

Gray matters

by the St. Louis Post-Dispatch

Molecular biologist James D. Watson is a very smart man. In 1962, when he was only 34 years old, he shared a Nobel Prize for helping to describe the double-helix structure of DNA. As everyone knows now, DNA is the molecule that encodes all the genetic information that makes us human as opposed to, say, jellyfish or apes.

When a very smart man speaks in public about a subject he presumably knows well, the rest of us pay attention. So it was big news earlier this year when Watson told *The Times* of London that he was "inherently gloomy" about Africa's future. He said "all our social policies are based on the fact that their intelligence is the same as ours - whereas all the testing says 'not really.'"

In other words, he seemed to be saying that Africans - and, by extension, African-Americans, are not as smart as other races.

Watson's words seem - and that's the operative word: "seem" - to have some objective basis, because of IQ testing that appears to indicate general differences by race. But a closer look suggests that those differences are not at all what they seem.

- After World War II, for example, American servicemen, both black and white, fathered children by German women. When those kids took IQ tests years later, their scores were practically indistinguishable, regardless of whether the fathers were black or white.

- In the early 20th century, southern Italians scored so poorly on IQ tests that many observers worried about the burden they would impose on society. A few decades later, their scores were back on a par with whites elsewhere.

- The so-called "Flynn effect" suggests that IQs around the world have increased about three points per decade in the Western world over the past 25 years. Based on that alleged finding, science writer Malcolm Gladwell has calculated that if an American born in the 1930s had a "normal" IQ of 100, his grandchildren today would have "very superior" IQs of nearly 120. Not likely. Gladwell also figured that the Flynn effect would mean that kids today with average IQs of 100 all would have had forbearers in 1900 whose IQs would have ranked them as nearly mentally retarded. Even less likely.

The point is, IQ is only a very rough measure of intelligence. In fact, most of the supposed "increased intelligence" measured by IQ tests over the past 25 years comes from improved performance on parts of IQ tests that measure abstract thinking. In developing countries where daily life involves a struggle to meet concrete needs, there's not much call for abstract thinking or the higher test scores that might result from

practicing and developing that skill.

But the best argument against Watson's logic and conclusions comes from an unlikely source: Watson's own DNA. The man who helped describe DNA also was involved in sequencing it. As part of that project, Watson's DNA was posted online.

Enter an Icelandic company called deCODE Genetics. The firm has developed software that searches for and identifies genes associated with different parts of the world. The idea is to use genetic analysis to pinpoint a person's origins.

Since Watson's DNA already was available, the company analyzed it. It turns out that Watson has 16 times the number of genes associated with African origins that an average white European has. The scientist who analyzed Watson's DNA said it's almost as if this very smart man had a great-grandparent who was African.

We draw some comfort from the fact that a very smart man made a very dumb statement. It means there's hope for the rest of us.

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