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 of the genetic determinism of intelligence, but also suggested that there is a "genetic" root to dyslexia.

First, in a sentence from the essay, "cross-disciplinary 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 of ability.

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 lacks" 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 unqualified adoption of "the success story of 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 that from 30 to 60 percent of the intelligence is the result of environmental factors, and that the environment for intellectually capable people is so much better than that for intellectually challenged people, is that they have taken full advantage of working with the environmental factors in attacking social problems that Lenkowsky and others appear to blame on a person's score on an I.Q. test.

DAVID MALCOLP SHEPPARD, III W. VA.

TO THE EDITOR:

The notion of genetic determinism has unfortunately led Leslie Lenkowsky to some very dangerous conclusions. He suggests that philanthropy may be based upon the long-discredited science underlying The Bell Curve and reject their efforts to help the less fortunate because "philanthropic efforts to help disadvantaged groups (of any kind) may well be self-defeating because of their differences are hereditary."

Even a cursory reading of the stream of criticism that greeted this book shows that the premises and methodology underlying The Bell Curve have all been subject to severe criticism by geneticists and molecular scientists of all stripes for many years. Yet Mr. Lenkowsky chooses to bittely assure us that "these conclusions...are...now widely accepted by experts."

Even granting the correctness of the findings, Mr. Lenkowsky and any allies he may find in the philanthropic community are left with the same problem that Murray and Herrnstein faced: They have no solutions. In the book, Murray and Herrnstein vaguely suggest some kind of policy, without getting anywhere to develop dyslexia. This is a correlation, not a causal explanation, and he knows that they can be "associated" with the other.

Then a few sentences later, he jumps from correlation to causation, without purpose, etc. Last, he repeats 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 preventable and incurable illnesses such as cancer, heart disease, and many cancers, philanthropic institutions will hear more calls for abondonment of efforts, 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 those children as slow, before they even enter first grade? Will prospective parents shun 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, genetically deterministic views into philanthropic thought.

As the political leaders of this country move more and more from their failures on genetics, philanthropic leaders must remain vigilant that they do not fall into the trap.

DAVID MALCOLP SHEPPARD, III W. VA.

TO THE EDITOR:

Leslie Lenkowsky writes that the recent publication of The Bell Curve is "deeply troubling to the community" in its 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 institutional trustee of the New York Foundation—Mr. Lenkowsky is wrong. His essay shows why the philanthropic community has been forced to offer more, not less, of a helping hand to the "faces at the bottom of the well." To use Derek Bell's bumbling phrase, "I don't think those of our fellow citizens kept at the bottom of the socio-economic heap by training racial and ethnic prejudice."

Mr. Lenkowsky shows us this in his opening argument, by giving us the straight-shot of a number of the authors of The Bell Curve used to such damaging effects. He begins with the discovery of a DNA sequence that, but simply a stretch of DNA which differs from family to family) that is co-inherited, in a number of families, with the trait of dyslexia. This is a correlation, not a causal explanation, and he knows that they can be "associated" with the other.

Then a few sentences later, he jumps from correlation to causation, without purpose, etc. Last, he repeats 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 preventable and incurable illnesses such as cancer, heart disease, and many cancers, philanthropic institutions will hear more calls for abondonment of efforts, 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 those children as slow, before they even enter first grade? Will prospective parents shun 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, genetically deterministic views into philanthropic thought.

As the political leaders of this country move more and more from their failures on genetics, philanthropic leaders must remain vigilant that they do not fall into the trap.

Leslie Lenkowsky writes that the recent publication of The Bell Curve is "deeply troubling to the community" in its 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 institutional trustee of the New York Foundation—Mr. Lenkowsky is wrong. His essay shows why the philanthropic community has been forced to offer more, not less, of a helping hand to the "faces at the bottom of the well." To use Derek Bell's bumbling phrase, "I don't think those of our fellow citizens kept at the bottom of the socio-economic heap by training racial and ethnic prejudice."

Mr. Lenkowsky shows us this in his opening argument, by giving us the straight-shot of a number of the authors of The Bell Curve used to such damaging effects. He begins with the discovery of a DNA sequence that, but simply a stretch of DNA which differs from family to family) that is co-inherited, in a number of families, with the trait of dyslexia. This is a correlation, not a causal explanation, and he knows that they can be "associated" with the other.

Then a few sentences later, he jumps from correlation to causation, without purpose, etc. Last, he repeats 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 preventable and incurable illnesses such as cancer, heart disease, and many cancers, philanthropic institutions will hear more calls for abondonment of efforts, 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 those children as slow, before they even enter first grade? Will prospective parents shun 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, genetically deterministic views into philanthropic thought.

As the political leaders of this country move more and more from their failures on genetics, philanthropic leaders must remain vigilant that they do not fall into the trap.