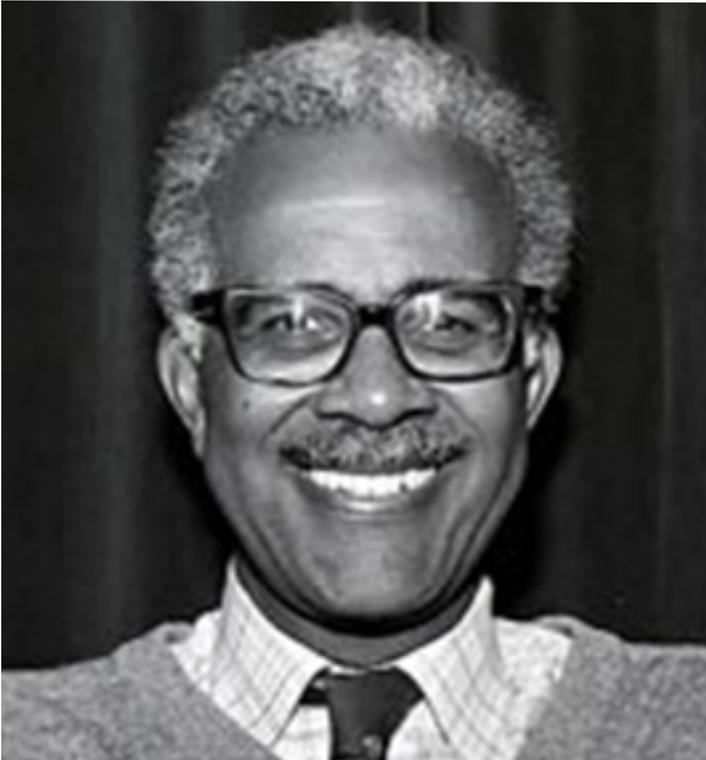




# Chester Middlebrook Pierce



*Photograph courtesy of the Harvard Medical Library in the Francis A. Countway Library of Medicine*

Chet Pierce, as he was universally known, was one of the most distinguished psychiatrists in Harvard Medical School's long history. Born in 1927 in Glen Cove on Long Island in New York, he graduated from Harvard College in 1948 and from Harvard Medical School in 1952. Chet trained in psychiatry at the University of Cincinnati, was on active duty as a Commander in the United States Navy and split his junior faculty years between the University of Cincinnati and the University of Oklahoma. He returned to Harvard in 1969 as Professor of Education and Psychiatry in the Graduate School of Education and Harvard Medical School.

As a 6' 4" 240 lbs. Tackle and End for the Crimson Football team, Chet played for four years and, in 1947, the same year Jackie Robinson became the first Black player in Major

League Baseball, Chet became the first Black athlete to play on a segregated College football field south of the Mason-Dixon line when Harvard played the University of Virginia. That singular experience, during which a greatly hostile crowd screamed invectives and racist slurs, as well as his daily life as a Black man in America made racism, racial disparities and White-Black interpersonal relations central to both his personal and academic concerns. Chet called racism a public health problem long before American Society recognized it as such. He became an expert, as he put it, on how Whites when engaging with Blacks tended to dominate time and space, mobility and energy. That insight became part of Chet's theory of the everyday microaggressions and humiliations suffered by people of color in America, and the possibility for "canalizing" anger in more productive ways, much as he himself had done on the playing field and throughout his impressive academic and clinical life.

Standing tall, erect and well dressed, and looking distinguished even well into his retirement, Chet was

humble to a fault and kind in all his relationships. Yet for all that, he like other African American academics of his era lived with the painful realization that racism was structured into the fabric of America and Harvard.

His achievements were many and impressive. Because of his work on human behavior in extreme conditions, a mountain in Antarctica is named Pierce Peak. His early contributions to the study of the impact of culture, race, and unequal international relations on mental health were recognized when the Massachusetts General Hospital's Division of Global Mental Health was named for him. Chet also won the American Psychiatric Association's Human Rights Award; was the Founding Chair of the Association of Black Psychiatrists of America; and was a past-President of the American Orthopsychiatry Association and of the American Board of Psychiatry and Neurology. He was a consultant to the NIH, the National Research Council, the US Airforce, the Peace Corps, the NBA, the NFL, NASA, and to Children's Public TV (both Sesame Street and the Electric Company). His research covered a very wide variety of topics from the consequences of violence and Ghetto life, to enuresis, sleep pathology, sports psychology, stress and behavioral pathology in the Arctic, the training of psychiatrists, and the psychiatric consequences of racism. In 1962 he was a coauthor in Science of an article on the effects of LSD on an elephant, which is a long story all to itself well known to his many psychiatric mentees at the Mass General and his close friends.

Chet was an early member of the IOM, now the National Academy of Medicine, member of the American Academy of Arts and Sciences, an Honorary Fellow of the Royal College of Psychiatry in the United Kingdom and of the Royal Australian and New Zealand College of Psychiatry. Harvard commissioned a portrait of Chet which hangs still today in the Junior Common Room of Lowell House. Chet died on the 23rd of September 2016.

Chet was a great mentor and his supervision of residents was legendary both for its high quality and for its inevitable segues into discussion of the sports he loved. He mentored numerous people across an array of disciplines who went on to also have distinguished careers including many Black psychiatrists. Those who were fortunate to spend time with Chet were enriched by sincerely, unspoken communications endowed with the auras of empathy, respect and inspiration.

Once at a monthly luncheon meeting with one of us (AK), Chet said in his soft and lowkey voice that in spite of all the honors he had received, he never in his three decades on the Harvard faculty had felt comfortable, owing to the everyday humiliations and microaggressions that characterized racial relations at Harvard. In light of the Black Lives Matter movement about systemic racism in our country it seems particularly important to consider this sad revelation. Chet was the very embodiment of a distinguished professor and a Harvard career. Yet, even this highly accomplished and award winning academic could not escape the awful toll of racism's systemic structural effects. It is high time Harvard Medical School recognize Chester Middlebrook Pierce in an enduring and meaningful way to signify this Faculty's commitment to racial justice.

Respectfully submitted,

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