BRITISH COLUMBIA | Ministry of Citizens' Services

# Backgrounder on Countering Deficit Narrative

## What is a deficit narrative?

A deficit narrative is created when racialized and Indigenous people become associated with deficiency, inferiority and failure, and are blamed for existing disparities.[1,2,6] This includes unintentionally faulting the individual, their family or their culture for the challenges that they face.

Deficit narratives ignore the systemic influences that cause disparities and often suggest those same systems as a solution (for example, discussing how education can increase income but failing to discuss inequities built into the education system itself).

Deficit narratives often build on ideologies of meritocracy and colourblindness to implicitly or explicitly deny that systemic racism exists. The main argument used is that merit determines a person's place in the social system and that everyone, regardless of the colour of their skin, has a chance to succeed. By extension, this implies that the privileged populations are where they are because of merit, and the oppressed populations are not at the same level because they lack merit.

## How can it be identified?

Deficit narratives can be difficult to detect as they're embedded in culture, language, policies and worldviews, and common in mainstream research. Whether a piece of text contributes to a deficit narrative is context-dependent: "the use of a single word does not automatically make discourse inherently and completely grounded in deficit thinking."[2]

Those who seek to critique the deficit nature of language should consider the larger context in which this language is used. Is it used to blame the oppressed groups or to highlight the systemic structures as the root causes of existing inequities?

Reporting on racial disparities can contribute to a deficit narrative if they are explained with cultural practices of racial groups. However, the same reporting can create an anti-deficit narrative when highlighting problems in the social structures that cause disparities.

## What impact does it have?

Deficit narratives result in three harmful consequences:

- Diminishing people from some racial groups and reinforcing negative stereotypes about them, which then elevates people from the dominant racial group[1,2,6]
- Justifying the oppression, discrimination or a disadvantaged position of a group or people (for example, suggesting that the group deserves what they experience because of its culture or other characteristics)

- Helping to legitimize and maintain the power of an elite subgroup of people who are disincentivized to make structural changes

In education, deficit narratives lead to educators having lower expectations of students from racialized groups and masking how this thinking is undermining student success.[2,6] This results in a "belief gap", which is the gap between what students *can* achieve versus what others *think they can* achieve. The belief that students cannot achieve something because of their immutable characteristics (like race or a health condition) can lead to decreased efforts and motivation on part of the student and the teacher. The BC Auditor General referred to this as "the racism of low expectations".[7]

In health, deficit narratives have negatively affected perspectives, understandings and policies and practices for Indigenous health.[1,4] These negative ideas can be internalized by Indigenous people and can lead to disassociation with health care and a reluctance to participate in potentially beneficial research. In turn, this leads to poorer health outcomes for the oppressed group, which further reinforces the dominant deficit narrative.

## How to counter deficit narratives?

Unfortunately, deficit narratives about some racial and Indigenous groups are now a part of our social discourse and eliminating them requires a sociocultural change. Many existing government policies and programs are created based on deficit narratives and further reinforce them. This includes policies that focus funding on initiatives that do not target the systemic root causes of disparities. For example, funding a training program on healthy eating to support a community that lacks the infrastructure and economic conditions to support healthy eating behaviours. By ignoring structural causes and focusing on training, this policy reinforces a deficit narrative by attributing system-level failure to people and groups.

We should strive to create content that corrects and does not reinforce the current distorted portrayals of the impacted groups. The key is finding a balance between highlighting the existing challenges groups face, naming racism, colonization and systemic factors responsible for these challenges, and recognizing the resilience and successes of the impacted groups. This is not easy and requires vulnerability, reflexivity and an openness to unlearn comfortable ways of doing and reporting research.

> "I must reflect critically upon my own … socialization; on how and by whom my gaze has been trained. I must recognize that the very perception of something "ringing true" for me … does not make it so and might be the best evidence that it is not, in fact, so." [6]

## Strategies to create anti-deficit narratives

- Recognize historical and/or current social structures (policies, practices, actions) as the root cause of inequities and the active role all members of society play in reinforcing these structures. Discuss a range of explanatory factors when reporting on conditions or outcomes for racial or Indigenous groups. Include and centre perspectives and knowledge of the

oppressed people to generate new frameworks that explain existing inequities. When proposing solutions, focus on the social conditions that need fixing, rather than on how the behaviours, attitudes, values or culture of the impacted groups need to change.[2,5,6] Use active language and name the actors that have the power to enact change, rather than implying that social conditions exist outside of anyone's control.

**Example:** "This tool will provide supports for students who have been impacted by inequities in education." – this frames the support tool as a remedy for problems in the education system.[8]

"Providing students of colour with strategies around grit can help reduce the achievement gap." – this places the problem within students of colour who are portrayed as needing improvement.[8]

- Present findings in a precise, rather than generalized manner.[5] This means:

a) Be precise in what data is being reported by including its specific value rather than describing a general pattern. Strive for accuracy in the magnitude of the difference and be clear when the difference is not meaningful.

**Example:** "The test produced scores 10 points higher/lower" or "teachers graded this group 0.25 standard deviations higher/lower" rather than "students scored higher/lower".

b) Name the data source (for example, name of instrument or test), what exactly it measures and in what context to avoid over-generalizations.

**Example:** "MACS mathematics test score in grade five" rather than "math achievement in elementary school".

- Use respectful terminology and people-first language that affirms the humanity and dignity of Indigenous and racialized groups.[5,6,9]

**Example**: Use "students who identify as Chinese" or "Chinese students" instead of "Chinese", use "enslaved people" instead of "slaves".

Do not use language that dehumanizes by association with animals or inanimate objects, implies hierarchy, reinforces existing stereotypes or assigns value judgements to disparities.

**Example**: Avoid the following: "research subjects", "lag/lagged/lagging", "gap", "trail/trailed/trailing", "at-risk", "culture of poverty", "disadvantaged" or "diverse" (when referring to a racialized group).

## Strategies to create anti-deficit narratives (continued)

- When describing coefficients for a racialized variable produced by a regression function or another statistical model, avoid language that may reinforce a misconception that race is an innate trait directly causing the relationship between variables. These include standard

research phrasing, like "race effect," "race impact," and "race explains," which may be harmful in the context of race-based data.[5]

> **Example:** Instead of writing "the effect of race on pay was significant," write "there were statistically significant differences in pay between racial groups". Instead of writing that "race accounted for 30% of variance in pay", write "30% of differences in pay were explained by differences in social conditions encountered by racial groups".

- Use a strength-based approach to help create a balanced narrative about groups experiencing inequities.[3,4,6] This involves paying attention to the positive concepts of well-being, thriving, hope, happiness and self-determination instead of solely focusing on the negative issues such as poverty or disease. It also means exploring if a strengths-based statistic could be reported instead of a deficit-based one.

> **Example**: The In Plain Sight Report suggests that in addition to reporting on the inequities experienced by Indigenous people, it is also important to report on their wellness and resilience and how these can be supported at the system level.[9] The First Nations Health Authority has also shifted to a model based on wellness to better address the effects of colonialism and promote and build on First Nations' strengths and resilience.[10]

## Are there any examples that we can draw on?

- A 2021 report by Tŝilhqot'in Nation and UBC researchers (for example, executive summary – chapter 2), is a good example of how challenges faced by a community can be discussed in a balanced way.
- A 2021 report by Métis Nation British Columbia and the Office of the Provincial Health Officer is another example of balancing statistics about challenges with a strength-based perspective.

## References

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