

sleeper effect: where the effects of media content are delayed, with the messages initially rejected, and then accepted, as inhibiting factors are worn down by repetition of the message. (See *drip effect*.)

snowball sampling: a *sampling* method in which a researcher gains access to a group and then uses members of this group to make contact with others, and then in turn uses the new group to make further contacts, and so on. Although the method obviously does not result in a *random sample*, it is sometimes the only way to gain access to sufficient numbers from a particular kind of group, for example members of a religious *cult*, or people engaged in deviant activities.

social action: action affected by the existence of others, involving the understanding and interpreting of their behavior. Social action therefore involves interaction, either directly or indirectly. An example of the direct form might be talking with another person. An example of indirect social action might be writing those same words in a letter, to be read by someone else later.

social benefits: a term usually referring to benefits, particularly financial ones, received through the *welfare state*. (See *means-tested benefits*; *universal benefits*.)

social capital: the existence of established and well-integrated family and community networks, which act as a support mechanism for people in times of difficulty. The presence of such capital leads to feelings of security. The absence of social capital is a crucial component of *social disorganization*.

social change: the process whereby societies or aspects of society move from one state to another. The study of social change was central for the *classical sociologists*, because society was undergoing massive changes when the early sociologists were writing. Sociologists who emphasize social change at the expense of *social order* tend to focus on *conflict* in society, and the contradictions that exist between social groups and interests. However, there is also a difference between those who stress social change through evolution and those who focus on revolutionary change. (See *consensus*.)

social class: any one of the hierarchical divisions of a capitalist society, in which *wealth*, *income*, and *occupation* form the defining characteristics of each group. The classic formulation of social class in Western capitalist society is of a three-class society – upper, middle, and working class – in which the largest concentration of people is in the *working class*. As a rough rule-of-thumb, the distinction between manual and nonmanual occupations can be seen as the dividing line between the middle and the working class. For the *upper class*, concentration of wealth, *power*, and *status* are important as defining characteristics. Social class, however, is subject to change, and some sociologists have suggested that society has developed so that the middle sector has grown large enough for some to claim that “we are all *middle class* now.” Others argue that the significant development in social class has been the appearance of an *underclass*, with little prospect of full-time employment.

social closure: a term used by Weberians to indicate the attempts by social groups to monopolize privileges and rewards by closing them off from other groups. Any social group can practice social closure, though the tactics employed tend to differ according to whether the group is at the top or bottom of the occupational *hierarchy*.