PERPETUATING A POLARITY BETWEEN BLACK AND WHITE

As the only working scientist writing regularly for The Courant's Other Opinion page, I feel it's my responsibility to speak out when another scientist crosses the line between science and racism. I refer to James Watson, the pioneering geneticist and Nobel Prize winner who was recently quoted by London's The Sunday Times as saying he was "inherently gloomy about the prospect of Africa," because "our social policies are based on the fact that their intelligence is the same as ours -- whereas all the testing says not really."

Watson quickly backtracked, apologized and resigned his leadership post at Cold Springs Harbor Research Laboratory in New York. These were good moves.

For an esteemed 79-year-old scientist to publicly link race and intelligence in such a sloppy way was hurtful not only to those he denigrated, but also to the entire scientific community. Watson reinforces the notion that scientists are arrogant know-it-alls and muddled the necessary boundary between science and politics.

Watson knows very well that neither human races nor global intelligence exist as discrete phenomena that can be defined on the basis of statistically significant, measurable criteria. For starters, the genetic variation within groups of people related by geographic ancestry is much greater than the variation between groups. Secondly, when used in an unqualified comment, the word "intelligence" is generally associated with cognitive reasoning, rather than to the entire spectrum of creative, neurological, psychological and philosophical mental skills. This is not to say that selected aspects of the human genome such as skin color or disease resistance don't cluster for traditionally and geographically recognized groups, or that the ability to think abstractly cannot be measured.

Writing about science and racism got me thinking about an apparent conundrum.

If race doesn't exist as a measurable phenomenon, then why is racism so prevalent? I am not qualified to answer this based on fact or theory. But I can infer from this that humans must think they know more about race than they actually do. In my experience, this kind of "false-positive" ignorance is reinforced when a continuum is arbitrarily broken into categories. The worst case is when there are only two categories and they are defined as a polarity.

I refer to the false dichotomy between black and white people, one that's being reinforced by the U.S. census.

I've lived long enough to know that most American "black" people use this label less to describe their color than to symbolize a common cultural bond and an affinity with African origins. This is a good thing, one freely promulgated by the language of popular culture, especially by "black" celebrities, politicians and commentators.

Being black is also promulgated by the fact that it is one of five racial categories on the census: "Black or African American." The other four are "American Indian or Alaskan Native; Asian; Native Hawaiian or Other Pacific Islander; and White."

Note that there is only one category stripped of its geographic genetic heritage (haplogroup): White. Note that there is only one possible polarity: Black vs. White. I suggest that this deeply ingrained, superficial and false dichotomy exaggerates the perception of racial differences, and thus racism.
What I like about the census categories is that there's no litmus test for inclusion or exclusion. This is consistent with the notion that race is largely a personal social construct, rather than a biological reality. The form gives you three choices. Simplest is to assign oneself into one of the five categories listed above. At the next level, those who think of themselves as multiracial can check that box; or one can check the box "some other race."

I never know which box to check. I am not a color. I'm a proud descendant of the late 19th-century diaspora from Scandinavia to the upper Midwest. This group was associated with neither colonialism nor slavery, but with a long tradition of social democracy and egalitarianism. Hispanics can make an ethnic choice separate from race. I cannot.

Ebony and ivory is a good idea for a piano, but not for humans.