

## CHAPTER 1

# Rhetoric as Social Intervention

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One afternoon you relax in front of the television and channel surf to catch up on world events. A reporter is interviewing not-for-profit organization leaders at an international AIDS conference about responses to the spread of HIV. A talk show host is attempting to help a young man confront his fear of clowns. A prominent senator is explaining how the president's domestic policy, offered as a way to solve serious problems, will actually create more problems. A sales person is demonstrating a portable video system that can be attached to a treadmill.

You turn off the television and skim the day's newspaper. A front-page article describes disagreements over the legality of a proposed wind turbine farm to generate electricity for a local community. An editorial column applauds the school board's decision to fund a remedial reading program. You set the newspaper aside and pop open your laptop to cruise the Internet. You peruse photos of adoptable animals posted on the Humane Society's Web site. You glance at the new videos uploaded on a popular Web site. You read an email from a friend who complains about current politics. You put the computer to sleep and phone your parents. Your mother chats about a recent stock investment she has made. After you hang up, you reflect on your afternoon.

You realize that, despite the variety of people, media, and messages you encountered, one underlying commonality unites them all: Each has the potentiality to shape the meaning you give to the world around you. Regardless of whether the communicators are informative

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or persuasive, entertaining or serious, they all in some way attempt to intervene in how you interpret experience. They offer choices for making sense of the people, objects, and events of daily life. After interacting with these communicators, you might alter your interpretation of the president's domestic policy from *good* to *poor*, or of treadmill exercise from *boring* to *tolerable*. You might become aware of a need to learn more about wind power or stock investments.

All of these potential interventions arise out of the rhetorical nature of the human being: in our talk or discourse, we interact in ways that attempt to influence others who, at the same time, attempt to influence us. In our symbolizing activity, we seem to practice a **rhetoric of social intervention**:

- *rhetorical* because it involves communication,
- *social* because our rhetorical acts occur in interaction with other people, and
- *interventional* because these acts potentially shift the way in which we (and others) interpret and respond to experience.

This book is about our lives as rhetorical creatures who create, maintain, and change the symbolically constituted world around us through our ability to symbolize. It examines how each of us acts as a social intervener, constantly interacting with others to shape interpretations of needs, relationships, and experience. To see the process by which we do this, we present a model for interpreting the rhetoric of social intervention. This model highlights the communication patterns that underlie our social interventions and provides a way for us to analyze and enact interventional activities. It empowers us to reflect on our own participation in the rhetoric of social intervention. In learning this model, you add to the choices that you have for making sense of and giving meaning to your own social interactions.

To communicate about the rhetoric of social intervention, we must agree on the meaning of some symbols—words—used in this book. These words will be important when we discuss the model, so we, the authors, need to explain how we use them. Take a moment to write down your definitions for these terms: *intervention*, *systems*, and *rhetoric*. Then, as you read this chapter, compare your way of *naming* these experiences to ours. Notice how we, the authors, define and give examples of *intervention*, *systems*, and *rhetoric* to illustrate our way of **naming** or symbolically categorizing these experiences—how we make these concepts “real.” Consider how we attempt to intervene in your interpretation of the symbols *intervention*, *systems*, and *rhetoric*!

After presenting some key vocabulary, we preview the Rhetoric of Social Intervention (RSI) model, which is the focus of this book. We describe its development and briefly compare it to several rhetorical criticism approaches. We also examine reasons for conducting rhetorical criticism and analyzing the rhetoric of social intervention. We close this chapter with an overview of the book's objectives and structure—a glimpse of the exploration ahead. Let's begin this journey by talking about intervention.

## ❖ INTERVENTION

*Intervention* is a symbol, or word, that frequently is used in conjunction with words such as *drug*, *alcohol*, *suicide*, *crisis*, *addiction*, and *family*. In popular and professional literature, *intervention* often means an intentional intercession or act to bring about change. The act might be designed to promote or encourage certain types of behavior (e.g., living alcohol free, solving a problem) as well as to prevent or impede certain kinds of behavior (e.g., killing oneself, falling behind in school). For example, a *drug intervention* might involve a health educator working with teenagers to promote intentionally a behavioral change—from taking cocaine to avoiding cocaine. A *family intervention* might entail a therapist counseling a family on how to shift intentionally its dynamics from dysfunctional to functional.

We also use the word *intervention* to refer to an act to promote or prevent change. More specifically, we define **intervention** as a communication act that attempts to encourage or discourage change. Our definition highlights *communication* because we assume that interventions are based on symbols. Through **symbolizing activity**, such as speaking, writing, or signing, we communicate our interventions. Suppose you have a sibling who smokes. You want to intervene in how your sibling interprets the experience of smoking—to shift the interpretation from *fun and relaxing* to *risky and dangerous*. Your intervention will involve some form of communication such as talking to your sibling about the health risks, showing your sibling a Web site with quitting strategies, or giving your sibling an antismoking brochure to read.

### Multiple Outcomes and Interveners

Our definition of *intervention* emphasizes that our communicative acts are *attempts*. Although an intervention might be well planned and executed, the outcome might not be as we had hoped or anticipated.

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Despite your various appeals, your sibling might continue to smoke, avoid you rather than listen to your nonsmoking reasoning, or smoke more to irritate you. Your interventional *attempt* might not have the desired outcome of changing your sibling's interpretation of cigarettes, and your sibling's actions might intervene in your interpretation of the smoking experience. Maybe now you interpret it as *hopeless!*

Our interventional acts are always attempts because all interventions involve multiple **interveners**, which we define as people and groups enacting and responding to interventions. At the same time as you encourage your sibling to rename the act of smoking, other interveners—friends who smoke and cigarette companies—might communicate messages that emphasize maintaining the current interpretation of smoking. Intervenors, then, both promote and impede change.

### Intervention Intent

Our definition of intervention lacks mention of *intention*, although throughout the book we discuss the goals and purposes of intervention and give examples of intended interventions. Also, when we analyze social interventions, we typically focus on ones we consider intentional so that we can compare an intervention's outcome and side effects to its purpose or intention. However, naming only communication acts that have been clearly defined as intentional as interventions might limit our knowledge and understanding of the rhetoric of social intervention. Besides, what an intervener names as *intentional* and what others around the intervener interpret as *intentional* may differ. Ultimately, all interventions can encourage and result in unintended change. Regardless of whether the intervener intended the effect, the influence is still there. Thus, the question of intent is relevant only when we attempt to measure what the intervener tried to accomplish and what actually took place.

Finally, our definition of intervention assumes that interventions take place within *systems*. Because system will be a recurring term, let's consider a few features of systems.

### ❖ SYSTEMS

To characterize a system, we must consider the meaning of the word *system*. Economist Kenneth Boulding (1985) defines a **system** as "any structure that exhibits order and pattern" (p. 9). We can identify

ordered and patterned structures and processes all around us. A house is heated and cooled by a *system* of interconnected ducts and machinery. We drive across the country on an organized structure of roadways called the interstate *system*. System theorists suggest that a system includes several key features along with order and pattern. Besides system characteristics, we will also examine two types of systems—social and ideological—and catalysts that prompt system change.

### System Characteristics

One important characteristic of a systemic structure is the interrelatedness or interconnectedness of its components (Boulding, 1985). A system's components are the parts that we identify as constituting the system. The house's heating and cooling system consists of components such as a heat pump, vents, ducts, thermostat, and forced air. The human circulatory system includes components such as the heart, blood vessels, and the blood itself. These systems are organized around a goal or purpose—to heat the house or to feed and oxygenate the body. All systems have a minimum of two parts (Hanson, 1995). These interrelated parts form an integrated whole (Laszlo, 1972).

*Interdependence.* A system's components are interdependent. **Interdependence**, in terms of a system, means that each system component interacts with and affects the other system components. Any shift or change in one component of the system alters or influences all parts of the system (Hanson, 1995). When the room temperature reaches a selected point, it *alters* the thermostat and the air conditioning unit *changes* and switches on or off. Environmentalists often discuss how an increase in one component of the ecosystem—such as carbon dioxide—interconnects to changes in all ecosystem parts—such as global temperature and glacier size.

*Causality.* Another characteristic related to systemic interconnectedness is that system change is not based on a single cause-and-effect relationship among the parts. Sociologist Barbara Hanson (1995) explains, "Any action or inaction will reverberate through the entire system leading to unpredictable effects and sometimes effects that are precisely the inverse of the intended effect" (p. 27). She compares intervention in a system to pushing down on a waterbed: "Pushing on one corner leads to disruption in all areas, and possibly ultimately back onto the first corner we push" (p. 29). Thus, *causality* means that a change in one part of the system has side effects for change in all system parts.

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*Open or Closed.* Systems can also be described as open or closed. An open system is one that is open to various inputs, which it processes in various ways. An *open* system is a dynamic system, and can adapt to changes within the system and within its environment. A company that alters its product line in response to changed customer demand exemplifies an *open* system.

A *closed* system is one that processes limited inputs in one patterned way. A company that refuses to listen to customer input and adapt to changes in customers' needs would be a *closed* system. Closed systems tend to run down over time. An unchanging company (closed system) will probably fail (Laszlo, 1972).

*Endurance.* Systems vary in terms of how long they endure. Systems theorist Ervin Laszlo (1972) explains that some systems, such as political systems or live oak trees, are long lived. Other systems, such as butterflies or soccer games, are short lived. Laszlo notes that maintaining relationships among a system's components is the key to its continued existence. Although a system's components might change, a system *endures* as long as its relationships continue. For example, the U.S. government system continues to exist even though a new president is elected every few years.

*Subsystems.* Finally, a system can itself be composed of systems. For example, the human body system consists of components such as the circulatory, digestive, endocrine, nervous, musculoskeletal, respiratory, and reproductive systems. Systems within a system are **subsystems** of a greater or superordinate system. Laszlo (1972) explains, "A system in one perspective is a subsystem in another" (p. 14). We can identify components that construct each subsystem, such as the heart, blood, and vessels of the circulatory system. Each subsystem influences the other and the state of the superordinate human body system. For example, a heart that beats too fast (circulatory system) can lead to changes in the lungs (respiratory system).

## Social Systems

In this book, we primarily study the interaction of two types of systems—social systems and ideological systems—although other systems, such as interpersonal systems, will be mentioned. A **social system** is made up of a network of human interconnections. Human beings in a social system influence and affect each other.

*Composition.* Social system components are composed of individuals and groups. At the individual level are *intrapersonal* systems, which we identify as a single person, and *interpersonal* systems, which we identify as connections that develop between two intrapersonal systems, such as between a parent and a child or between two friends. Networks of interpersonal systems create larger social systems, such as a family. A family consists of interdependent components, such as mother, father, stepparent, sister, stepbrother, and grandmother. A medical practice system includes individuals such as doctor, nurse, technician, and patient.

Social systems are also composed of groups. For example, the social system known as a university is composed of groups such as students, faculty, staff, administration, and alumni. The university, in turn, is part of the social system known as the state educational system. The university and other universities and colleges within the state form this social system.

*Constitution.* In discussing systems and social systems, we have acted as if they are real and have existence in the physical world. However, systems theorist Lars Skyttner (1996) points out that the word *system* "does not refer to existing things in the real world but rather to a way of organizing our thoughts about the real world" (p. 35). Social systems arise out of our ability to name experience, thereby organizing it. That is, social systems are symbolic constructions. They have been created or *constituted* through symbols.

In interactions with others, we identify the components and define the relationships among those components that comprise the social system. We choose, for example, the qualities and behaviors that constitute the social system we call *family*. Consequently, we might not always agree on the components that make up a social system. For example, can a system of interconnections that includes two men who act as *mother and father* be named as *family*? To analyze interventions within a social system, then, we have to define what we consider to be the components of that system.

*Purpose.* We assume that social systems develop around a *purpose* or goal (Skyttner, 1996), in the sense that they meet some human need. For example, a family system meets the needs of infants and children to grow and survive. School systems satisfy learning and knowledge needs. Political systems meet the need for social order. Examining purposes and goals can help us identify the components of a social system that seem to be key to achieving those goals.

## Ideological Systems

Our discussion of social systems suggests that they consist of relationships that are organized around meeting needs. In the process of symbolically constituting social systems, we also constitute ideological systems. An **ideological system** is a comprehensive way of interpreting and giving meaning to all of our experiences. We considered it a system because it is composed of the interpretations that we give to our needs, relationships, and daily experiences. It is organized around meeting the innate human need to construe an ordered and meaningful world. We create, maintain, and change an ideological system in communication with others. Participants in social systems symbolically construct and are constructed by ideological systems that influence how participants symbolically constitute social systems. We will talk more about ideological systems later in this chapter.

When we intervene, we attempt to shift or prevent a shift in an ideological system, or how a social system interprets its needs, relationships, and experience. A change in the ideological system influences the social system's growth and development. A shift in your sibling's interpretation of cigarettes can alter his interdependencies with the social systems in which he participates. Your sibling might interpret himself as having less interdependency with smokers and cigarette vendors and increased interdependency with nonsmokers and nicotine gum vendors. If your sibling continues to name smoking as *fun* and *relaxing*, then relationships with smoking friends and cigarette vendors will likely stay the same. The upcoming chapters detail how our rhetorical interventions to promote or impede ideological system change influence social system dynamics.

## System Change Catalysts

What scholars view as the catalyst of social system change, or the force that drives social system change, varies with their field of study and expertise (Brown, 1978). For example, a psychologist might focus on the family as a system and consider a shift in attitudes among family members as the catalyst of change. An economist might focus on buyers, sellers, and suppliers as a system and point to a shift in marketplace forces as the driver of change. An ecologist might focus on the earth as a system and view a shift in environmental forces as the spark of change.

As our definition of intervention indicates, we emphasize *communication* as the generator of social system change. Fields of study such as psychology, economics, history, biology, and—for that matter—communication,



exist only because we communicate about them. These fields arise out of our ability to symbolize and talk about experience that we define as *psychology* or *economics* and so forth. As rhetorical scholars, we identify *our ability to symbolize* as the driver of social system change. Social systems change as a result of our naming and renaming of needs, relationships, and experience. We build on this idea throughout the book as we examine how we symbolically create social systems and intervene to maintain and change those constructions.

Overall, we use the word *intervention* to remind us that we interact with, rather than act on others. We *intervene* into, rather than control, the development of ideological systems, and, by extension, we intervene into the social systems in which we participate (Brown, 1978). Our interventions introduce choices about directions for possible development. However, the choices that each of us offers are not the only ones available. When we intervene to move a person or group toward change, other communicators may attempt to forestall change. When we intervene to prevent change, others may encourage change. We have no buttons to push to ensure that our interventions will result in the social system selecting the choice we are advocating. Rather, intervention is a rhetorical act that *attempts* to nudge people and groups toward an interpretation of needs, relationships, and experience that we hope leads toward a particular social outcome (Brown, 1987). The emphasis on rhetorical action points to another symbol important to our discussion of social intervention—*rhetoric*.

## ❖ RHETORIC

*Rhetoric* is a word that circulates in popular media, often in a less than positive way. Think about the times you have heard phrases such as “that’s mere rhetoric” or “she was not impressed by his rhetoric.” How does the use of the word *rhetoric* in this manner shape your interpretation of the situation? Does it suggest that what you are hearing is trustworthy? Untrustworthy? Objective? Biased?

The word *rhetoric* also circulates in the academic media. Rhetorical scholars often debate how to characterize the word. Definitions range from Aristotle’s well-known statement that rhetoric is “an ability in each [particular] case, to see the available means of persuasion” (Aristotle, 2007, p. 37) to rhetorical theorist Barry Brummett’s (2006) claim that rhetoric is “the ways in which signs influence people” (p. 4). Rhetoricians Richard Cherwitz and James Hikins (1986) suggest that rhetoric is “the art of describing reality through language” (p. 62).

## Symbolic Foundations of Rhetoric

Such a range of definitions for rhetoric is a reminder that our symbolizing ability enables us to construct and communicate concepts such as *rhetoric*. We are the ones who conceive the idea of *rhetoric* and make *rhetoric* “real” in our talk and interactions. In our conversations and writings with each other, we negotiate the characteristics and attributes of *rhetoric*. We decide which experiences constitute *rhetoric* and which experiences do not constitute *rhetoric*. The word *rhetoric* itself is a **symbol**. A symbol is a word that stands for or represents a particular behavior or experience.

The definition of rhetoric we use highlights the symbolic foundations of the word. We define **rhetoric** as the creation and study of meaningful symbols that symbolically constitute reality. By *symbols*, we mean words that people agree shall represent and communicate particular experiences. So far, we have given meaning to the symbols *intervention*, *system*, and *rhetoric* by defining and giving examples of experiences that these symbols name. In defining and explaining these symbols, we also symbolically constitute reality. We make *intervention*, *system*, and *rhetoric* “real.” We can talk about and act as if *intervention*, *system*, and *rhetoric* exist in our daily experience.

## Symbol-based Reality

Our definition of rhetoric assumes that much of what we experience as *reality* is based on symbols. Consider, for example, your response to these questions that rhetorical scholar Lee Snyder shared in an email to the authors.

- How far back do your personal experiences extend? That is, what is your earliest memory? How do you know about dinosaurs, the Pilgrims, or World War I?
- How many famous people do you know? How do you know they are famous? How do you know about these people?
- How much of the world have you traveled? What countries or states have you been in? How do you know about Antarctica, Mt. Everest, or Easter Island?
- How much of your past exists in actual artifacts—pictures, videos, and audio files? How much exists only in your memory? Are your memories made of actual objects or symbols?

- What is your greatest ambition? What is your greatest fear? Are your dreams and fears physical and literal, or are they symbolic?

As you reflect on your responses to these questions, think about how much of your reality is based on words and mediated images or, in other words, is *symbolic*. Much of what you “know” does not come from your own direct experience with people, objects, and events. Rather, much of your knowledge of the world is symbolically constructed from interactions with other people’s interpretations of experience, such as the stories they tell, the reports they share, the photos they broadcast, the blogs they post, and the documentaries they create.

The field of rhetoric is one in which scholars investigate the process by which human beings create symbolic interpretations of experience that they consider reality. When we assume a rhetorical perspective, we study how, in our symbolizing activity, we construct, maintain, and change our symbolic reality. As rhetorical theorist Sonja Foss (2004) observes, “What we count as real or as knowledge about the world depends on how we choose to label and talk about things” (p. 6). We explore this labeling or naming behavior in depth in the next chapter.

Part of our definition of **rhetoric** includes the *study* of meaningful symbols that symbolically constitute reality. When we conduct such studies, we become rhetorical critics.

#### ❖ RHETORICAL CRITICISM

As students of rhetoric, we often engage in **rhetorical criticism**. We seek in an organized manner to interpret, analyze, and critique the symbolizing activity that underlies the growth, maintenance, and decline of our ideological and social systems. Foss (2004) describes rhetorical criticism as “an everyday activity we can use to understand our responses to symbols of all kinds and to create symbols of our own that generate the kinds of responses we intend” (p. xi).

Each time we interact with others we have an opportunity to observe and reflect on how we create meaningful symbols that symbolically constitute reality. We can study the rhetorical strategies, tactics, and maneuvers that underlie the rhetoric of social intervention. The knowledge gained from our observations can enhance our ability to act as interveners and to create symbols that *attempt* to generate the responses we desire.

### Components of Rhetorical Criticism

Foss (2004) suggests that the execution of rhetorical criticism involves three components:

- systematic analysis as the act of criticism,
  - acts and artifacts as the objects of analysis in criticism, and
  - understanding rhetorical processes as the purpose of criticism.
- (p. 6)

First, rhetorical criticism requires an organized way of studying human symbolizing activity. Typically, a rhetorical critic adopts a methodology or framework as a lens through which the critic interprets and critiques symbolic interactions. Second, rhetorical criticism involves the analysis of some type of symbolizing activity, such as a conversation, speech, book, movie, email, or Web site. The rhetorical critic identifies the discourse to investigate, and draws on the methodology as a pattern to guide the analysis. Finally, the primary reason we employ rhetorical criticism is to expand our knowledge of the symbolic nature of human beings.

Brummett (2006) adds a fourth component to the execution of rhetorical criticism—the critic's findings must be shared with others to complete the criticism process. By sharing our analyses with others, we contribute to the knowledge base of all rhetorical critics. We also reinforce the need for rhetorical criticism. Foss (2004) explains that the results of rhetorical criticism can lead to greater knowledge about the nature of rhetoric, expansion of rhetorical theory, improvement in our communication practices, and our own growth as critical receivers of messages. Communication theorists Malcolm Sillars and Bruce Gronbeck (2001) comment that understanding communication processes is key to understanding how societies function. Brummett sees the outcome of rhetorical criticism as providing ways for others "to see and experience the world differently" (p. 102). In all, rhetorical criticism is an intervention that potentially shifts how scholars interpret and explain human communication processes.

### Rhetorical Criticism of Social Intervention

This book emphasizes the rhetorical criticism of social intervention. A critique of the rhetoric of social intervention can make numerous

scholarly and social contributions by increasing our insight into the following:

- the symbolic processes underlying social system dynamics of continuity and change
- the rhetorical strategies, tactics, and maneuvers used to create, maintain, and change interpretations of experience
- the direction and outcome of our own rhetorical interventions
- the kinds of *futures* being created and promoted in our symbolizing activity

For example, in the 1960s, women began to attend to the *future* being created for them in gender-specific symbols such as *firemen* and *police-men* and advocate an alternative future using gender-neutral symbols such as *fire fighters* and *police officers*.

The rhetorical criticism of social intervention foregrounds the *process* by which we enact interventions. It focuses attention on *how* we construct symbolic interpretations of reality rather than on the *correctness* of those interpretations or the critic's own personal feelings about the interpretations. As social intervention critics, we seek to observe the patterns of communication that generate the content of communication. We attempt to expand our knowledge of how interveners rhetorically promote particular symbolic realities and how social system components react to and enact responding interventions. Understanding the *how* enables us to reflect on our role in intervention and to develop strategies that guide our own interventions.

As Foss (2004) notes, the act of rhetorical criticism requires *systematic analysis* or a *methodology* for investigating symbolizing activity. We need a framework that provides a pattern that we can use to interpret and critique the rhetoric of social intervention. Thus, this book introduces the RSI model as a methodology.

#### ❖ RSI MODEL

The RSI model was conceptualized in the thinking and writing of rhetorical theorist William R. Brown (1978, 1982, 1986, 1987).

#### **RSI Model Beginnings**

The model's beginnings can be traced to Brown's graduate school interest in Will Rogers, an Oklahoma cowboy and vaudeville actor who

became a well-known U.S. humorist and social commentator. In the 1920s and 1930s, until his death in a plane crash in 1935, Rogers traveled around the country, giving speeches and writing newspaper columns that offered respected insights on society and politics. Today, the Will Rogers Memorial Museums in Oklahoma ([www.willrogers.com](http://www.willrogers.com)) commemorate Rogers's activities and influence. Brown, a native Oklahoman, was curious about the source of Rogers's social persuasiveness and authority.

In research published in the book *Imagemaker: Will Rogers and the American Dream*, Brown (1970) attributes Rogers's popularity with and influence on the U.S. public to his embodiment of characteristics associated with American dream ideology. Brown maps the rise and structure of the American dream ideology and explores how Rogers symbolically identified with it. Brown was frustrated by his explorations, though, because, although he believed he had painted an interesting portrait of Rogers's rhetoric, he perceived that the picture was static (personal communication, September 29, 2006).

This frustration led Brown to investigate the rhetorical processes by which the U.S. social system constitutes the ideology known as the **American dream**, which had shaped Rogers's communicative interactions. In his research on Rogers, Brown describes the components of the American dream, such as *freedom, equality, individualism, and pursuit of happiness*. "But I wanted to find a way to put it into motion—a way for the content of ideology to become background and the process of ideology to become foreground" (personal communication, September 29, 2006). In his search to understand *how* human beings symbolically construct ideology, he turned to books and articles on language, linguistics, and philosophy as well as conversations with communication colleagues.

From these idea generators, Brown synthesized a model to explain the rhetorical process by which we create, maintain, and change ideological and social systems. He published three articles that describe the model's concepts (Brown, 1978, 1982, 1986). Brown's RSI model provides the framework used in this book for understanding the rhetoric of social intervention and the processes of social change and continuity.

### RSI Model Foundations

The RSI model is built on the assumption that *naming* is the fundamental activity of human beings (Brown, 1978). That is, we *name* or symbolically categorize both physical, sensed experience and conceptual, non-sensed experiences to communicate and share these experiences

with others. In essence, we transform all experience into symbols (Langer, 1980). For example, words such as *book*, *desk*, and *pen* name physical, sensed experience. Earlier in this chapter, we *named* the conceptual, non-sensed experiences *intervention*, *system*, and *rhetoric* as we described the characteristics of those symbolic categories. As we learn language, or learn symbols and their definitions, we learn to name and constitute symbolic reality.

To symbolically categorize experience, we abstract from experience. For example, to name an object a *book*, we pay attention to the object's use as a source of information and knowledge. Because names for experience are abstractions, they categorize only some aspects of experience but not others. In the case of the experience known as *book*, naming the experience *book* directs attention away from the object's use as a source of fuel, piece of art, or as weapon. Our symbolic reality labels only a portion of all experience, although we often act as if our names capture the whole of experience (Leach, 1976). We act as if a *book* is a *book* and nothing more. Chapter 2 discusses symbolic abstraction in more depth.

How we name experience influences how we interpret and respond to that experience, for names create expectancies about experience. Of course, each of us can name the same experience differently depending on what we pay attention to in experience. For example, you might name a military attack on another country *justified* while your friend names it *unjustified*, depending on what each of you abstracts from experience to create the name *justified* or *unjustified* military attack.

Brown (1978) takes the idea of naming and builds it into a model that describes the process by which we create overarching names to explain all of experience. In addition, the model provides a way to analyze interventions to influence the symbolic process.

### RSI Model Overview

The RSI model focuses attention on the process by which we create *superordinate* names in our symbolizing activity to make sense of the world around us. Brown (1978) calls these superordinate names *ideology*. We can view the *American dream* as an example of a superordinate name, or ideology, that influences how participants in the U.S. social system communicate, interpret, organize, and share their experiences.

Brown (1970) describes the main attributes of the **American dream** as "the belief in the dignity and worth of the individual, the anticipation of enjoying freedom and equality in a democracy, the hoped-for opportunity for success, and the vision of progress" (p. 33). In essence, the American dream is "the dream of Paradise to be regained" (p. 33).

This superordinate name, then, both constitutes and is constituted by our daily symbolizing activity. For example, a television commercial that suggests that a newly introduced computer can be *individually* tailored and offers the *freedom* to work at home is organizing experience in line with American dream ideology. The commercial implies that consumers can come closer to achieving the American dream by purchasing this computer.

The RSI model assumes ideology emerges from and constitutes three components of human symbolizing activity—how we name needs, how we name relationships with others, and how we name the events and actions of experience. Brown (1978) calls these components *need*, *power*, and *attention* subsystems. Together they form a system of ideology, or an ideological system.

### RSI Model Subsystems

Briefly, the RSI model assumes we have growth-and-survival needs, such as food and water, which we express with communication. We also symbolically create needs, such as *freedom* and *progress*, which we attribute to each other through communication. At the same time that we symbolically construct or name needs, we also constitute relationships or interdependencies to meet those needs. We symbolically create social systems in the form of social roles and hierarchy.

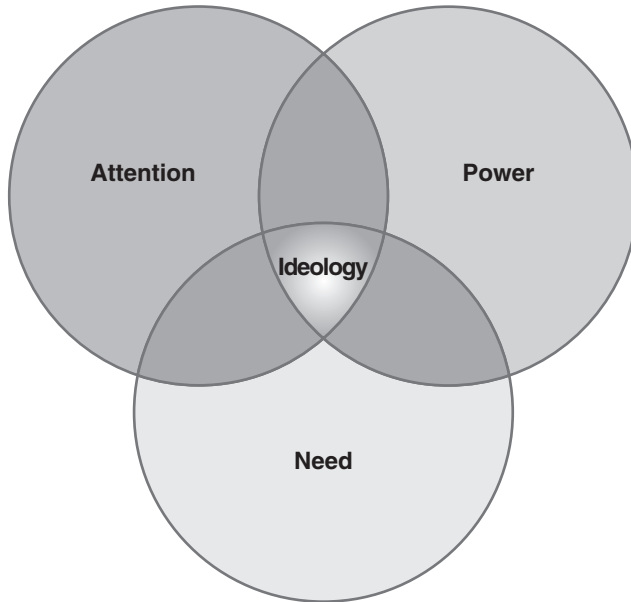
In naming needs and relationships, we also simultaneously constitute interpretations of the events and actions of daily experience by what we pay attention to in experience. These interpretations influence how we understand and organize symbolic reality. These three subsystems of ideology—need, power, and attention—form the basic building blocks of the RSI model. Figure 1.1 provides a visual representation of the RSI model components.

The RSI model assumes that human beings have an inherent need to create an ordered and meaningful world (Brown, 1978). Our attempts to make sense of and give meaning to our experiences result in social interventions that maintain and change our ideological system. Interventions occur as we attempt to shift or to prevent a shift in how we name needs, relationships, and the events and actions of experience, resulting in what Brown (1978) calls *need*, *power*, and *attention interventions*.

### RSI Subsystem Interconnection

The RSI model assumes that the ideological subsystems are interconnected. A change in one subsystem results in simultaneous changes



**Figure 1.1** The RSI Model Components

in the other two subsystems. A shift in interpretation of needs, for example, will also alter power and attention. Shifts in the ideological system will be reflected in shifts in the social system.

Suppose you watch a television report about the lack of medical personnel in sub-Saharan Africa that are trained to deal with AIDS. Prior to watching the show, you named the AIDS in Africa experience as *not affecting my life*. But the show made you aware of problems in that symbolic interpretation of experience. Perhaps the television report mentioned how the spread of AIDS might destabilize national governments, resulting in conflicts requiring international attention and resources to resolve. The program directs your attention to aspects of experience that your name for the event had de-emphasized. The way you had been symbolizing the AIDS in Africa experience no longer seems to make sense of experience. Thus, when you rename the AIDS in Africa experience as *affecting my life* you regain a consistent and meaningful world. The show has intervened in your symbolic reality—how you name and interpret experience—via an attention intervention.

A shift in attention has consequences for the other two subsystems of ideology. Needs shift as you become more attentive to the physical suffering of human beings in another part of the world. Power shifts as

you become increasingly interdependent with AIDS organizations that can meet the need to relieve AIDS patients' suffering by providing medical care that is connected to the alternative meaning you now attribute to the AIDS in Africa experience. Notice that the situation in Africa did not change: just your way of naming the situation changed. Your renaming can bring about changes in the situation because of your altered relationships with the social system components. Overall, the RSI model provides a way to examine how social change arises out of our symbolizing ability. It assumes that rhetorical interventions underlie the growth, maintenance, and decline of our symbolically constructed social systems.

The RSI model is the approach that we take in this book to conduct rhetorical criticism. It joins a long line of methodologies that rhetorical critics have used to critique symbolizing activity.

#### ❖ RHETORICAL LENSES

Since the time of Aristotle, scholars have employed rhetorical criticism to increase our understanding and improve the practice of communication. In your studies, perhaps you have encountered rhetorical criticism methodologies with names such as Aristotelian, Narrative Paradigm, Fantasy Theme Analysis, Dramatism, Feminist Criticism, and Cultural Studies. Like these other approaches, the RSI model offers a lens through which we can examine our symbolizing activity.

#### Method Commonalities

Communication scholar David Swanson (1977a) notes that all rhetorical criticism methods share two key commonalities. First, all rhetorical criticism must be carried out in what he calls the *natural attitude*. Swanson explains that the natural attitude means that a critic must assume that "the world is real or objective" and that investigating the world "can yield factual knowledge" (p. 210). To conduct rhetorical criticism, then, we take for granted that persons, objects, and events around us exist. We also believe that the world is knowable and presents itself in similar fashion to all persons. Finally, we presume that we can gain information from our observations.

Second, Swanson (1977b) points out that all rhetorical critics use *interpretive* or *representational schema* to analyze symbolizing activity. He defines these interpretive or representational schema as "systems used by critics to interpret and create meaning for rhetorical phenomena"

(p. 306). Thus, to do rhetorical criticism, we assume a point of view or a way of looking at the world. The approach we use is influenced by our assumptions about what is “real” in the world. We apply our framework or methodology to critique the symbolizing activity under study. Our approach shapes how we interpret the people, objects, and events that we are analyzing. In essence, all rhetorical criticism involves putting on a set of lenses to explore the everyday common-sense world we assume exists and assume is common to everyone.

### Method Differences

Swanson (1977b) also highlights two key differences among the various rhetorical criticism methodologies. Rhetorical criticism approaches differ in their assumptions about the source of meaning in the symbolizing activity and the purpose of criticism. First, although all rhetorical critics use frameworks to interpret and give meaning to symbolizing activity they are analyzing, critics adopt different types of representational schema and stances toward the schema (Swanson). Consequently, rhetorical critics make different assumptions about the creation of meaning in symbolizing activity.

Some rhetorical criticism methods place the critic in the role of constituting the meaning of the symbolizing activity being studied (Swanson, 1977b). For example, neo-Aristotelian critics might give meaning to a rhetorical event they have observed by applying externally created concepts such as *ethos*, *pathos*, and *logos* to the symbolizing activity. Genre critics might give meaning to their observations by comparing symbolizing activity to categories or types of rhetoric that they assume exist independently of the rhetorical event.

Other rhetorical criticism methods view meaning as arising out of human interactions (Swanson, 1977b). They assume that meaning is participant generated. Dramatistic critics might analyze the relationships among act, scene, agent, agency, and purpose within the context of a symbolic act to understand how its participants create meaning. Critical studies scholars might attend to the class struggle they interpret as going on within a cultural phenomenon to understand the meanings created by participants within that event. The RSI model leads critics to search for interventions occurring within symbolically constructed social systems, with particular attention to how the system’s participants generate, maintain, and change meaning within those interventions.

Second, critical approaches differ in their assumptions about the purpose or outcome of the rhetorical criticism (Swanson, 1977b). For example, neo-Aristotelian critics might link the speaker’s use of *ethos*,

*pathos*, and *logos* to the resulting effect on an audience. An outcome of the analysis might be to learn how to increase a message's persuasiveness. Dramatistic critics might examine our identity as rhetorical actors within a particular historical experience. An outcome of such a critique might be an increased understanding of a communicator's motives and how those motives reflect and affect the cultural assumptions.

Critical studies scholars might expose the included and excluded parties in messages, thereby creating awareness of hidden power within a social system. Their identification of rhetorical struggles within a symbolic experience might result in the empowerment of an excluded people and a power shift within the social system. RSI critics might search for patterns of symbolizing activity involved in the birth, growth, and decline of a social system. The resulting RSI critique might lead to an improved understanding of the rhetorical processes associated with ideology creation.

No matter which methodology a rhetorical critic adopts, that critic contributes to a greater appreciation of our lives as symbolizing creatures. Each approach offers a way to examine symbolizing activity and highlights aspects of experience that might be *hidden* in another approach. We, the authors, as students of William R. Brown, grew up academically with the RSI model, hence our preference for that method. We have found its concepts useful in our professional and personal lives. We have also observed that our students find the model's ideas compelling and applicable to their own experiences. Thus, in this book, we share the RSI model so you might evaluate its relevance to your own critiques of symbolic reality. So let's talk about how we envision our intervention.

## ❖ BOOK OVERVIEW

We intend our presentation of the RSI model to spark your curiosity about the symbolic nature of human beings. More specifically, this book provides a critical framework for analyzing social continuity and change from a rhetorical perspective that enables you to

- identify attempted social interventions,
- critique the rhetorical strategies, tactics, and maneuvers of interventions,
- contemplate side effects of interventions,
- reflect on the apparent outcome of interventions, and
- enact and critique your own social interventions.

We use a variety of techniques throughout the book to enable you to achieve these goals.

### **Section I: The RSI Model**

The first section of the book explains and illustrates the RSI model's assumptions and concepts. Chapter 2 lays the foundation for the RSI model by presenting concepts related to the naming process. We examine how and why we name, and the rhetorical functions and strategies of naming.

Chapter 3 introduces the assumptions of the RSI model, which are built on the naming foundation. We take a closer look at how ideology emerges from the three subsystems of need, power, and attention.

Chapter 4 lays the groundwork for using the RSI model as a representational schema for rhetorical criticism and intervention. It describes the nature of attention, power, and need interventions and highlights the rhetorical strategies, tactics, and maneuvers related to each starting point for intervention.

Chapter 5 discusses how to use the RSI model as a method of rhetorical criticism. It provides questions for analyzing the intervention discourse and a guide to writing a rhetorical criticism essay.

Chapter 6 concludes by showing how the RSI model can be used as a framework to guide the development of a social intervention. We also consider how the RSI model relates to other areas of communication and other fields. Finally, we ask you to reflect on this book as an attempted intervention.

### **Section II: RSI Criticism Essays**

The second section of the book consists of student and scholar essays that illustrate the RSI model's application. A brief author reflection and questions accompany each essay.

In Essay 1, Shannon DeBord, through the lens of the RSI model, analyzes the symbolic construction of Down syndrome and the interventional attempts of two young men with Down syndrome to shift the social expectancies related to the syndrome.

In Essay 2, Seth Phillips and Mark A. Gring use the RSI model to examine how Margaret Thatcher, via an address to the Conservative Party Conference, attempted to shift how the British populace named its role in the country's economic development.

In Essay 3, Omolara Oyelakin adopts the RSI perspective to trace the patterns of communication enacted by the Mirabel sisters in their

intervention to challenge Dominican Republic social hierarchy to bring about a reordering of that society.

Finally, in Essay 4, Lee Snyder uses the RSI model to highlight the rhetorical patterns of a white supremacist organization, the Posse Comitatus, to understand how a group with a worldview repugnant to many U.S. Americans was able to attract followers.

#### ❖ CHAPTER SUMMARY

This chapter has provided an overview of the rhetoric of social intervention by introducing some of the key vocabulary and concepts to be presented in greater detail in the upcoming chapters. We defined and described the characteristics of terms such as *intervention*, *systems*, and *rhetoric*. We examined the characteristics of systems, social systems, and ideological systems. We considered reasons for engaging in rhetorical criticism of symbolizing activity, and reviewed the components of the act of rhetorical criticism. We also described the scholarly and social contributions that result from critiquing the rhetoric of social intervention.

Next, this chapter has provided a brief introduction to the RSI model, the main focus of this book. We summarized its conceptualization and highlighted its key assumptions. We previewed concepts related to the model, such as *naming*, *ideology*, *need*, *power*, and *attention*. In addition, we considered the RSI model's similarities and differences to other rhetorical criticism approaches. Finally, we previewed upcoming chapters. We highlighted key ideas you will encounter on your exploration of the rhetoric of social intervention.

In all, we intend this book to be a rhetorical intervention—one that shifts how you name and construct your symbolic interpretations of experience. Although the RSI model is basic in its concepts, through its lens you will discover and explore the complexity of the human symbolizing process. We hope that one day soon when you are media surfing, as exemplified at the beginning of this chapter, you will attend to the ongoing symbolic process of social continuity and change underlying the various discourses that you encounter.

By learning about the rhetoric of social intervention, you will be better equipped to develop your own interpretation of the human being as symbolizing creature. You will see that all of us are rhetorical interveners in some form or fashion, whether we are parents attempting to shift how our child names homework or politicians attempting to alter how a social system interprets climate change. All of us, when

we interact with others, have the potentiality to intervene in constructing ideological and social systems.

#### ❖ REVIEW QUESTIONS

1. What is intervention? How do we intervene into each other as systems?
2. What constitutes a system? How are systems and people interdependent?
3. What is meant by the symbolic construction of social systems and ideological systems?
4. How does communication generate social change?
5. How do the authors attempt to shape your naming of *intervention*, *system*, and *rhetoric*?
6. What is the purpose of rhetorical criticism?
7. What are the three RSI model components?
8. How do Brown's attributes for the American dream compare to characteristics you associate with the American dream?
9. According to the RSI model, is there any time when a person uses symbols that she or he is not trying to intervene into a social system? Is there a time when a person is not overtly or covertly, intentionally or unintentionally, intervening into a social system?
10. How is the RSI approach similar to or different from other communication or rhetorical approaches that you have studied?

#### ❖ CHAPTER EXERCISES

1. Create a chart and track your own symbolizing activity for one day. Respond to the following questions as you record information for the day: With whom did I talk? What did we talk about? Were the events we talked about ones that I personally experienced or witnessed? How about the other person? If the events were not something I or the other person had personally experienced, how did I or the other person gain knowledge of the events? In what way is my knowledge of these events symbolically constructed?

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2. Keep a one-day journal of your communication interactions with people or media (e.g., conversations, email, television). Which of these interactions would you classify as attempted interventions? What characteristics of an intervention did these interactions demonstrate? In what ways did these interactions try to shape your interpretation of needs, relationships, or experience?
3. In a small group, brainstorm and outline the components and connections of a system in which you participate (e.g., economic, educational, ecological, family, political). Around what needs is the system organized? In what ways are the system's components interdependent? What shifts might occur in one component that could influence all other components?
4. Review the advertisements in a popular magazine. How do the advertisements communicate the American dream? What appear to be the characteristics of the American dream as suggested in the advertisements? What words, objects, and images used in the advertisements represent ideas associated with the American dream? Write a short paper about your findings and share your findings with your class. What commonalities and differences appeared in the analyses of the American dream?
5. Write a brief paper that discusses how you would classify the RSI approach in the spectrum of communication theories and methods. Is it quantitative, qualitative, critical, ethnomethodological, some combination of these, or something new? Does it fit within a laws, rules, systems, or other metatheoretical category?

❖ SERVICE LEARNING EXERCISE

Select a not-for-profit organization whose interventional activities you can observe and critique throughout the semester. Its members should be willing to grant interviews and allow you access to organizational materials and meetings. In exchange, at the end of the semester, you will provide a rhetorical critique of the organization's interventions so that the organization might enhance its communication with its publics. In addition, you might suggest alternative interventional strategies for it to consider.

Begin collecting information about the organization to use as you progress through the chapters of this book.



### Under the Lens: Sharing Students' Insights

As we developed the manuscript for this book, our students read the drafts and wrote critiques about their experience of learning the RSI model. We share some of their remarks for the insights they provide on your journey to acquire the concepts of the RSI model. As you read the remarks, consider how the students *name* their experience.

- Learning the RSI model was interesting, informative, and difficult at times, but it became easier to understand once I got into the main points of each chapter.
- After reading this book, I found myself asking, "What is reality?"
- Understanding the concepts of the RSI model can help us make sense of our day-to-day experiences and reactions to those experiences, both good and bad, in a way that promotes continuous learning.
- As I began to form an understanding of the model, I could see it applied to a number of things going on in my life. Interestingly enough, the model has affected the way I watch television!
- The RSI model has made me aware of interventions in my life and how I affect and am affected by them.
- Learning about the model has changed the way I look at life. It has changed the way I act toward others and the way I interpret the actions of others.
- The RSI model has helped me to become a better critic, instead of just going with the flow. I am gradually developing the habit of standing back and analyzing the systems around me.
- When you are using the model to write an essay, don't lose sight of the overall ideology surrounding the intervention you are examining.
- Be creative in the ways you choose to examine or use the RSI model. Don't be afraid to make it a challenge.
- To get the most out of this experience, allow yourself time to study the material, do research, and really think about how you are using and applying the RSI approach. Also, when an idea pops into your head when talking about this model, write it down immediately. It might be useful for your paper!

