

What philanthropy should not learn from 'The Bell Curve'

TO THE EDITOR:

In "What Philanthropy Can Learn From 'The Bell Curve'" (Opinion, November 29), Leslie Lenkowsky not only perpetuated a potentially harmful misunderstanding about the so-called "general intelligence" of people with dyslexia, he also provided grant makers with a powerful argument for rejecting his plea to stress nature over nurture in providing charity to the disadvantaged.

First, in leaping in one sentence from a preliminary scientific discovery of a genetic basis for dyslexia to broad-based claims for a genetic determination of intelligence, Lenkowsky implied that this relatively common reading disorder can be equated with problems with intelligence.

In fact, as virtually any teacher who works with dyslexic children and adults will tell you, extremely bright and able people often suffer from the disability. Moreover, at least one commonly used textbook defines dyslexia as "a disorder in which a person fails to learn to read in spite of adequate intelligence." So dyslexia may or may not have anything at all to do with that vague characteristic we call intelligence.

More importantly, perhaps, Lenkowsky's own admission that many dyslexics "have successfully compensated for their disability, completed demanding programs of study, and performed at high levels in intellectually challenging careers" powerfully suggests that perhaps grant makers should spend more time and effort, not less, on examining how manipulating a person's education and environment can shape social success. If this serious cognitive problem can be overcome by changes in the social environment, what about others?

As Lenkowsky notes, the consensus view is that a large share—from 20 to 60 per cent, he wrote—of intelligence is the result of environmental factors. Before grant makers go charging off into the brave new—but still poorly understood—world of genetic manipulation in humans, they should satisfy themselves that we've taken full advantage of working with these environmental factors in attacking social problems that Lenkowsky and others appear to blame on a person's score on an I.Q. test.

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for many years. Yet Mr. Lenkowsky chooses to blithely assure us that "most of these conclusions . . . are . . . now widely accepted by experts."

Even if one grants the correctness of *The Bell Curve's* findings, Mr. Lenkowsky and any allies he may find in the philanthropic community are left with the same problem faced: They have no solutions. In the book, Murray and Herrnstein vaguely suggest some kind of permanent ghetto where our genetic unfortunates can be warehoused and kept out of the sight and away from the wallets of those of us who have the right stuff. Without overt references to genetics, Newt Gingrich has suggested orphanages for this purpose. Mr. Lenkowsky offers no suggestions at all in his article.

Over the next decade, as the Human Genome Program finds more genes that really do predispose their owners to develop unpreventable and incurable illnesses such as Huntington's, polycystic kidney disease, and some cancers, philanthropic institutions will hear more calls for abandonment of efforts to help those whose genes are not beneficial.

In fact, the Lenkowsky article provides one hint of such a development. What, one might ask, is going to happen to children who carry this dyslexia gene (it should be noted that there is no agreement within the scientific community that dyslexia is a discrete entity, much less caused by a single gene). Will school systems label these children as slow, before they even enter first grade? Will prospective parents abort them even before they are born? Will universities and professional schools regard those who are predisposed to this or other illnesses as bad investments?

Philanthropy is one of society's chief efforts to achieve equality. Genetics is the science of inequality. There is an inherent contradiction here that cannot be resolved by advocating surrender to, or even incorporation of, genetic deterministic views into philanthropic thought.

As the political leaders of this country seem more likely to blame their failures on genetics, philanthropic leaders must remain vigilant that they do not fall into the same trap.

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TO THE EDITOR:

Leslie Lenkowsky writes that the recent publication of *The Bell Curve* challenges the philanthropic community to reconsider its "core commitment to improving social conditions in order to improve human welfare." In my opinion—as professor of biological sciences and former dean of the College at Columbia University, and as a trustee of the New York Foundation—Mr. Lenkowsky is wrong. His essay shows why the philanthropic community had best prepare to offer more, not less, of a helping hand to the "faces at the bottom of the well." To use Derrick Bell's haunting phrase for those of

our fellow citizens kept at the bottom of the socio-economic heap by continuing racial and ethnic prejudice.

Mr. Lenkowsky shows us this in his opening argument, by giving away the sleight-of-hand that the authors of *The Bell Curve* used to such damaging effect. He begins with the discovery of a DNA sequence (not, incidentally, a gene, but simply a stretch of DNA which differs from family to family) that is co-inherited, in a number of families, with the propensity to develop dyslexia. This is a correlation, not a causal connection, and he knows it: He says that one "may be associated" with the other.

Then a few sentences later, he jumps from correlation to causality, without any cause to do so, restating the results of the same single experiment as a claim that dyslexia "can be traced to a particular genetic abnormality." On what grounds? None in his article, and none in *The Bell Curve*.

The problem with making one unjustified leap from correlation to causality is the freedom it gives one to make another, and another. This leads to ritualistic pseudo-science, and to self-righteous but circular explanations after the fact: Of course we sacrifice the virgin every time there is an eclipse, you dummy; that's why the eclipse goes away.

Thus by the end of the first paragraph, we find that this small piece of real science "powerfully supports" the thesis that "much of intelligence is inherited." It does not. Rather, it supports the thesis that, since our bodies and our minds are the products of both our genes and our experiences, we should continue to work to improve that which can be improved, that is, the likelihood that the experiences of a child will be nurturing and nourishing in all senses of the word.

Once a person of means gets up a head of steam on the issue of the undeserving, genetically-driven poor, the arguments start to take on a characteristic and familiar tone.

First, there is the claim of a "consensus view," in this case the view that intelligence is inherited, coupled with the complaint of a cabal to disguise this consensus. There is no consensus, of course, because there can be no data around which to form one, since the definitions of intelligence are as vague as the mechanism of gene action in the assembly of a conscious brain is indeterminate.

And then, in the absence of either data or a good cabal to hide it, one expects to see the surfacing of simple, raw prejudice, usually of the racial sort.

Since people from different continents do look different, we can at least understand the impulse to sort ourselves that way. But when we try to sort people by race and compare their intelligence, we run smack up against the strong—depressingly strong and invariant—correlation between resources and race in this country.

The presumption that darker skin means fewer marbles but greater danger is almost always

built into such studies. Presumptions like these are always dicey when they are closely examined: Africans now living in Africa score higher on American "intelligence" tests than those African-Americans who are the descendants of hundreds of years of African slave labor.

But Lenkowsky, with a young black man in a hooded sweatshirt presumably hovering beneath his mind's eye, actually claims that inherited "intelligence" and not deprivation, lack of hope, nor bad examples, critically effects "the likelihood of becoming a criminal." Let him tell that to Webster Hubbell.

We know the game is up, and that it is just a game not a science, when the argument slips from race to ethnicity. By his name, Mr. Lenkowsky shares with me a Polish ancestry. I do not know his ethnicity beyond that, but I do know my own.

My grandparents left the Russian Pale to escape the religious and ethnic prejudice of their non-Jewish fellow Poles, Russians, and Ukrainians. They had no wealth, no education acceptable to the larger society they lived in, and no prospects; as this was the case for their ancestors, many Americans thought their condition was inherited. Indeed, I am fortunate that they arrived here before the ethnically-tilted immigration laws of the 1920's, which would have kept them out on the grounds that they carried putative Eastern-European, Jewish "genes" for poverty, disease, and avarice.

Their friends and relatives who did not make it out in time died, of course, at the hands of a great German experiment in genetic engineering, the removal of "Jewish genes" from the population of Europe by the execution of Jews, especially those genetic time-bombs, Jewish children.

Now, after three generations and less than a century of access to safety, food, and a chance at a higher education, I and my fellow American Jews are held up by *The Bell Curve* as inheritors of "genes for high intelligence." What nightmarish, ironic nonsense this is to me.

What mean-spirited rhetoric it is as well, and finally what an insult it is to my grandparents and to the rest of those millions of people who came to this country and who still come in the hopes of the chance my grandparents were given.

It is insulting and wrong to give my ancestors "genes" credit because the prejudices they faced have eased in my generation, and it is an even deeper—and wholly contradictory—insult to blame my African-American friends' ancestors' "genes" for America's inability to give up the prejudices that still block their path.

Surely philanthropy has a signal responsibility to work against the damaging effects of prejudice on the hopes of young people of all genetic makeups, as it has an obligation to work against the unduly prejudiced themselves.

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