

Joseph P. Ryan, *Samuel Stouffer and the GI Survey : Sociologists and Soldiers during the Second World War*, Knoxville, University of Tennessee Press, 2013, 279 pp. With an introduction by David R. Segal.

Reviewed by Thomas Crosbie

Military sociologists will immediately recognize the great value of Joseph P. Ryan's new work, *Samuel Stouffer and the GI Survey : Sociologists and Soldiers during the Second World War*. The book fills no fewer than three sizeable holes in our understanding of the development of the subfield, and does so with clarity and concision. First, the book introduces Samuel A. Stouffer's character and intellectual development. Next, it reconstructs his leadership of the Research Branch of the Army Information and Education Division and the effect of this branch on Army policy (which was very significant). Finally, it analyzes the content and reception of the Research Branch's major publication, *The American Soldier* (the first two volumes of the four-volume *Studies in Social Psychology in World War II*).¹ Based on exceptional material, Ryan has skillfully tied together these three strands of inquiry to produce a rich contribution to the field and one that offers compelling justification for including Stouffer among the leading figures of mid-twentieth century American social science.

Ryan makes clear that his book is “*not a biography of Stouffer ; rather, it is a synthesis of his ideas as a sociologist as they met and, in some respects, formed military culture*” (p.4). Despite this caveat, Ryan offers us the most detailed biography of Stouffer that we have, skillfully synthesizing published accounts but also drawing from interviews with Stouffer's surviving children and from what was surely a very rich personal archive (including childhood report cards, personal letters, newspapers from Stouffer's hometown and the like). Born 6 June 1900 in Sac City, Iowa, Stouffer earned a BA at Morningside College in Sioux City, Iowa, and an MA in English at Harvard University, and then, for a time, followed his father's career as a journalist. A chance encounter with sociologist E.S. Ross led him to embark upon a PhD at Chicago with a focus on what Stouffer referred to as “scientific sociology” (p.11). A brief stint at the University of Wisconsin was followed by an Social Science Research Council (SSRC)-funded postdoctoral fellowship in London. He returned to Wisconsin in 1932, and, following an attempt by the Rockefeller Foundation to hire him at an impressive salary, was named full

¹ Samuel A. Stouffler, Edward A. Suchman, Leland C. DeVinney, Shirley A. Star, and Robin M. Williams, Jr. *Studies in Social Psychology in World War II*. Volume 1: *The American Soldier: Adjustment During Army Life* and Volume 2: *The American Soldier: Combat and its Aftermath*. Princeton, NJ, Princeton U.P., 1949.

professor in 1934. He nevertheless left Wisconsin for the University of Chicago the next year. He stayed affiliated with Chicago until 1946, when he was hired by Harvard to found and run the Laboratory of Social Relations, where he remained active until his death at age 60 from cancer.

At times, Ryan is perhaps too uncritical of his subject, portraying Stouffer as the very epitome of a social scientist, “*a classically educated, insatiably curious modern stoic going about finding hard data*” (p. 8) This portrait strips Stouffer of the considerable charm and idiosyncrasies attributed to him by his contemporaries (e.g. Stouffer’s student Jackson Toby, whom Ryan cites). Some of this discrepancy may be attributed to Ryan’s focus on Stouffer’s involvement with the US Department of War. Whereas Stouffer appears to have been something of a character in the academy, he cultivated a very different persona in Washington, DC. Ryan notes that Stouffer played innocent in order to navigate an institution hostile to civilian involvement and particularly resistant to Stouffer’s research. Sociological and journalistic skills helped with this: “*His sensitivity to the army’s institutional mores helped to accrue wisdom in dealing with the army bureaucracy*” (p.13).

At any rate, there is little doubt that Stouffer’s career was charmed. He was well funded by SSRC, the Rockefeller Foundation, the Ford Foundation, the Carnegie Corporation and of course the Department of War. At Harvard, he became a close companion of Talcott Parsons, then emerging as the leading figure in American sociology. He consistently found himself in the midst of intellectual ferment and actively engaged with the big issues of his time (racism, the Great Depression and Prohibition, among other topics). But for his work for the Research Branch, he might still be remembered by some statisticians for Stouffer’s Z (a combined probability test) and by sociologists more generally for his Law of Intervening Opportunities (people move to fill opportunity holes, but they don’t make it if other opportunities appear along the way). Yet as Ryan argues forcefully, by far his greatest contributions are those contained in *The American Soldier* and his subsequent work on conflict-ridden politics.

It is difficult to reconstruct just how averse American sociology had become to the study of conflict by the middle of the century. Although Lewis Coser’s dissertation and first book would reveal the conflict-oriented roots of many schools of American sociology, almost no one actually studied conflict, let alone war. It is somewhat remarkable then that a sociologist would be called upon by the Department of War to produce actionable research findings during wartime. Ryan attributes this to the convergence of two factors. The first was the enlightened leadership of US Army Chief of Staff General George C. Marshall, who was all too aware of the problems associated with building up a conscript army and who was unusually sensitive to the emotional and psychological well-being of his troops. The other was a raft of social problems that emerged in the first phase of conscription and would linger for the length of the war, including racism, officer-enlisted resentment, soldier-civilian

resentment, and psychoneurosis (emotional problems associated with PTSD and the transition to army life). A triggering event, a mass of desertions at the point of embarkation, led Marshall to call for a sociologist. Stouffer fit the bill, and happened upon a brilliant solution to the problem. Stouffer reasoned that if soldiers were required to wear their uniforms when on leave, their identity as soldiers would be reaffirmed sufficiently while home that they would have far less incentive to go AWOL (absent without official leave) when shipping out. The plan worked and Stouffer thereby provided proof of the military value of the sociological imagination (as it would come to be called).

As a result of his quick thinking and his low-key self-presentation, Stouffer managed to be assigned the leadership of the Research Branch of the Army Information and Education Division. Ryan emphasizes that, for Stouffer, this was very much a patriotic exercise that stood apart from his academic research, a form of “social engineering” rather than sociology. Although it employed an interdisciplinary team of contributors, the Research Branch was nevertheless thoroughly sociological in its approach. The branch drew its data from endlessly surveying troops. It would then pass this along to the other branches, which would implement the findings as troop indoctrination and domestic propaganda. Ryan notes, “*From first to last, the Research Branch was Stouffer’s creation*” (p.45), but despite this considerable administrative resource, he still faced opposition. The major problem was attitudinal : where Stouffer, with Marshall’s blessing, worked on the assumption that accurate information about soldiers’ beliefs and preferences would make for better policy and improved morale, many officers, and even Secretary of War Henry L. Stimson, were of the opinion that what soldiers believed or preferred was of little consequence. At one point, Stouffer tendered his resignation when faced with the possibility of an officer taking command of the branch. His resignation was denied and he retained command authority. Ultimately, Stouffer would remain the head of a productive and dynamic department for the length of the war.

Ryan dedicates three chapters of his book to the history of the Research Branch, and benefits here, too, from exceptionally rich archival material, including Stouffer’s handwritten notes, reports produced for Stouffer by his staff on a variety of subjects, and the regular reports produced by the branch for use by the army. Ryan therefore has the capacity to pinpoint the direct contributions of the branch to the war effort. The GI Bill and the point system for demobilization were perhaps the most consequential outcomes of Stouffer’s research, directly affecting millions of lives and quite possibly ensuring the army’s ability to conclude the war in the Pacific (and totally transform Japan as a result). Race relations, preferences for the post-exchange, and everything in between would fall under the Research Branch’s purview. Among Ryan’s more surprising insights is his discovery of an active conversation about psychoneurotics based on Research Branch findings : “*Contrary to conventional wisdom, a rigorous, public discussion of what would later be called post-traumatic stress disorder was taking place during the war*” (p.76).

Based on four years of Research Branch work and half a million soldiers surveyed, the two volumes of *The American Soldier* (finally published in 1949) would allow Stouffer to justify his “social engineering” experiment as having genuine value for his discipline. The books, more revered than read in Ryan’s estimation, cover about 1,200 pages of, at times, arcane tables and particularistic findings. Perhaps Ryan’s most important contribution is his analysis of the main findings and methods of the books, a very lucid explanation that demystifies the work considerably. First, he explains that the format of the books reflected the division of labour within the Research Branch, with each chapter normally written by the researcher who had worked most intensively on that topic. Stouffer seems to have had a hand in most of the chapters, reflecting his close supervision of the branch.

Ryan offers three categories to classify the two volumes’ findings, as “*no surprise*”, “*counter to contemporary conventional wisdom, but not counter-intuitive*” and “*counter-intuitive*” (p.106). The unsurprising findings were nevertheless significant accomplishments, given the opposition to listening to the troops at all. Stouffer and his team demonstrated that the regular and draftee armies were radically different ; a stable upbringing made for a good soldier ; and that infantry morale was a constant problem. In the challenging but not counter-intuitive category, Ryan lists the following discoveries: (1) combat is in fact very difficult to define ; (2) malaria pills were taken or not regardless of disciplinary norms ; and (3) the only significant difference in attitudes between southerners and northerners was in regards to race. Findings of this sort served to dispel much of the conventional wisdom then dominating and muddying army policy-making. Most intriguing, of course, are the findings of the last category, the counter-intuitive : white soldiers who regularly interacted with black soldiers were less likely to oppose integration; soldiers do not necessarily improve with experience (most peak after three or four months) ; rural soldiers did not adjust to the army better than urban soldiers. All of these latter findings would prove immensely important in shaping how the army recruited, managed, and demobilized its soldiers.

In a chapter dedicated entirely to the reception and criticism of the two volumes, Ryan notes the considerable acclaim and exceptional sales that greeted the works as well as the polarized assessments of its values. Arthur Schlesinger, Jr. attacked it as scientific, reminding us that “*sociology has whored after the natural sciences from the start*” (pp.120-121). Sociologists were quicker to grasp the theoretical contributions that escaped Schlesinger, particularly the theory of relative deprivation, which has become perhaps Stouffer’s most recognizable contribution. The perception of relative, not absolute, deprivation or advantage was at the heart of much soldierly discontent, and so metrics were introduced to prevent any group from being visibly deprived more than others. Despite this insight, the books were also widely criticized for their lack of theoretical coherence.

To summarize, then, Ryan’s book moves through three distinct phases. First, he provides a rich intellectual biography of Stouffer, indicating his commitment to the use of

surveys and belief in a verifiable, scientific, and objective sociology. Second, Ryan details how Stouffer directed his considerable methodological acumen toward a project of social engineering during his time with the Research Branch. Ryan forcefully demonstrates both the many direct outcomes of that branch on army policy and that Stouffer was the central figure behind it all. And finally, Ryan analyzes *The American Soldier* as a product of the Research Branch's considerable labour but also as a specific subset of its findings that were considered to have special value for the social sciences in general. He argues that the two volumes were proof of the methodological sophistication of the Research Branch's work and included a network of discrete theoretical insights that were valued by sociologists. Altogether, Ryan succeeds in casting Stouffer as a major figure in the history of the Second World War and of mid-century American sociology.

There are, of course, shortcomings that should be acknowledged. In trying to tell three stories, of Stouffer, of the Research Branch, and of *The American Soldier*, Ryan at times loses focus on his real subject, which I take to be the intersection of the three in Stouffer's leadership of the branch. While we learn a great deal about Stouffer's tastes as a sociologist and about his strategy for flying below the radar at the beginning of his time with the branch, we gain little sense of what allowed him to succeed so brilliantly in such an adverse institutional context. I suspect the scientific character of his research style and self-presentation was an important factor in his success, which would be a significant observation given the subsequent rise of science and technology as symbolic categories during the New Look era. This, of course, is a minor quibble.

The more significant shortcoming of Ryan's text is his own theoretical hesitancy. Like Stouffer, Ryan is perhaps too content to let his findings speak for themselves. For example, in the long summary of Stouffer's critics, we are treated to quite provocative challenges to the entire *American Soldier* project, but Ryan recuses himself from the debate. This shortcoming is partly resolved by a very stimulating introduction by noted military sociologist David R. Segal, an invaluable supplement to the text that should not be overlooked. Segal situates Stouffer within the history of military sociology, but also provides a sequence of autobiographical reflections that further cement Ryan's central claim for Stouffer's significance for the field. Segal notes his own debt to Stouffer but also includes excerpts from letters by military and civilian Defense Department academics, senior civilian academics, and even a junior faculty member, and a graduate student. What these excerpts suggest is that Stouffer's position as a major sociological figure hinges on *The American Soldier*, and to that end Ryan's helpful summary of that dense text will likely do much to open Stouffer's work up to future generations.

Stouffer introduces *The American Soldier* with a quotation from Tolstoy: "*In warfare the force of armies is the product of the mass multiplied by something else, an unknown x*" (p.3). What is this *x* ? It is morale, the fundamental subject of Stouffer's work, the elusive

entity that brought him from academia to run the Research Branch of the Army Information and Education Division, and the object which under Stouffer's diligent care would for the first time be subject to scientific analysis. Certainly, he and his staff developed many valuable insights from their hundreds of thousands of surveys. Yet morale has remained an elusive element of the militaries of democracies, as American other forces would discover in Vietnam. With the loss of conscription, of overt propaganda and of indoctrination, are we in a post-Stouffer age? As militaries lose their powers over the public, the emotional and psychological lives of its soldiers only gain in strategic importance, and to this end sociologists still have much to learn from Stouffer.

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