

Fate or life path? The genetic theory of Szondi Lipót

The title of our conference is "Pathfinders" – and so, as such, I thought that the analysis of Szondi Lipót's life story has a connection to our topic today. I am not talking about his biography, as it can be read on the internet, and can also be found on my homepage (www.lukacsdenes.hu). Rather, I would like to speak about his theory of fate analysis. According to Szondi's terminology, "fate" means life path, and the essence of my presentation is about the way he applied his theory of fate analysis, toward the formation of his own life path. The presentation is divided into three sections: Szondi the geneticist, Szondi the pathfinder, and the Szondi who decided to take his fate in his own hands.

1. Szondi, the curious geneticist

Originally, Szondi was a geneticist, and remained so throughout all his life: he dealt with hereditary diseases, and conducted family-tree research. I will begin the description of his work with something which became a basis of his fame. He met some married couples, and became interested in the spouses' characteristics, as well as the underlying motivation which made them mutually choose each other. Szondi thought that this mutual choice was not random, rather it was instinctive, and went on to hypothesise that this instinctive choice was influenced by the genetic stock of the spouses which had unconsciously created a mutual sympathy in both. Later, he extended this theory, until he finally came to the conclusion that a human's life is in fact a series of instinctive choices. These choices dictate our life path, or our 'fate' in Szondi's terminology. During the course of several pieces of systematic research, he realized that people's choices are not individually specific, but instead the reiterations of their ancestors' choices. This phenomenon was named "instinct fate" by Szondi.

In Szondi's theory, fate is a kind of life path, which is determined by instinctive choices driven by inherited genetic stock. According to his theory, fate is not a unified entity, but different fates or life paths exist. The first life path is the so-called "compulsive fate". "Compulsion" characterizes the beginning of life, and it refers to the living conditions in to which we are born, and so consequently we do not choose our way of life. However, it is not obligatory to go along this life path: if we find a better one, we have a chance to choose and go down that way. It is not an easy task, because our environment, without even being aware of it, passes patterns on to us, which stem

from the so-called "family unconscious". We, also unconsciously, take over these patterns in the form of latent learning. It can be considered a compulsive fate when the first-born sons follow their father's footsteps into the same profession through several generations, and become railwaymen, lawyers, or take over the family enterprise. Szondi's theory is not deterministic: the genes do not dictate, they only influence our life paths. Therefore, if we get to know our subconscious, we may be able to realize that a more fitting way exists for us, and we can leave the compulsive fate and choose this way instead. The possibility for change remains with us throughout our life, until we find our most appropriate life path. "Take your fate in your own hands" he said, which became the motto, and, at the same time, the goal of his entire theoretical system.

Szondi's theory claims that the instinctive drive of the inherited genetic stock is present in everybody, but it is present more intensely in a mentally ill person than in a healthy one. According to his hypothesis, there is only quantitative difference between the instinctive life (fate or life path) of an ill and a healthy person. The ill person is depressed, the healthy person is only depressive (pessimistic, lacks motivation, avoids social contacts). This can be illustrated using another example: an ill person can be an aggressive, bad-tempered, sadistic murderer, whereas the healthy person is active, and if necessary aggressive, but he is able to control his aggression, and so does not become a murderer, rather he remains healthy. For the experimental verification of his hypothesis, Szondi created a test to map the person's life path, by scrutinizing the instinctive choices stemming from the family unconscious. He wanted to know if a person's inherited fate (the compulsive fate) was acceptable, or another life path, which was chosen by the person himself, could be more appropriate for him. The test is based on the same instinctive sympathy - or antipathy - choice as the one which Szondi had noticed while observing married couples' choices between each other. To summarize: when two people meet, an unconscious communication comes into being between them, which might result in mutual sympathy, or antipathy, or perhaps two opposing attitudes. As it is believed by Szondi, behind the mutual sympathy there may be similar attitudes of the two people, for example both of them might be hardworking, or passionate football fans, or it is possible that neither of them like beer. Nowadays, we do not use the term "instinctive" choice, moreover the notion of instinct is also strongly neglected. By investigating the working of mirror neurons, recent nerve physiology research has discovered the mechanisms of people connecting with each other, which verifies Szondi's claim regarding the sympathy/antipathy choices' underlying controlling mechanisms.

As I have already mentioned, in order to verify his theory, Szondi created a test which

named four basic "instinct circles". These instinct circles influence our life paths unconsciously by influencing our fate. The four instinct circles are: sexuality (reproduction), surprise (protection), ego (self-control), and finally the human relationships (contact). There is no explanation why these four instinct circles are included in the test; why not three or five? Szondi only provides subjective whys. He claims that he tried to find other "instinct circles" without success.¹ The instinct circles were named "vectors" by Szondi, and all vectors have two other factors, which complement, compensate for, or work against each other, while they intend to make a balance inside the vector. It can be seen as a set of scales, in which the material placed in one pan must be balanced by the weight placed in the other. The stimuli in the test consists of portraits of mentally ill people whose instinct drives pathologically accumulated in their genes, of which such instinct drives are present in healthy people also. Their sight evokes sympathy or antipathy choices due to an unconscious urge, which was coined as "gene kinship" by Szondi.

The basis of Szondi's theory is duality: this may stem from Freud's effect which dominated psychoanalysis around the beginning of Szondi's career, until the end of the 1930s, and which is only a fact of science history today. The theory has been blemished by the passing of time, and perhaps due to this also, similarly to other projective test procedures, it has been abundantly criticized. However, no other criticism has been so excessive, filled with so much subjective pathos, as that related to the Szondi test. For instance, the Rorschach-test has also been criticized intensely, its validity has been questioned even recently, but these criticisms are not based on emotions, rather they highlight the lack of statistic analyses.²

The subject of another type of criticism is Szondi's unique terminology. He does not use the usual terminus techniques and the conventional diagnostic categories; instead he applies symbolic and metaphoric emblems. The passionate articulation of several criticisms might also be due to the frequent use of the homosexuality/lesbianism concept by Szondi, which may have rightly angered laymen interested in psychology. There have been many alterations in the theory of sexuality over the past 80 years. Same sex attraction was regarded as an illness in Szondi's age, however the APA removed it from the list of illnesses in 1975, so same sex preference disappeared from the Hungarian 'BNO' also.

1 *In Szondi's legacy, a fifth instinct circle was found, however he did not use it in his test.*

2 *As I know, while having a conversation with Flóra Kozmutza, Mátyás Rákosi called the Rorschach-test so unreliable, that he was even willing to take the test with her. With this, he meant to prove that the procedure was unreliable.*

2. The pathfinder Szondi

Szondi's theory received a positive welcome in Hungary, which facilitated his personal career too: the endocrinologist Szondi was appointed to be the Director of 'The Research Laboratory for Special Education'. He focused on family-tree construction, genetics and endocrinological research, but then became increasingly interested in psychoanalysis. He noticed the typical features of neurotic people's family-trees, and immersed himself in fate analysis. He was regarded as a school founder; everybody wanted to be his disciple. Szondi worked obsessively, and expected his students to do so. Among them were Lajos Kardos, Ferenc Mérei and his wife Júlia György, Ágnes Binét and Flóra Kozmutza who was the psychologist of Attila József. However, the Second World War and Hitler intervened, and Szondi – as a Jew – was deprived from his cathedra, dismissed from his teaching position, and he was not allowed to practice as a psychologist any longer. He dealt with some of his former patients illegally, but needed to search for a new path after the deportations began, and a threatening way appeared which led to the extermination camp. That time, Szondi applied his own theory to himself, and he decided to govern his fate. But before getting to that, we have to make a bypass.

A brilliant organizer, who may be called a swindler; Rezső Kasztner found some corrupt Nazi officers, and organized the emigration of the richest Jewish families to Switzerland, after taking over their whole fortune. It seemed to be completely impossible, but Kasztner was able to compass the impossible. He rescued several acknowledged scientists and artists who did not have a fortune, by promising to deliver one truck for each of these refugees to Hitler by the Americans, when the train of the refugees was due to arrive at the Swiss border. It was a swindle, since the Americans did not even know about this promise. Nevertheless, there was no downfall, as the refugees were not transported to the Swiss border but to Bergen-Belsen.

Szondi was given 48 hours to decide: the risky way of escape, or to stay and try to hide from the deportation. He chose to get on the train, getting off in Bergen-Belsen, which was not a concentration camp at that time, only an intermediate station on the way to the camp. From there he continued on his own way; he held lectures about fate analysis for interested captives. Finally it was proven that Szondi made the right decision, since the American soldiers arrived in Bergen-Belsen earlier than the trains which were to take the crowds to the extermination camps.

3. Szondi, who decided to govern his fate

After the liberation, a lot of the survivors returned to their home countries, but Szondi did not want to live in Hungary any more, rather he wanted to settle down in Switzerland. It was the choice of a person who was searching for his path and who governed his own fate. However, for Szondi it was not easy to accomplish his choice. Switzerland did not take in refugees. But they made an exception for the sake of Szondi, in which Jung may have had a great role, who, as a Swiss citizen, negotiated with the immigration office.

Szondi soon recovered, and, as if he had forgotten the trauma, started working intensely. He was a workaholic, and obsessively believed in his theory. A team formulated around him again. In 1961, in Zurich, he established the Institute of Szondi Foundation utilising the gift given by the mother of a recovered patient. He was appointed Honorary Doctor at Sorbonne, and at the Leoven Catholic University. He published twenty books, but in Hungary all of his books were on the blacklist until 1982. Despite this, Szondi was bound to Hungary, but since his deportation he was willing to meet only his former students.

Meanwhile, in Hungary, at ELTE, despite the prohibition, the Szondi-test had been taught for years. In line with the loosening of the dictatorship, at the beginning of the 1980s', it seemed possible that the university might get permission to publish the Szondi-test. At that time I was in psychoanalysis at Imre Hermann, so I asked him to try to plead his cause to the university. For his encouragement, I wrote a letter to Szondi, in which I referred to Hermann. By my surprise, Szondi replied immediately, and he gave his consent to the publication, with the condition that he would review the manuscript. In 1981 I started the work; Szondi was almost 90 years old at that time. His eyesight worsened, but he relentlessly worked on the manuscript, which was read to him by his wife, Szondi Lili, who wrote down her husband's remarks. In January, 1986 Szondi passed away, and his wife followed him half a year later.

"Fate or life path?" - that was the title of my presentation, but how can I finish all this that I have said today? Perhaps by putting an equality sign instead of the "or" word, in other words, fate is a life path which a person chooses. Our life is a biological process: we are born, we reproduce, and we die. This way of life becomes fate and a life path, by all of the things we are able to put into it. We are almost never able to put everything in it that we want to, but if we are lucky, we can place

signposts for the others arriving later. Therefore, please take Szondi's advice: "Take your fate in your own hands!" - and choose an appropriate life path for yourselves. I wish for you to go along this path successfully, and in the mean-time: enjoy yourselves!

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Translated by Kata Vadai