IDENTIFYING HARMFUL PERVASIVE NARRATIVES

As storytellers, we may reinforce tropes that perpetuate harmful pervasive ideas even when we don't intend to. As you craft your story, or work with someone else to share theirs, avoid contributing to the proliferation of harmful, damaging stereotypes and stories. Stories that oversimplify people's lives are almost always harmful because they lean into these established narratives.

They may include:

Deservingness: These are stories that describe an individual's moral merit. They might focus on factors like hard work or military service to show that they "deserve" success; support; and forms of public assistance like tuition aid, housing, or food assistance. The individual may be presented as an outlier who may easily be described through harmful stereotypes, but is one of the "good ones."

Hero stories: These stories are about a single individual who, through extraordinary commitment, generosity, and skill, is able to "save" or "fix" people who are suffering the consequences of poverty. Often, this person's success is presented without acknowledgment of others who participated in collective action.

Stories that perpetuate stereotypes: Stereotypes are generalized beliefs that are applied to an entire group of people. Even when they are intended to be flattering, they rob people of their individualism. More often, they present harmful generalizations that undercut "deservingness."

Tokenism: Tokenism is the practice of making a symbolic gesture toward inclusivity, usually by recruiting those from marginalized groups to offer the appearance of equity, diversity, and parity within a system or organization. Such stories are insincere efforts to create the appearance of inclusivity.

White saviorism: In such stories, white people provide the help that they believe BIPOC need. These kinds of stories are doubly harmful because they exacerbate privilege and deprive people of agency. They also reinforce narratives that people rather than systems require fixing, and deny the power and importance of collective action.

Fixed-pie or zero-sum: These stories are written from a perspective that there is a fixed pie of resources, and that one person or group's gain is a loss for someone else. Language that reinforces this narrative might include phrases like getting ahead or left behind.

Success stories, including "against-all-odds" stories: Success stories are tempting to tell for a range of reasons. Organizations often use them to demonstrate their effectiveness (in which case, they become savior stories) or to gain support from donors. These stories can be harmful because they can create an impression that if anyone can succeed against impossible barriers, everyone should. Too frequently, success stories benefit organizations rather than movements or individuals. They exploit an individual's trauma for the entertainment or aggrandizement of others. And they can easily become hero stories or bootstrap stories.

Narratives that justify poverty or present poverty as fixed or natural: These stories present poverty as a natural consequence for people who don't work hard or may just be "down on their luck." They fail to present poverty as unnecessary, or a consequence of wealth creation or greed.

Bootstrap or "American Dream" stories: In these stories, individuals advance themselves based on their own skills and abilities, without acknowledgment of the systems or privilege designed to advantage them.

"Fixing" stories: These stories feature either a person or a delivery system that has to be repaired, rather than pointing to the damaging underlying causes or systemic factors that lead to this moment or experience.