

What are the best books for Social Anthropology applicants to read?

One introduction stands out:

Watching the English : The Hidden Rules of English Behaviour

Kate Fox

Hodder & Stoughton (2004)

ISBN 0 340 81886 7

This is a lively, entertaining but perceptive book on the “codes” used in English (yes, not British!) conversation and behaviour. English people discuss the weather, for instance, as a means of testing whether others are prepared to react positively to them and engage in conversation. Her fieldwork includes looking at patterns of behaviour in ordering drinks at a bar and in queuing. In the latter case, she tested reactions by deliberately queue-jumping!

In her introduction she quotes the list compiled by her father, Robin Fox, another anthropologist, of practices, customs and beliefs found across human societies that are of particular interest to an anthropologist:

“Laws about property, rules about incest and marriage, customs of taboo and avoidance, methods of settling disputes with a minimum of blood-shed, beliefs about the supernatural and practices relating to it, a system of social status and methods of indicating it, initiation ceremonies for young men, courtship practices involving the adornment of females, systems of symbolic body ornament generally, certain activities set aside for men from which women are excluded, gambling of some kind, a tool- and weapons-making industry, myths and legends, dancing, adultery and various doses of homicide, suicide, homosexuality, schizophrenia, psychoses and neuroses, and various practitioners to take advantage of or cure these, depending on how they are viewed.”

Another interesting book, which often raises the problems of “participant observation” in fieldwork, is:

The Innocent Anthropologist : Notes from a Mud Hut

Nigel Barley

Penguin (1983)

ISBN 0-14-009536-5

The author writes in an engaging way about his years spent living with the Dowayo people in a remote part of the Cameroons. As one reviewer put it, “He does for anthropology what Gerald Durrell did for animal collecting”.

Prospective Social Anthropology students would also benefit from reading **Things Fall Apart** by Chinua Achebe, a novel which explores the tragic consequences of the clash between traditional African village culture and colonialism. Wole Soyinka described it as “the first novel in English which spoke from the interior of an African character, rather than portraying the African as exotic, as the white man would see him”.

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