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Government surveys high school seniors, then tracks them for decades

By Justin Moyer
Washington Post Staff Writer
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Like most of my memories of high school, this one is vague and indistinct, almost like part of someone else's life:

One day in my senior year, my English class was given a survey. Printed in wan blue ink on heavy paper, it looked like the SAT. Participation was voluntary. Answers, we were told, would remain anonymous.

I don't remember specific words. But there were a lot of questions about drugs (Had I used tobacco, alcohol, marijuana, heroin, cocaine, methamphetamines? How often?), maybe a few about sex (Had I had it? Oral sex? Intercourse? How often?), and possibly questions about driving (Did I drive? From where? To where? How often?).

I answered them all. My willingness to record intimate details about my love life and car use says less about my fear of authority than my sheer innocence. I was 16, or maybe 17. There wasn't much to hide.

But there was no taking it back. Apparently I'd signed up for a long-term project: No matter where I went or what I did, follow-up surveys dogged me like broken-down cars and poor career choices. After graduation in 1994, I moved to Connecticut. I moved to Cape Cod. I moved to Washington. I moved around Washington. But, about once a year, I'd open the mail and see that same wan blue ink on that same heavy paper: another survey, embossed with a clip-art logo (silhouettes holding hands across a wan blue America) and headlined "Monitoring the Future: A Continuing Study of American Youth." Return address: the University of Michigan.

"You cannot be replaced!" these communiques exclaimed. "You were scientifically selected to be included in the follow-up sample so that your responses represent the views of thousands of people your age. If we lose contact with you, no substitution can be made." My failure to complete a survey would obviously be a statistical tragedy. I was, to someone at Ann Arbor, the One.

So I dutifully completed Monitoring the Future surveys for 15 years. As the Clinton administration became the Bush administration, the Internet took off and the twin towers fell, I was asked every year whether I was happy. (Sometimes, I was.) I was asked whether I smoked cigarettes. (Sometimes, I did.) I was asked whether I was cynical about government. (Sometimes, I just wasn't sure.) In return for my answers, Monitoring the Future would send me a check for $10 or $15 and a newsletter highlighting some of the things the survey had learned about people my age.

Why me?

But when I received Monitoring the Future's December 2009 newsletter, I was the one with questions. I had just landed my first full-time job in seven years and learned that I would become a father. In this time of transition, every conclusion in the study seemed weighted with significance.

"Most of our 18-35-year-old respondents are getting some sort of personal fulfillment from being a part of the workforce," I read. And "Relatively few [high-school] seniors agree that marriage will provide a fuller and happier life," though they "expect that they themselves will eventually marry." Who were these people, and was I supposed to agree with them?

And who were these Michiganders? Why had they decided to monitor me?

"It's really a random process," said Lloyd Johnston. I reached Johnston, the 69-year-old social psychologist who founded Monitoring the Future in 1975, at his home in Michigan during a January snowstorm and he launched into an explanation of his study's statistical architecture.

Long story short, Monitoring the Future wanted representative high school seniors, and via some kind of random processes my community had been chosen, my high school had been chosen, my classroom had been chosen, and, out of the 30-odd people in that classroom on that day, I had been chosen.

"That's how you got in" to the follow-up sample, Johnson said. "With 12th-graders, we always had in the design to take a subset of them and follow them into adulthood. You happen to fall into that lucky selection, too." In all, the study surveys 16,000 to 17,000 seniors every year and follows about 2,400 into adulthood.

He'd gotten the idea for his study in the late '60s, Johnston told me, when he and a colleague at Michigan, Jerald Bachman, were studying a group of 10th-graders and observed what he calls "a hardening of attitudes" and a growing cynicism about government.

It was "a period of great cultural turmoil," Johnston said. "There was a destabilizing -- an angst of the times. Vietnam was central. There was a schism in the generations. Marijuana use was an indulgence, but a symbol of being part of the counterculture. But there were other things going on. Race relations were at an all-time low. Cities were being burned. Race relations are in the study. Gender roles were changing."

Frustrated by the limits of studying one small group of young people over a relatively short time, the researchers conceived a "sequential cohort" study that would follow students as they became adults.

Across the aisle

There might have been many sociological topics on Johnston's mind, but his first funding came through Robert Dupont, Richard Nixon's second-term drug czar, and Monitoring the Future has consistently devoted most of its energies to dope. It's not formally focused on drugs, but when journalists, academics or government policymakers consult the study, it's usually to answer questions about teenage drug use. The hundreds of publications on the organization's Web site are largely about teenage drug use. ("We don't get to write as much as we would like," Johnston says. "The demands to write on substance abuse are so substantial.")

A sample questionnaire provided by Johnston shows how detailed the questions asked of high school students are. "When you take hallucinogens other than LSD, how long do you usually stay high?" it asked. "What methods have you used for taking amphetamines during the last year?" (Confidentiality firewalls built into the study prevented me from accessing my own answers to these questions, or even getting copies of surveys I'd

completed.)

When I asked Johnston whether he thought Monitoring the Future had become a conservative pawn in the culture wars, he said no.

"I see myself as an impartial scientist," Johnston said. "I've made a real attempt not to be identified with one political party or another. It's important for the country to have scientists like me who can be identified by both sides of the aisle. We've operated under half a dozen administrations. . . . We've had to survive them, and I hope we've provided constructive information to both to aid in prevention."

Nobody special

Monitoring the Future is run on government money, and Johnston is very proud of that. "We're not [private] contractors," he told me. Dupont originally provided funding with White House discretionary money, he said; eventually, it was moved to the National Institutes of Health, which remains its primary funder.

Where did I fit into the program? I had always harbored the hope that I was in some way special -- that I had been followed by sociologists because I was smart, or had provided unusual answers, or had a striking personality. Johnston disabused me of this notion.

"We didn't pick the ones that were brightest or most promising," Johnston says. There was nothing about me or my answers that could have led to my selection. Monitoring the Future doesn't want special people, but typical ciphers. "We are trying to be as representative as possible," he said.

That left the question about how my fellow ciphers (and I) felt about being used for this kind of research. Why does the government need personal information from us, and, if it does, why does it care only about our illicit drug use? And, when we talk about drugs, why does it assume that we're telling the truth?

Hunting for an answer, I faced a sampling problem of my own: I was the only person I knew still completing the questionnaires. Luckily, when I discussed this story with my high school classmate Matthew Hecht, he revealed that he had filled out surveys for a few years after we graduated. (He stopped receiving follow-up surveys after moving four times in the mid-'90s.) I expected Matt, a 33-year-old intensive care nurse at Georgetown University Hospital, to share my skepticism.

I was surprised to hear he didn't. Some excerpts from our instant-message discussion:

Me: do you feel like it's weird for a government-sponsored study to ask questions like that?

Matthew: no that's how they get info I actually like that they did. what if they didn't collect ANY data?

Me: do you think a survey can accurately reflect the way you've changed since 1994?

Matthew: yes, if its a good survey, I'm not sure that one was. . . . i mean not everything about me could be quantified, but i'm guessing a fair amount could be.

My generation

When I pushed Johnston to discuss what he has learned beyond trends in tobacco and ecstasy use, he surprised

me. Forget punk, grunge, hip-hop: Johnston finds the youth of today are actually less rowdy than the Woodstock generation.

Also: "The generation rift of the 1960s has really gone away," he said. "Animosity between the generations is diminished considerably, [though] you still hear people call up issues of the 1960s and blame things on them."

As for why he believes the responses, Johnston said that internal checks on data (such as asking the same question in different ways) show that few participants lie on questionnaires. "If you give a good reason why you're asking and evidence that you will protect their confidentiality, people will tell you personal things," he said. "There is a high level of truth-telling."

It sounds as if Monitoring the Future may be monitoring the demise of teenage rebellion. But post-Y2K graduates are feistier than their predecessors when it comes to one thing: They quit participating in Monitoring the Future.

The study retains 50 to 55 percent of its 50-year-olds, but a much lower percentage of its younger people. "The earlier cohorts were more cooperative in general," he said.

So I'm quantifiable, compliant, not that unique, and I don't have any animosity toward older generations? I sound . . . well, vague and indistinct, like those high-school memories.