmaster Samuel Reshevsky (Fischer’s more senior and orthodox Jewish chess colleague). It is possible, from a psychodynamic perspective that Fischer may have associated his deep feelings of hurt and abandonment with Jewishness in some form (see Brady, 2011; Ponterotto, 2012; Stankovic, 2010).

With regard to Fischer’s vitriolic Anti-American sentiment (as reflected in his 9/11 radio rant cited earlier), he believed he had brought great pride to the U.S. after his 1972 world championship victory over Spassky, and now the U.S. Treasury Department issued a warrant for his arrest for playing chess in Yugoslavia. In essence then, he also felt abandoned by his own country (Ponterotto, 2012; Stankovic, 2010).

Finally, with regard to understanding what led to Fischer’s forfeiture of his world title match against Anatoly Karpov in 1975, we can speculate the following. Lacking a father-figure his whole life and denying his own Jewish heritage, two normal paths to personal identity development, Fischer long searched for his sense of identity. It was in the game of chess, where he was markedly successful and adored, that he found his route to identity. In essence his personal identity became fused with his chess identity, and the apex of his chess and personal identity formation would be reaching the World Chess Championship title (see Ponterotto, 2012). Fischer, in his 1972 defeat of Boris Spassky had finally found his identity; after searching for 29 years. Now to risk losing the world championship to Karpov would be too much to bare for Fischer, as losing that title would be, in effect, losing his personal identity (Fine, 1973/2008; Ponterotto, 2012). It should be noted that most chess historians believed that Fischer would have defeated Karpov in 1975, and it is likely that Fischer did not consciously fear losing to Karpov. Nevertheless, the unconscious dynamics may have overpowered Fischer’s logic in this instance (see Kasparov, 2003, for an insightful discussion on the matter). In resigning his title (or forfeiting it), Fischer could still be, in his own mind, the undefeated world chess champion. In this scenario, though Fischer would lose his FIDE championship title, he would retain his chess identity and therefore his personal identity.

Naturally, the above interpretation stems from a psychodynamic or psychoanalytic interpretation, but is consistent in making sense of Fischer’s withdrawal from competitive chess in the mid 1970’s. In almost prophetic sense, this scenario was predicted by noted psychoanalyst and Chess Grandmaster Reuben Fine in 1973, the year after Fischer’s world chess championship victory over Spassky. In the following two quotes, Fine discusses psychoanalytic interpretations on the meaning of victory to Fischer’s overall identity.

Fischer, brought up without a father, from adolescence on even without a mother, is a man who has been singularly unsuccessful in everything outside of chess. Hence victory in chess for him must gratify all kinds of revengeful omnipotent fantasies, in which he gets back at all the men who have humiliated him throughout his life. By the same token, defeat brings him back to the situation of the helpless abandoned little boy, where he felt so desperately unhappy. Hence defeat involves almost a total breakdown of his life style, and is thus a drastic threat. (Fine, 1973/2008, p. 82)

The next quote by Dr. Fine actually turned out to be quite prophetic: Since victory gratifies many of the omnipotent fantasies of childhood for Fischer, he may quite conceivably retire from active chess for a while in order to indulge these fantasies ... All the champions of the past withdrew for some time after their conquest of the title; Fischer's retirement may well be longer because of his emotional conflicts. (p. 83)

### **Final Reflections on Hiller's (2011) MLCC Method**

The job of a psychobiographer is to contextualize the behavior, thought processes, and life decisions of the individual under examination, or in other words understand the "why" behind her or his behavior. Hiller's (2011) Multi Layered Chronological Chart (MLCC) provides the psychobiographer with a flashlight to navigate a situation that would otherwise be investigated in the dark. In the case of Bobby Fischer, the MLCC was created to advance the authors' knowledge within a historical and sociopolitical context, a technique in line with qualitative research.

Viewing Fischer's life through the MLCC provided the researchers, especially the junior psychobiographer who initially possessed limited knowledge of Fischer's life and less of an understanding of the cultural norms during the Cold War period, with a more contextualized understanding of Fischer's unique lived experiences. In researching and creating the MLCC, the junior psychobiographer was propelled to learn about the history of Stalin's purges, the experiences of first generation Jewish immigrants struggling with anti-Semitism and financial hardships during the middle of the twentieth century, and the subsequent effects these experiences could have on the life of an individual. Additionally, the MLCC illuminated the instability of Fischer's family/school environment and the single-parenting childhood he experienced which led to examining his life through an attachment perspective. Creating the MLCC challenged the authors to consider the historical impact, the systems in place at the time, and the trauma likely experienced during Fischer's early life that would have a lasting impact on his identity and mental health development.

Tracing any single point in Fischer's life could also be linked to what was going on in the country and the rest of the world. Thus, the MLCC was a very functional method in understanding the connections in Fischer's life across chronological periods. Similar to a family genogram, creating the MLCC facilitated connections to certain events in Fischer's life with the decisions he made and behaviors he executed. It helps make meaning out of the hundreds of seemingly unrelated data points and provides psychobiographers with a broader consideration of the myriad factors that contributed to an individual's motivations and behaviors. It also provides researchers the ability to step back and view the framework of an individual's life from a panorama perspective.

We believe Hiller's (2011) MLCC is a valuable interpretive tool for both biography and psychobiography. However, the methodology is most recent and in need of ongoing research and development. While the MLCC does provide the reader with a depth of understanding of an individual's life in socio-cultural context, as with most methods used in a retrospective analysis of an individual, it falls short of meeting the individual in person to gain a more layered, contextual, and dimensional understanding of a person's behavior, personality and cognitive structure. In the future, in preparing an MLCC for a still-living public figure (e.g., a living President, a renowned scientist), it would be of value to work with the individual in crafting the MLCC. In the case of deceased historical and public figures (the majority of psychobiographies) it might be of value to have two or three independent teams develop separate MLCCs and compare profiles, and then work together on a consensus model. This process would add a measure of researcher triangulation to the credibility of the



data interpretation. Another suggestion would be to reconfigure the MLCC in a three-dimensional rather than a two-dimensional space. The present article and Hiller's (2011) original work, present the model with only a vertical and horizontal dimension. However, with the advent of on-line journals and books with depth perception it would be feasible to more creatively present the historical context of the life space.

It will be of value to see Hiller's (2011) MLCC approach applied to other biographical and psychobiographical case studies. The MLCC could also be useful for clinicians and forensic specialists preparing case study presentations of their clients and subjects. Furthermore, it would be interesting to extend the MLCC chronology back to before the birth of the biographical subject to contextualize possible neurobiological (genetic) determinants on the subject's character and personality development. This will be particularly relevant for psychobiography given the documented influences of genetic predispositions on psychological development (Zuckerman, 1999). In Fischer's case, the mental health history of his maternal (Regina Fischer and Natalie Wender) and paternal (Paul Nemenyi) lineage is important in fully understanding his psychological development over his lifetime. Similarly, it might be of value to extend the MLCC beyond the subject's death so as to examine the impact of the historical figure from a sociological perspective. For example, after Fischer's death, the popularity of chess in the U.S. (and associated career opportunities for elite chess players and chess teachers) declined markedly (Ponterotto, 2012). Second, given Fischer's observable mental illness symptoms (thanks to movies, the internet, and particularly YouTube), it is possible that in the minds of individuals viewing these behaviors that elite chess skill may become (erroneously) associated with automatic psychological challenges. In fact, in his review of the empirical literature, Ponterotto (2012) found no differential rates of mental illness in elite chess players as compared to the general population.

Finally, though this article focused on a qualitative research application of Hiller's (2011) MLCC, this methodology could be expanded to include mixed methods models. For example, a team of Fischer psychobiographers could retrospectively complete quantitative assessments of Fischer's personality as outlined in procedures modeled by Ponterotto and Reynolds (2013b) and by the Historical Figures Assessment Collaborative (1977).

In addition to demonstrating the use of Hiller's (2011) MLCC in a psychological case study example, it is our hope that the Fischer life story can stimulate ongoing research attention to the needs of both youth prodigies and those at-risk of developing academic and psychological difficulties. We hope that our review of the life of Bobby Fischer has been both respectful and balanced.

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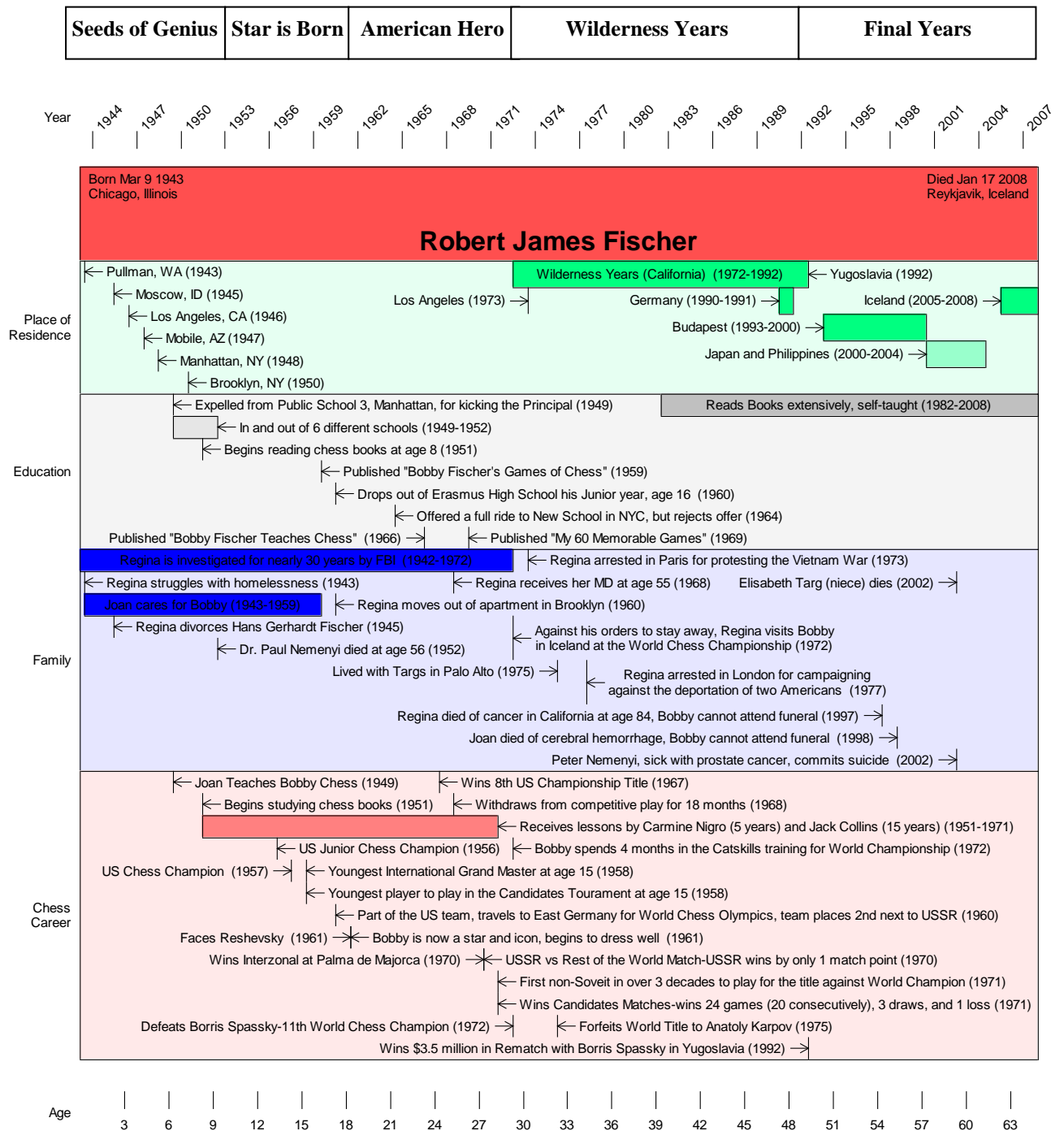
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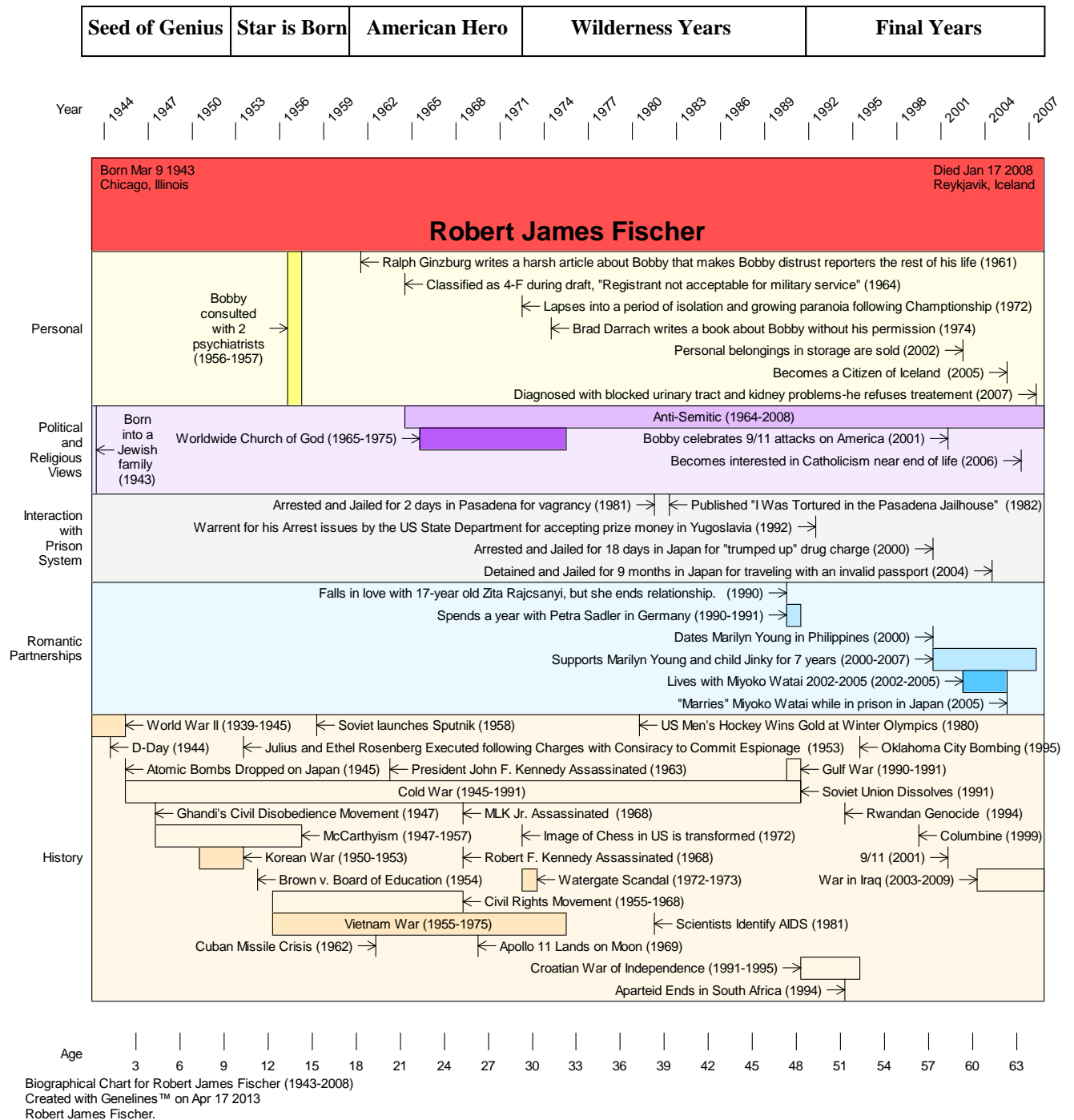
Appendix

Figure 1



Biographical Chart for Robert James Fischer (1943-2008)  
 Created with Genelines™ on Apr 17 2013  
 Robert James Fischer.

Figure 1 cont.



**Author Note**

Joseph G. Ponterotto, Ph.D. is a Professor of Counseling Psychology and a practicing clinician. His research and teaching specialties are in the areas of multicultural counseling, psychobiography, and mixed methods research.

Jason Reynolds, M.S., is an advanced Ph.D. student in counseling psychology and a practicing clinician. He has strong research interest in multicultural competency training, qualitative research, and psychobiography. His doctoral dissertation focuses on a qualitative

study of racial/ethnic identity development of transracial Korean-born adoptees and their decision to return to Korea.

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