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## Measuring Levels of Collectivism and Individualism with One Maya Volunteer

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Abstract: “Measuring Levels of Collectivism and Individualism among Maya Living in the United States” will help us understand, among other variables, their struggles, and the consequences of migrating to the most individualist nation on earth.

The Singelis Scale measures levels of collectivism and individualism in humans. Collectivism is correlated with interdependent behaviors such as sense of duty with the in-group, harmony and working collectively among other characteristics, while individualism is correlated with independent behaviors such as personal responsibility, egalitarianism and freedom. By measuring independence and interdependence, in the same test, the scale intends to show that these two aspects of self are separate factors not opposite poles. Collectivism and individualism co-exist in both collectivist and individualist societies at the same time. For example, Southerners in the U.S.A are more collectivist than Northerners who are more individualist. In *Culture's Consequences*, Geert Hofstede identifies individualism and collectivism as one of the most important dimensions of culture. According to Hofstede, collectivism and individualism describe the relationship between the individual and the collectivity that prevails in a given society. Hofstede's cross-cultural research found that Guatemala is the most collectivist society and the United States the most individualist. Based on the results of this survey, it might be reasoned that the high level of collectivism in Guatemala can be explained by Guatemala's large indigenous (Maya) population. Although the statistics vary, Mayan population counts for at least 50% of the Guatemalan population.

Measuring levels of collectivism and individualism among Maya living in the United States will help us understand, among other variables, their struggles, and the consequences of migrating to the most individualist nation on earth. For this particular project, I asked Mayan leader Gilberto Simon to undergo the Singelis test. I also asked him to provide an explanation for every answer. I wanted to go beyond the statistical analysis of the test and get into a more conscientious and humane examination of the

Mayan community in the United States. Gilberto's honesty and willingness to cooperate and to understand his Mayan-ness in a new environment resulted in an eye opening experience for him as a Maya living in the United States, and for me as a Colombian immigrant myself.

### Singelis Self-Construct Scale

#### Instructions Provided to Gilberto

This questionnaire of 30 questions measures a variety of feelings and behaviors in various situations. Listed below are a number of statements. Read each one as if it referred to you. Beside each statement, write the number that best matches your agreement or disagreement. Please respond to every statement. Thank you.

- 1 = Strongly Disagree
- 2 = Disagree
- 3 = Somewhat Disagree
- 4 = Don't Agree Or Disagree
- 5 = Agree Somewhat
- 6 = Agree
- 7 = Strongly Agree

#### Question One: I enjoy being unique and different from others in many respects.

Response: Disagree (2).

Gilberto: I disagree because human beings are alike in many aspects, even more when we share the same culture, the same nation, the way we think, and the way we live. Our ideas are similar when we come from the same group. We are similar when we come from the same group. If I am completely different from others in my community, I won't belong with them. I will think and act different to them.

David: So it is important that the community maintains some similarity, an identity?

Gilberto: It is important, especially, for the Guatemalan community. It is important to maintain harmony in the Maya community. It is important to respect ideals, that's why communities exist. When the ideals are different in the community, the people break away and there is no community anymore.

**Question Two: I can talk openly with a person who I meet for the first time, even when this person is much older than I am.**

Response: Agree (6)

Gilberto: I feel well conversing with older people (adults) because they are wiser than we (younger people) are. Sometimes they think that we (younger people) know better because we have more education, but it is not true. Regardless of the level of education that one might have, they (elders) have more wisdom; they have lived more than us.

David: Is wisdom important to you?

Gilberto: Yes, it is. The wisdom of elders is important because they have experienced life more than us.

David: Do elders have a voice in your community?

Gilberto: Yes, usually what they say is what we do. We trust in their wisdom.

David: Are elders in your community leaders?

Gilberto: Most of them serve the community.

**Question Three: Even when I strongly disagree with group members, I avoid an argument.**

Response: Agree (6)

Gilberto: In any group, any community there are disagreements, even

within the same family, or with a brother there are disagreements. It is very important for me to maintain harmony. If the disagreement is small, I avoid friction and respect other opinions.

David: Even if that means you have to remain silent?

Gilberto: Yes, I prefer not to get into a confrontation if things are not too serious. I prefer not to add more fuel to the fire...for the sake of harmony.

**Question Four: I have respect for the authority figures with whom I interact.**

Response: Strongly agree (7)

David: Is question number four related to question number three?

Gilberto: I totally agree. I respect authority figures, starting with the local authorities in the communities. If someone has been elected to organize, to hold that position, I have to respect his authority.

David: That would be in the community. How about with the police?

Gilberto: I respect them too because they are doing their job. If they arrest me or give me a ticket for driving without driver license, they are doing their job.

David: How about at work?

Gilberto: I respect authorities too. I don't like to argue with my boss, or my supervisor, or with a superior, even if I disagree with what they say.

**Question Five: I do my own thing, regardless of what others think.**

Response: Strongly disagree (1)

Gilberto: No matter what I do, I always think about the others. What I do might affect others, and I care about other people.

**Question Six: I respect people who are modest about themselves.**

Response: Strongly agree (7)

Gilberto: Yes, I strongly agree. Modest people are not necessarily poor. Some people confuse modesty with poverty. Modest people are simple or humble not necessarily poor. I admire those people (modest people) because, generally, those people know more.

David: So modesty and humility are important to you.

Gilberto: They are important to me. There is a common expression that says: your attitude, not your aptitude, will determine your altitude.

David: Is that Gilberto's perception or Maya's perception?

Gilberto: I think it is Mayan perception. In Mayan culture, the elders are very important. We don't have nursing homes. An elder is an important figure at home. When the meal is served, elders tell stories. Mayan culture has been passed down from generation to generation.

David: Can you connect what you just said with modesty?

Gilberto: Modesty is related with elders because elders are simple people. The advice that grandparents always give you, is to be honest and humble.

David: So, modesty/humility is a Mayan cultural value?

Gilberto: It is a cultural value that is verbally transmitted. In the Mayan culture we don't have many books; it is verbally that we passed down culture. Grandparents tell stories to grandsons that later will do the same. In that way simplicity is transmitted. It is very important for Mayan people to remain united, to stay simple, and to be humble. We are losing that value, unfortunately. It was customary to help each other. For instance,

if you have a Milpa, my father, my brother, and I will help you with your milpa, and then you help us when we need help with our milpa. No money is involved. The same situation to help someone who does not have a house. We get together and each person donates something; boards, thatch, etc. The community works together building the house for an elder or for whomever.

**Question Seven: I feel it is important for me to act as an independent person.**

Response: Disagree (2)

Gilberto: I marked four first because I did not understand the question. But somewhat I disagree.

David: So would you say two or three?

Gilberto: Two. It is important to be independent but at the same time I depend on others.

David: In what aspect do you depend on others?

Gilberto: I think that I depend on all aspects from others. I am a facilitator (leader) in my community. In order to serve (lead) in my community, I need them.

David: Do you enjoy serving in your community.

Gilberto: I do. I like to work with others; I like to learn from others. When you serve others, you learn. It is a growing opportunity. I couldn't be a leader without the community. At the same time, the community won't work without a leader. To some extent, we need each other; we are connected with each other and with nature.

David: Would that be interdependent instead of independent?

Gilberto: Interdependent. It is important because we need the environment, we need each other and we need nature.

**Question Eight: I will sacrifice my self-interest for the benefit of the group I am in.**

Response: Strongly agree (7)

Gilberto: I marked seven because I strongly agree. As I said before, I enjoy working for the community. There is always something to do at home; clean, do the laundry, cook, etc. When I am at home, my mind is wondering about pending issues in the community. I have a hard time thinking that I am at home when there is so much to do in the community. I prefer to stop doing what I am doing at home and go help the community.

David: In Spanish, we called that altruismo (altruism). Are all Mayas like that?

Gilberto: Not all but most Maya are. Leaders have to be like that. I admire so many in the community that sacrifice themselves for others. We have birthdays or celebrations and people help. They come early to help and leave late cleaning and organizing. It is not easy to spare an hour or two. One of our leaders said once; we don't have money but we are alive (we have life), and that is very important.

**Question Nine: I'd rather say "NO" directly, than risk being misunderstood.**

Response: Disagree (2)

Gilberto: I express my ideas even when risking being misunderstood. If I have too, I explain it again. There is a big difference between what you say and how you say it. I think the question is more about how you say things. I can tell you something in different ways, and depending on that, you are going to interpret what I say.

David: So you risk and say NO when you have too?

Gilberto: I say what I have to say



**Question Ten: Having a lively imagination is important to me.**

Response: Strongly agree (7)

Gilberto: It is important to have a creative mind. Only with a creative mind we can do things. When you have an idea and you put it in practice - when you bring into reality your idea is when things get done.

**Question Eleven: I should take into consideration my parents' advice when making education/career plans.**

Response: Strongly agree (7)

Gilberto: My parents' opinions are very important for whatever I do. As I said before, they are older people and are important in my life. Whatever I do, I consult with them because they are my bosses, they are my elders, and they have more wisdom than me. They know what is better for me. I always listen to their advice.

David: Have you ever done anything against your parents' will?

Gilberto: Yes, it was not easy but it was only for a couple of days and they later understood. The disagreement was not about what I did, it was about how I did it. They did not want me to go to the City to study because they thought that they could not pay for it. I had a half scholarship and then they agreed with my decision.

David: The question asks about education and career plans. How about love? Is it important that your parents like your girlfriend and/or wife?

Gilberto: This is a different situation. Generally, they don't have to accept her. I listen to their advice anyhow. Usually, they don't say much about it. When I told my mother about it, she said: son, you are the one who is going to marry her and if you want her, we support you.

David: Did they agree to your marriage?

Gilberto: My mom, yes, my dad, not too much.

**Question Twelve: I feel my fate is intertwined with the fate of those around me.**

Response: Strongly agree (7)

Gilberto: As human beings we are all connected, our fate is intertwined. What I get is related to what I do. You reap what you sow; by doing good you receive good. It might take time but it will come to you. The same happens with evil acts. What I do affects the community.

David: And in the spiritual realm?

Gilberto: People are spiritually connected. We, in the community, are Catholics. We all pray to the same God, but Maya spirituality is in our blood.

David: You just mention Mayan spirituality as separate from Catholicism. Are they different?

Gilberto: It is different.

David: Can you educate us about it?

Gilberto: I am Catholic. I was baptized Catholic. Religion is a combination of norms and knowledge that tries to bring humans closer to God, but Spirituality is a natural form of communication. Spirituality is an innate way to communicate with the Ahau.

David: It is a natural way to communicate with God. How about the Catholic religion? How do you communicate with God in the Catholic religion?

Gilberto: A colleague used to say that the Catholic religion illuminates

our spirituality. I feel that it is not the same. To be Catholic is not the same as to practice Maya spirituality, but it is intertwined because there is only one God. We just invoke him differently. In the Mayan spirituality everything occurs here in nature with the Supreme Being. Ahau father-mother is the creator. Earth is important to us because it supports us. Air, fire, light are sacred; everything is sacred in nature. In the Catholic religion, as well, everything is sacred too but we don't see it. We don't have respect for earth.

David:       What is the main difference between Mayan spirituality and Catholic religion? Do you perceive any dividing line?

Gilberto:     The main difference that I see is that in the Catholic religion, we don't talk much about respect for Mother Nature, but in Maya spirituality, we do. For instance, when praying, we kiss the ground, each time we cut a tree we say a prayer, each time we kill a chicken (we don't eat much meat in Guatemala), we say a prayer. As I said before we all need each other; humans and nature.

**Question Thirteen: I prefer to be direct and forthright when dealing with people I've just met.**

Response:     Disagree (2)

Gilberto:     I prefer to get to know the person before being direct and forthright. What I say or what I think might hurt the other person, so I prefer to wait. I don't want to offend or to hurt someone that I don't know. I prefer to get to know the person before expressing my ideas. I am in disagreement with being direct and forthright with someone I just met.

**Question Fourteen: I feel good when I cooperate with others.**

Response:     Strongly agree (7)

Gilberto:     Yes, I feel good when I cooperate with someone. It motivates me to work in groups.

**Question Fifteen: I am comfortable with being singled out for praise or rewards.**

Response: Agree (6)

Gilberto: Yes, I feel comfortable, I like it. Merit is important. When I received my GED diploma, it felt so good. It was an achievement. I realized that it can be done. It might not be a big achievement but for me it was.

David: Is it common to obtain a GED in your community?

Gilberto: No, it is not.

**Question Sixteen: If my brother or sister fails, I feel responsible.**

Response: Agree somewhat (5)

Gilberto: Family is very important to me, my parents are important and my brothers are very important to me. I communicate with my brothers (the ones living here in the U.S.) every day. It is rare that we don't talk every day. I have a brother who was into drugs and I felt very bad for him. He used to come home drunk. One day he did not come home. I called him but he did not answer. I found him on the floor in the bathroom. I went to my bedroom and cried for him. It hurts me to see a loved one who is not doing well.

David: Is it common in the Mayan community that men get in addictions?

Gilberto: Yes, it is common.

David: Why do you think this happens?

Gilberto: Most men come to the United States without their wives, without their families. I think that the nostalgia leads them into addictions. In Guatemala a beer is expensive, but here not. You buy many with 10.00 dollars.

David: When we talk about addictions, are we talking about drugs or alcohol?

Gilberto: Alcohol. Drugs are not common in the community.

David: Is your brother younger or older? Do you think that younger men are more likely to consume alcohol?

Gilberto: I think so...and the lack of responsibility too. My younger brother did not have a wife and only worked three or four days a week. He had plenty of time doing nothing. He is 28 and came here five years ago. But now he has two jobs and doesn't have time to waste. He has seven or eight hours a day to sleep.

**Question Seventeen: I often have the feeling that my relationships with others are more important than my own accomplishments.**

Response: Strongly agree (7)

Gilberto: Relationships are very important. I prefer to get along with everybody. If I focus only on my own goals, I will not care much for them.

**Question Eighteen: Speaking up during class (or a meeting) is not a problem for me.**

Response: Strongly agree (7)

Gilberto: I like to participate in class; I like to ask questions-many questions

David: Is that a common characteristic among Maya?

Gilberto: I think so.

**Question Nineteen: I would offer my seat in a bus to my professor (or my boss).**

Response: Strongly agree (7)

Gilberto: Yes, as I said before; I appreciate my bosses and teachers. I would offer my seat to them and to someone else...a woman, and elder.

**Question Twenty: I act the same way no matter who I am with.**

Response: Disagree (2)

Gilberto: Being multifaceted is important. I act according to the environment I am in. At work, I act different because I am working with Americans; white and brown. I act different with the people in my community...they are my people.

David: How do you act with Americans...brown and White? Any difference?

Gilberto: Yes, I feel they are different. Because I am a manager at work, I shake hands with them. In my community, it is like with family.

David: Who is more difficult to deal with, white Americans or Brown Americans?

Gilberto: The same.

David: Do you have white and brown friends?

Gilberto: Yes.

**Question Twenty-one: My happiness depends on the happiness of those around me.**

Response: Strongly agree (7)

Gilberto: I care a lot for others. Others' happiness is important for me. When I say others, I meant the people of my community. This weekend I had an experience with one of the leaders. He called me and told me that he was

discouraged because other leaders were not considering his opinions. I don't want to participate anymore, he said. I told him not to give up because we are different and that happens sometimes, even among brothers. If we call out the leader that is not paying attention to your ideas, we might hurt him, and he is the leader with more followers, more family. I felt uncomfortable with the situation.

**Question Twenty-two: I value being in good health above everything.**

Response: Strongly agree (7)

Gilberto: My health condition is very important. If I have everything but health, I won't be able to enjoy it. If my family and I have health...the rest is bearable.

**Question Twenty-three: I will stay in a group if they need me, even when I am not happy with the group.**

Response: Agree (6)

Gilberto: To serve the community is very important for me. If the group needs me, I stay in the group, even when I disagree with the group. I help some members of the community to fill job applications, or with any other favor. I feel happy helping my community. It is never an inconvenience. My wife tells me that I have to start charging.

**Question Twenty-four: I try to do what is best for me, regardless of how that might affect others.**

Response: Disagree (2)

Gilberto: All questions here are related...right? I care about others, what others say is important. If I am doing something that is affecting/bothering the rest, I will stop doing it in order to make everybody happy.

**Question Twenty-five: Being able to take care of myself is a primary concern for me.**

Response: Agree (6).

Gilberto: The question was not very clear, I did not get it.

David: To be able to take care of myself is a primary preoccupation.

Gilberto: I agree, it is important to be able to do things on your own. I like to cooperate with the community, I like to help, but it is important to be independent.

**Question Twenty-six: It is important to me to respect decisions made by the group.**

Response: Agree (6)

**Question Twenty-seven: My personal identity, independent of others, is very important to me.**

Response: Strongly agree (7)

Gilberto: I understood a collective identity.

David: No, not collective, just your identity. Is it important for you to have an identity that is independent from the others, from your group? Is your individuality (Gilberto's individuality) important to you? There are two different identities; collective identity and individual identity. The question asks; is it important for you to have an identity that is separate from the group?

Gilberto: Yes, I agree.

David: Can you tell me more about that yes?

Gilberto: Well, it is important that I identify myself...I don't know how to answer.



David: Is it because your personal identity is connected to your group?

Gilberto: To some extent, it is because without the group I am not okay. When I talk to my wife about moving to a different state, I tell her that the first thing that I would do is to find a group (community). I feel that I am not complete if I am not part of a community. It is like a passion, what I like.

**Question Twenty-eight: It is important for me to maintain harmony within the group.**

Response: Strongly agree (7)

Gilberto: Harmony is very important. Harmony in my family, my group, my community is very important.

David: How do you keep harmony while considering what is right and wrong?

Gilberto: By doing the right thing. Always doing the right thing is important; the right thing keeps us united. What is not right might keep us united but only for a short while. When you act right the family is happy and united. What is wrong has no foundations and can fall apart at any time. There is song by Ricardo Arjona that says: I prefer a lie that makes me happy than a truth that makes me miserable. I like the lyrics of that song.

David: And how do you apply that song?

Gilberto: I like the song but what is true is always more important. Sooner or later, they will find out about the lie. What has taken you years to build can collapse at any time because of a lie. It is important to tell the truth and to do the right thing.

**Question Twenty-nine: I act the same way at home that I do at school or work.**

Response: Disagree (2)

Gilberto: Yes, I act different. When I am at home with my children, I behave like a kid with them. We play together.

David: In which language do you communicate with your children?

Gilberto: In Q'anjob'al.

David: Do you communicate in Spanish sometimes?

Gilberto: No. When my wife talks in Spanish at home, it feels strange.

David: So when you are with your children at home you behave like another child and talk to them in Q'anjob'al?

Gilberto: Yes.

David: When you play with your children, do you ever use English?

Gilberto: Yes, sometimes. We speak Q'anjob'al and English.

David: So your children feel more comfortable communicating in English than in Spanish?

Gilberto: For the kids is the same...English or Q'anjob'al.

David: What language do you speak at work?

Gilberto: English.

David: Do you think that you change your behavior when you speak Q'anjob'al and when you speak English (Like a shifting)?

Gilberto: No, I don't change but I behave more professional at work. I have to be more professional because I am in charge of the restaurant and people have to follow my orders. At home is a different story.

**Question Thirty: I usually go along with what others want to do, even when I would rather do something different.**

Response: Strongly agree (7)

Gilberto: I go with what the groups want. I like to maintain the harmony in the group.

David: I guess sometimes you have to say no, we have to do things this way.

Gilberto: When I see that they are not doing it right, I tell them. But I do it with strong foundations.

David: If the group is having fun mocking or bullying someone, would you tell the group to stop?

Gilberto: Oh yes. I will tell the right way to behave. For example, we are organizing a party and the rent for the room is 1,000 dollars. We are going to have a Marimba and the price of the Marimba is 1,000 dollars. We all contribute. That's what I mean. If I cannot attend the event, I still contribute. Last week a marimba group from Santa Eulalia played here in Greenville. We agreed to pay 15.00 dollars per person. I had to work that day but I contributed for the party.

David: One question Gilberto. On one hand, we have harmony, which is very important for the group, and on the other hand, what is right and wrong. Do you have, sometimes, to keep harmony by doing what is wrong?

Gilberto: No, always doing what is right. The community is rooted in the Catholic Church. We are under the Guatemalan church. Priests from Guatemala come to visit us. Father Andres came from Santa Eulalia. For the Pastoral Maya conference, Father Mat Xun, who was my professor, is coming.

David: Gilberto, was it difficult to answer the questionnaire?

Gilberto: Some questions...yes, some questions.

Although Gilberto had difficulties answering some of the questions, he was able to complete the test. The Singelis Self-Construal Scale contains 15 independent items and 15 interdependent items. For the Singelis test we have to find the mean. The mean is obtained by adding all the scores and dividing the result by the number of items (15). Interdependent items are questions # 3, 4, 6, 8, 11, 16, 17, 19, 21, 23, 26, 28, 12, 14 and 30. Gilberto scored 100, so the mean is 6.66 or 6.6%. A result of 6.6% is high and it is considered statistically significant. The independent items are questions # 1, 2, 9, 10, 13, 15, 18, 20, 22, 25, 27, 29, 5, 7, and 24. Gilberto scored 59, so the mean is 3.93 or 3.9%. As we can appreciate Gilberto's collectivism value of 6.6% is much higher than his individualism value of 3.93%.

When analyzing Gilberto's explanations, some cultural patterns are observed:

- Difference/diversity within the in-group is not appreciated.
- Adults represent experience and wisdom and those characteristics are highly appreciated.
- Confrontation is avoided at almost all costs.
- Respect for authority figures.
- The importance of the other (in-group) is very significant.
- Modesty/simplicity/humility are highly appreciated.
- Highly interdependent, not only from one another, but also from nature and environment.
- Sense of sacrifice for the community.
- Connectivity is a must.
- Imagination, contrary to what is expected from collectivist societies, is very important for Gilberto.
- Mayan spirituality differs from Catholic spirituality.
- Identity is defined in reference to the other, in reference to the community.

After Gilberto took the test, we had a conversation (debriefing) about the meaning and extent of individualism and collectivism in a given community. I shared with him a list, created specifically for him, of the most salient characteristics of collectivism and individualism. Gilberto's difficulty to answer question 27 (Personal Identity, independent of others, is very important to me) was the most striking aspect of the test. He was

unwilling to separate himself from the group in order to claim some degree of individuality. Collective identity or an identity that is based on the other was the preferred way for him to understand and define himself.

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