



Drifting Identity Formation: A Disaggregation of Indo-Fijian Ethnic Labels



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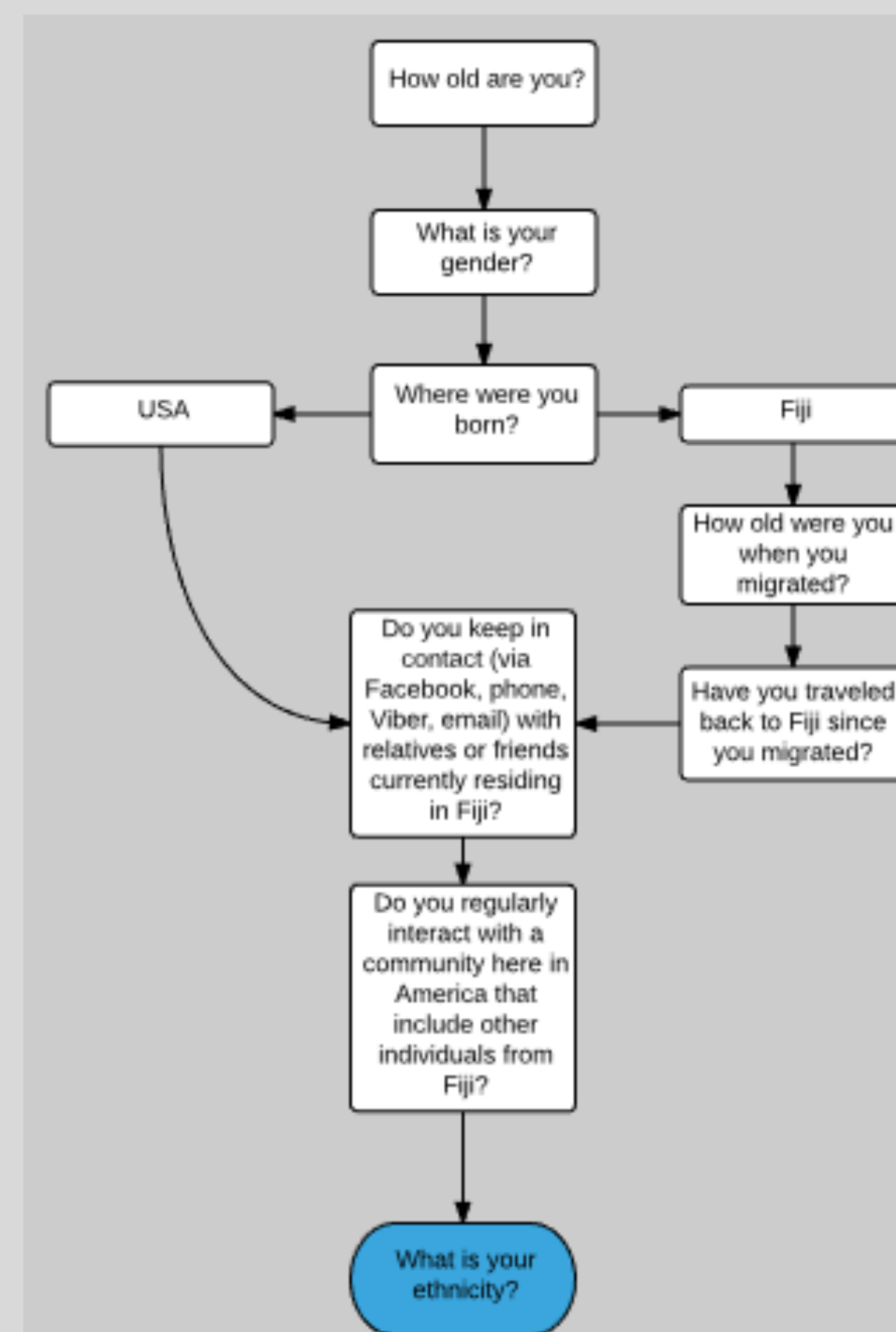
Abstract

In 2007, individuals of Indian descent comprised 37% of Fiji's population. A variety of ethnic labels have been proposed to distinguish Fijian-born citizens of Indian descent from the indigenous Fijian population. A clear consensus has not been reached to determine a politically correct label for their ethnicity. Ethnic identity is further complicated when taking into perspective the American-born generation, whose immigrant parents were born in Fiji and have descent from Indian indentured servants. A survey was conducted to explore the variety of ethnic labels used by individuals, currently residing in the United States of America, who have been impacted by the Fiji Indian Diaspora. The survey included 34 participants, who provided 14 different ethnic labels. After grouping related ethnic labels, 15 responses referred to Pacific-Islander, 16 responses included Indian, 6 responses referred to religion, and 2 included American. Correlations based on age, generation, gender, location of birth and interactions with Fiji could not be made regarding ethnicity due to the small sample size.

Background History

Fiji became a British Crown Colony in 1874, with Sir Arthur Gordon serving as the first governor. In order to economically develop Fiji, a sugar industry was established on the island in 1881. During this time, moral and humanitarian questions were being introduced to the British public. This increased awareness that European presence could imply a threat to the survival of the indigenous culture of the colonies. Gordon centered his policies around the preservation of the indigenous Fijian culture. In need of labors, Indian indentured servants were introduced to Fiji in order to work on the sugar plantations. In 1879, the first Indians arrived in Fiji. Between 1879 and 1916, approximately 60,500 Indians were brought to Fiji under the Indenture Labor Agreement during the Indian diaspora. The laborers and indigenous Fijians were kept separate due to the policies centered around preservation of native culture. This allowed for the retention of Indian culture, while also postponing the acculturation of Indian and Fijian cultures. Inter-Indian acculturation, however, was taking place. The laborers were from a variety of regions in India, each with their distinct language, food, music and clothing. The different cultural regions condensed and formed a Fiji-specific form of Indian culture. The ratio of Fijian-born to Indian-born Indians began to increase. The descendants of these migrants, though preserving and practicing their traditional Indian culture and Hindu religion, knew no home other than Fiji. A second wave of immigration occurred when these individuals migrated to developed countries, such as America.

Survey



The following survey was taken by participants, currently residing in the United States of America, whose immigrant parents were born in Fiji and have descent from Indian indentured servants. At the end of the survey was a section prompting participants to rank various ethnic labels with how they most closely identify.

- Fiji Indian
 - Indo-Fijian
 - Fijian
 - Indian
 - American
- I ALWAYS identify as this
 - I OCCASIONALLY identify as this
 - I NEVER identify as this

Results

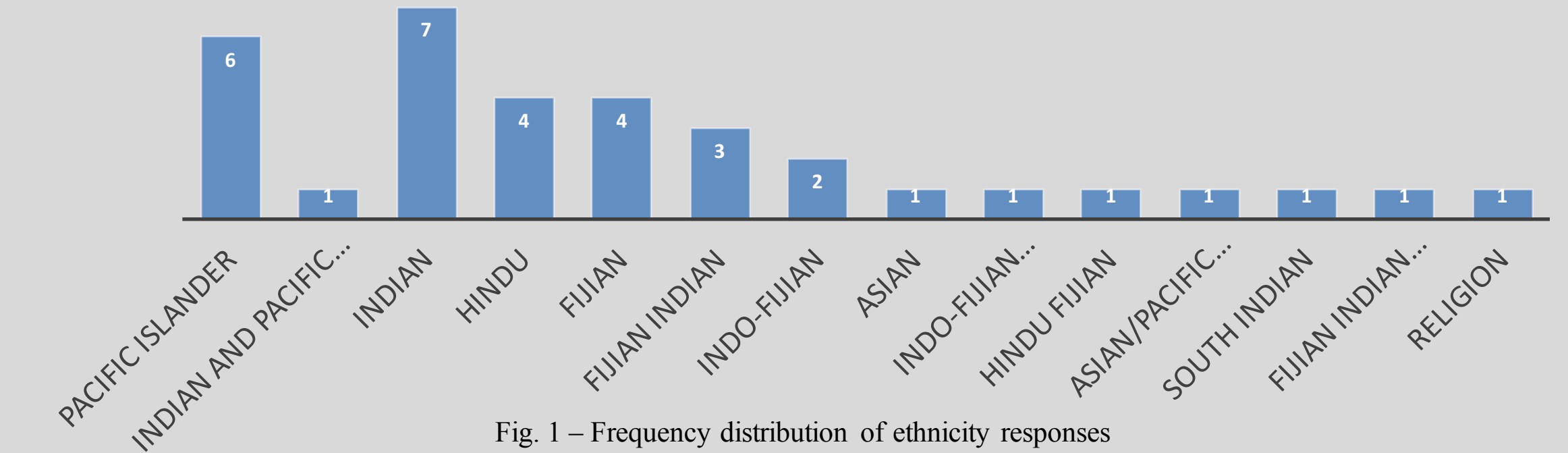


Fig. 1 - Frequency distribution of ethnicity responses

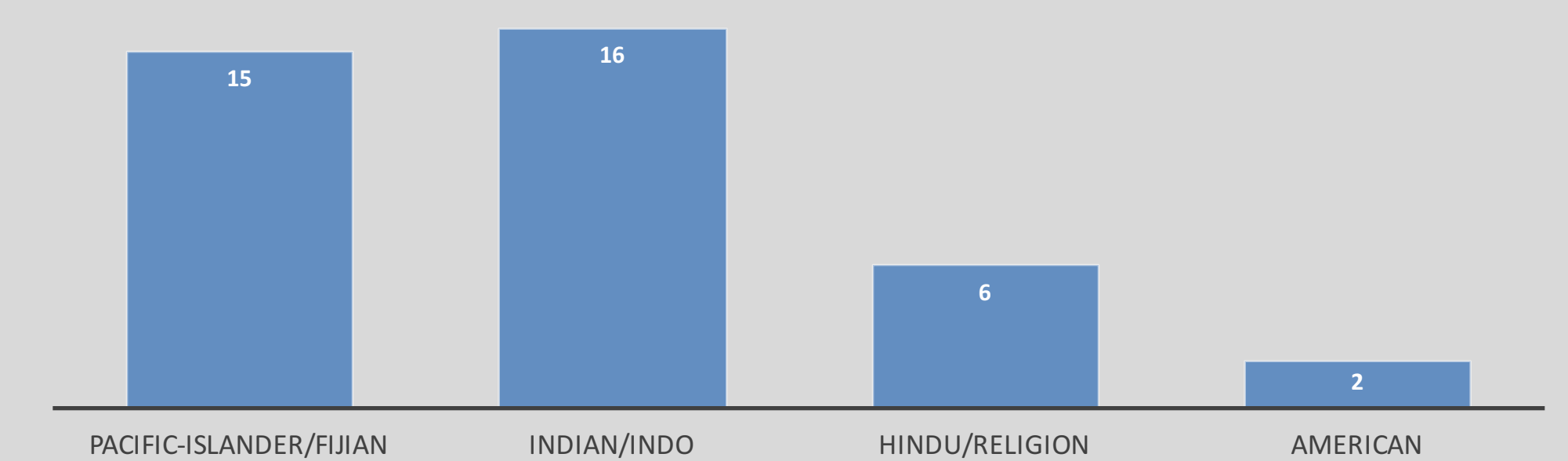


Fig. 2 - The ethnicities from fig. 1 were grouped together based on related ethnic groups. The frequency of these groups is as shown

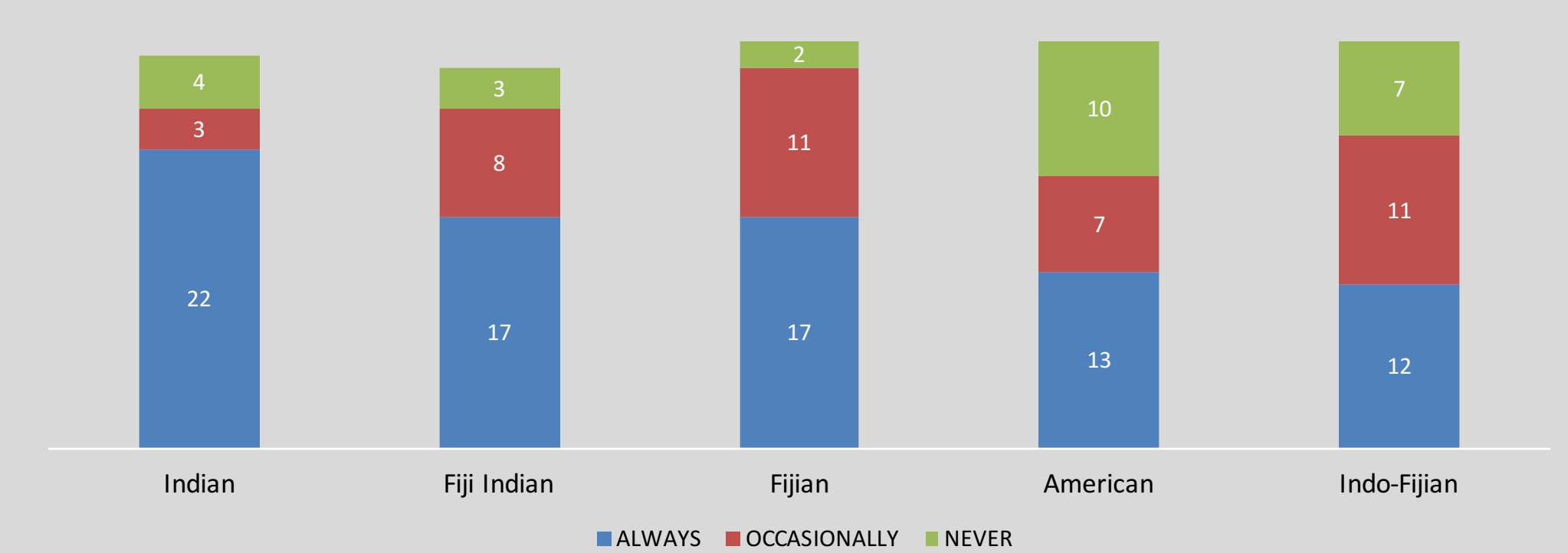


Fig. 3 - Results from participants ranking what labels they: always identify with, occasionally identify with, and never identify with

Conclusion

Correlations could not be inferred between age, generation, gender, location of birth or interactions with Fiji and ethnicity due to the small sample size. The overall data from the survey suggest that there is indeed many ways that these people provided their ethnic identity. Future potential studies could conduct the survey on a larger scale to potentially find correlations. While religion is not classified as an ethnicity, many respondents referred to Hinduism as their ethnicity. This could be due to Hinduism being seen as shared cultural practices and as a way of life, therefore it can be synonymous with ethnicity. Another interesting study would be to conduct a cross-cultural analysis, where two host lands of the Indian diaspora are compared, and analyzed on the basis of ethnic identity formations and the retention of Indian culture amongst the generations following the dispersal.