

Alaska Native Identity Study 2016: Report of Results

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Summary

The purpose of this study was to document different aspects of Alaska Native identity – specifically group identity, with regards to clan and home community – and investigate how these identities influence people’s expected behavior, particularly in the context of helping others. 182 self-identified Alaska Natives answered a survey in May-June 2016. Participants identified equally strongly with clan and home community, and both clan and community identity played a role in expectations about interactions with others. When either identity was shared, people thought they would be more likely to interact regularly with someone, give them help, and receive help from them. However, shared community identity was more important than shared clan identity, likely because most participants did not live in close proximity to clan members. Future work will investigate more fully the role of clan membership in helping, as well as more specific contexts for helping.

Introduction

What is identity, and how does it influence people’s behavior? In this study, we had two objectives. First, we aimed to document for some of the components that make up Alaska Native identity. Second, we sought to understand how people’s Alaska Native identity shapes their expectations about interactions with others.

People’s identity can have several sources. For example, people may define their own identity based on other *people* with whom they identify, such as family members. People may feel their identity comes from a certain *place*, such as where they grew up or where they spent a lot of time. People may also gain identity from *culture*, such as religion or language (Moya and Boyd 2015). The implications for this study are that Alaska Native identity is likely shaped by people’s *clan* (people), their *home community* (*kwáan*) (people and place), and their cultural traditions, values and interests.

Previous research has found three major principles about identity. First, people identify both as individuals and as members of groups: that is, people have a “personal identity” as well as a “social identity” (Tajfel 1974). Second, identity is flexible, not fixed. In particular, people’s perceptions of identity are relative, so if the comparison point changes, perceptions of identity change too. For example, someone might identify as being from Juneau when talking to another Alaskan, as an Alaskan when talking to a person from another state, and as an

American when talking to someone from another country. In technical terms, “superordinate group identity” (in this example, American: the overarching group) is more important in certain situations, such as when there are large-scale threats across multiple groups (Kramer and Brewer 1984).

Third, people’s identity influences their behavior towards others. A well-established finding in psychology and anthropology is that people show “in-group favoritism”, where they are more likely to help others with whom they share a group identity (Balliet et al. 2014). This may also be accompanied by discrimination against people who do not share the same identity (Halevy et al. 2008). Research explaining this behavior is ongoing, but it is likely because people expect to interact repeatedly with members of their own group and thus have many opportunities to help each other (“reciprocity”) in the future (Yamagishi et al. 1999).

In this study, we were specifically interested the components of Alaska Native identity that affect people’s willingness to help (cooperate with) others, and their expectations of who would be willing to help them. Our hypothesis was that cooperation depends on expectations of future interactions and reciprocity, which are shaped by group identity. From this hypothesis, we predicted that the group of people that a person expects to interact with is the group with which s/he is willing to cooperate. We investigated this hypothesis and prediction in a survey where people answered questions about the group identity that was most important to them (e.g. clan versus *k̄wáan*), and what their expectations were about interactions and cooperation with people from those and other groups. This is an important theoretical question because it is unknown how multiple group identities affect people’s willingness to cooperate with members of other groups (Robinson and Barker 2017).

Methods

We collected data in May and June 2016, when we were based in Juneau and Haines to carry out the study. We recruited people to answer questions in a survey, which they could do online or in person. We created a website (<http://www.tinyurl.com/AKNativeIdentity>) and a Facebook page (<https://www.facebook.com/AlaskaNativeIdentity>) where people could learn more about the study and find a link to the survey. We also volunteered at Celebration 2016 and staffed a booth there to advertise the study (Figure 1). Any person who was over 18 and self-identified as Alaska Native could take part. Participants were compensated \$15 for their time answering the survey questions. People who finished the survey had the additional option to be interviewed.



Figure 1. The researchers recruiting participants at Celebration 2016 (from left: Jessica Barker, Djuke Veldhuis, Caitlin Stern).

The survey had two main parts. The first part addressed the question of what components make up people's identity. It contained questions about demographic information. It also had questions from an "ethnic identity scale" (Roberts et al. 1999) to measure how strongly participants identified with Alaska Native as their ethnic group, and two sets of questions from a "group identity fusion scale" (Gómez et al. 2011) to measure how strongly participants identified with their "home community" (defined by the participant) and their clan. Each of these scales consisted of several statements which participants had to state their agreement with on a 4-point scale (strongly agree, agree, disagree, strongly disagree).

The second part of the survey addressed the question of how people's identity influences their behavior. Participants read vignettes (short descriptions) of fictional people and were asked who they would be most willing to help and who would be most willing to help them. They were also asked to consider people from their own versus different clan and home community, and to state they would expect to give help to and receive help from.

Results

Who took the survey?

182 participants took the survey, of whom 175 answered it completely. All of the following results are from these 175 people. 119 people identified as Alaska Native only, 41 as Alaska Native and one other ethnic group, and 15 as Alaska Native and two or more ethnic groups. 104 participants were women and 71 were men. The mean age of women was 46.3 (range: 18-84), and the mean age of men was 45.1 (range 18-78).

In terms of tribe membership, 140 participants identified as Tlingit, 10 as Haida, 12 as Tsimshian, and 13 as Other. The tribe identifications of those who chose Other included Yup'ik (2), Eskimo (1), Athabascan (1), Ahtna Athabascan (1), Aniishanoee (1), Nisga'a (1), Tlingit/Haida (1), Tlingit/Tsimshian (1), Tlingit/Athabascan (1), Tlingit/Tsimshian/Aleut (1), Aleut/Inupiaq (1), and German (1).

85 participants identified as belonging to the Raven moiety, 71 as Eagle or Wolf, and 2 as Neix.ádi. Of the Tsimshian participants, 3 identified as Ganhada, 3 as Laxsgiik, 2 as Gisbutwada, and 1 as Laxsgibuu.

Of those who answered Raven, 18 people identified as Deisheetaan, 12 T'akdeintaan, 6 Kookhittaaan, 5 Gaanax.teidí, 5 Kaach.ádi, 5 L'uknax.ádi, 4 L'eeneidí, 4 Yahkw 'Láanaas, 3 Kiks.ádi, 3 Lukaax.ádi, 2 Yaxtehittaaan, 1 Gaanax.ádi, 1 Ishkahittaaan, 1 Kak'weidí, 1 Koosk'eidí, 1 Kooyu.eidí, 1 Sukteeneidí, 1 Taakw.aaneidí, 1 Taalkweidí, 1 Teeyhittaaan, 1 Teeyneidí, and 1 Tleineidí. Those who chose Other wrote: Frog (2 people), Git laan, Naltsiine-Sky Clan, Raven-Seagull or Raven-Coho.

Of those who answered Eagle, 34 people identified as Kaagwaantaan, 9 Shangukeidí, 9 Dakl'awedí, 6 Wooshkeetaan, 4 Teikweidí, 4 Chookaneidí, 2 Kookhittaaan, 1 Kaax'oos.hittaaan, 1 Yanyeidí, and 1 Xook'eidí. Those who chose Other wrote: Killer Whale or Haida Eagle.

In terms of home community, 47 people considered Juneau to be their home community (including 5 from Douglas and 4 from Auke Bay), 18 Haines, 16 Kake, 14 Angoon, 14

Hoonah, 14 Sitka and 12 Klukwan. The other home communities with fewer participants were: Ketchikan (6), Metlakatla (6), Hydaburg (4), Wrangell (2) and Yakutat (2). There was 1 participant from each of the following places: Atlin, Cape Fox, Carcross, Haines Junction, Kasaan, Klawock, Prince of Wales, Saxman, Teslin. The remaining 11 people chose Other, and wrote in the following home communities: Whitehorse (2 people), Tacoma, Iowa/Minnesota, Kincolith, Anchorage, Glacier Bay, Unalakleet, Tazlina, “Juneau Sitka Kake”, Seward.

115 people lived in the community where they participate in cultural ceremonies, 31 people did not, and 29 people sometimes did.

38 people lived in the community where their clan house is, 124 people did not, and 13 people sometimes did.

64 people grew up in the community in which they were born. 43 people were born in the community in which their mother was born, and 30 people were born in the community in which their father was born.

How strongly did people identify with different groups (Alaska Native ethnicity, clan, home community)?

Alaska Native ethnic identity: The mean±s.e. score on the ethnic identity scale was 18.11±0.41 (where a score of 12 is the strongest identification and 48 is weakest). This is significantly stronger than halfway on the scale ($t=-28.73$, $p<0.001$). There was no difference between men and women ($t=1.32$, $p=0.188$), and no correlation with age ($r=-0.002$, $p=0.975$).

Home community identity: The mean±s.e. score on the home community identity fusion scale was 12.97±0.29 (where a score of 7 is the strongest identification and 28 is weakest). This is significantly stronger than halfway on the scale ($t=-15.44$, $p<0.001$). There was no difference between men and women ($t=0.41$, $p=0.678$), and no correlation with age ($r=-0.081$, $p=0.281$).

Clan identity: The mean±s.e. score on the clan identity fusion scale was 12.89±0.36 (where a score of 7 is the strongest identification and 28 is weakest). This is significantly stronger than halfway on the scale ($t=-12.71$, $p<0.001$). There was no difference between men and women ($t=0.04$, $p=0.967$), and no correlation with age ($r=-0.112$, $p=0.138$).

Relationships between different group identities: There was no difference between people's clan identity and community identity fusion scores (paired $t=-0.29$, $p=0.769$). Strength of clan and community identity were positively correlated ($r=0.724$, $p<0.001$; Figure 2). Strength of ethnic identity was positively correlated with clan identity ($r=0.687$, $p<0.001$) and community identity ($r=0.592$, $p<0.001$).

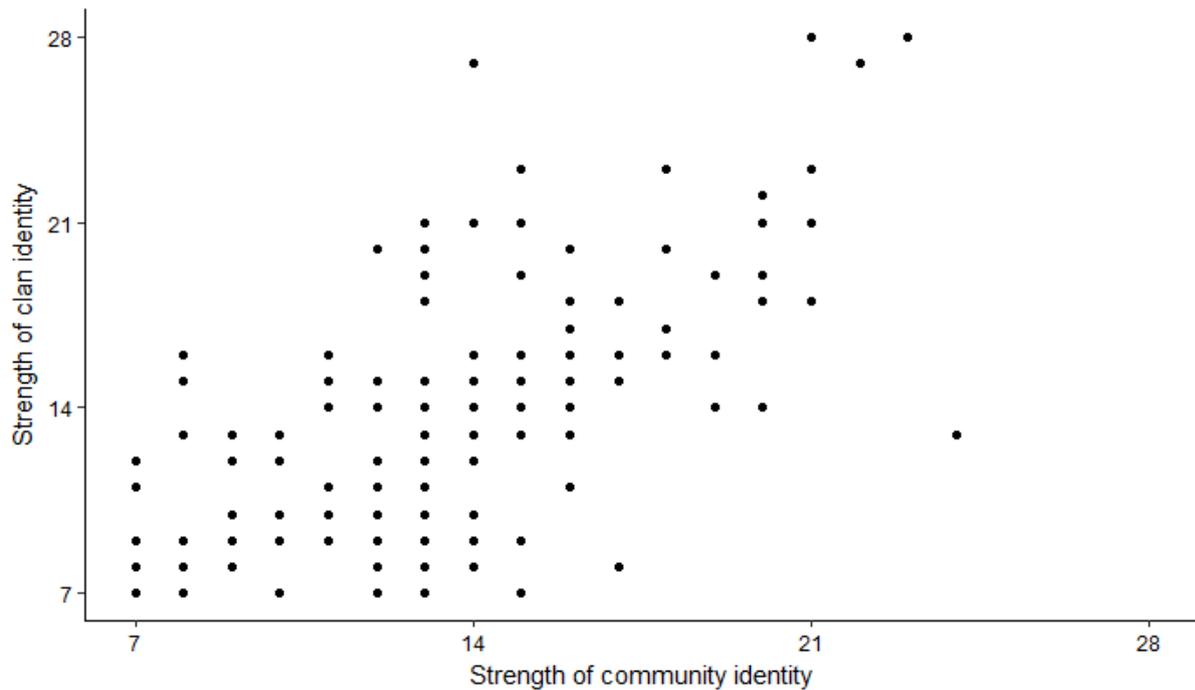


Figure 2. The strength of community identity was positively correlated with the strength of clan identity. Lower scores indicate stronger identity (7 is strongest, if a participant answered “strongly agree” to all questions; 28 is weakest, if a participant answered “strongly disagree” to all questions).

How does group identity shape people’s expectations about helping others?

In this report, we focus on three questions from the final part of the survey:

- With whom are you most likely to meet and interact regularly?
- Who would be most likely to ask you for help? (i.e. you give help to someone)
- Who would you be most likely to ask for help? (i.e. you receive help from someone)

For each of these questions, participants had to rank the following answers in terms of who was most likely (1) and least likely (3); participants had to choose a different rank for each answer:

- A person from the same community but a different clan (i.e. shared community)
- A person from a different community but the same clan (i.e. shared clan)
- A person from a different community and a different clan (i.e. unshared identity)

In this analysis, we use the set of three answers as our dependent variable. There are six possible sets of answers, which we can categorize in two different ways (Table 1). First, we can group the answers according to which shared identity people prefer: community identity or clan identity (i.e. whether they rank shared community before shared clan or vice versa). Second, we can group the answers according to how strongly people prefer unshared identity (i.e. whether it is ranked first, second or last).

Table 1. Six possible sets of answers, categorized by whether community is preferred to clan (red colors) or clan to community (blue colors), and whether people prefer to have shared identity (“unshared last”, darker colors) or prefer unshared identity (“unshared first, lighter colors”).

<i>Community preferred to clan</i>		<i>Clan preferred to community</i>
Community first, clan second	<i>Unshared last</i>	Clan first, community second
Community first, clan last	<i>Unshared second</i>	Clan first, community last
Community second, clan last	<i>Unshared first</i>	Clan second, community last

Considering all three questions (Figure 3), the most common set of answers was “community first, clan second” ($G=255, p<0.001$). Significantly more people chose this than the second most common set, which was “clan first, community second” ($G=44, p<0.001$). The frequencies of both these answers were above average. The frequency of people choosing “community first, clan last was no different to average ($G=5, p=0.023$, which is not significant with Bonferroni corrections for multiple comparisons), while the frequencies of people choosing the remaining three sets of answers (“clan first, community last”; “community second, clan last”; “clan second, community last”) were all below average ($G=62, G=36, G=55$, respectively; all $p<0.001$).

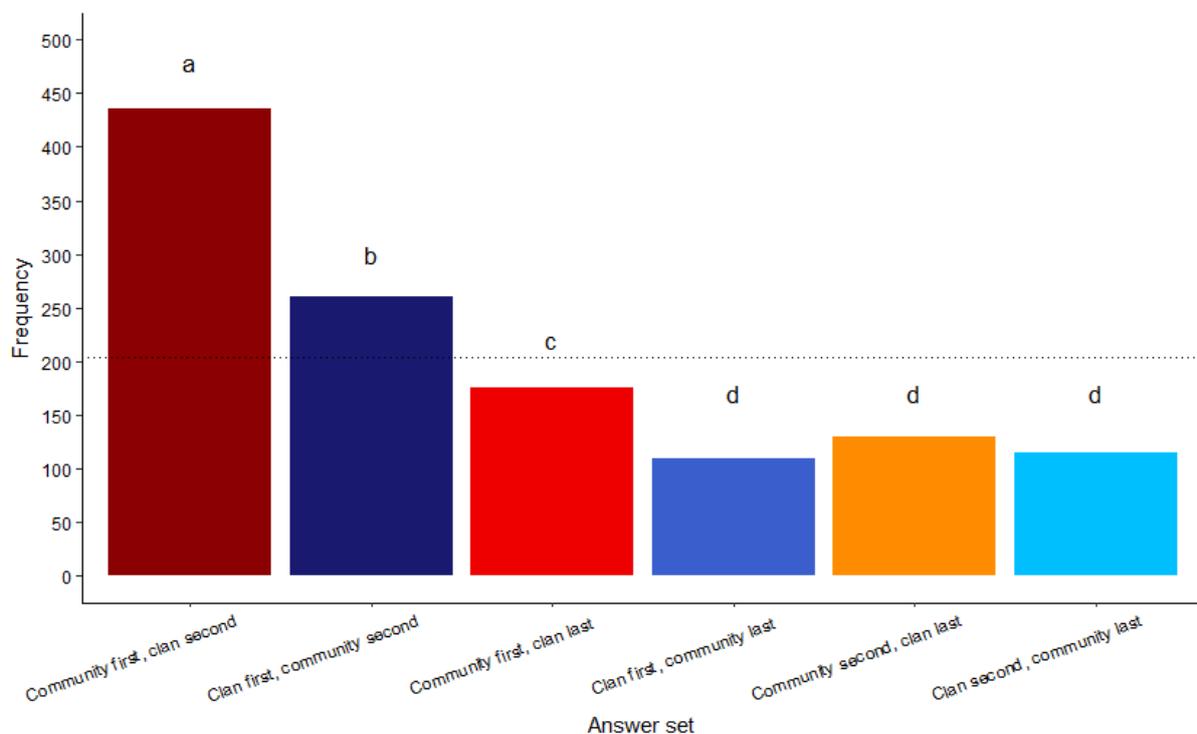


Figure 3. Frequencies of sets of answers across the three questions of interest (“With whom are you most likely to meet and interact regularly?” “Who would be most likely to ask you for help?” “Who would you be most likely to ask for help?”). Letters show statistically

significant differences (i.e. categories with the same letter are not significantly different from each other). The dotted line shows the average expected frequency for each answer set.

Conclusions: (1) People chose shared identity (either community or clan) over unshared identity. (2) Given shared identity, people chose shared community identity over shared clan identity.

We now consider each question separately. For the question “With whom are you most likely to meet and interact regularly?” (Figure 4), the most common set of answers was “community first, clan second”, which was higher than average ($G=83$, $p<0.001$). The four next most common answer sets were no different to average or to each other: “clan first, community second”, “community first, clan last”, “community second, clan last” and “clan second, community last” ($G=2.3$, $G=2.7$, $G=1.2$, $G=3.0$, respectively; all $p>0.08$). Finally, “clan first, community last” was below average ($G=39$, $p<0.001$).

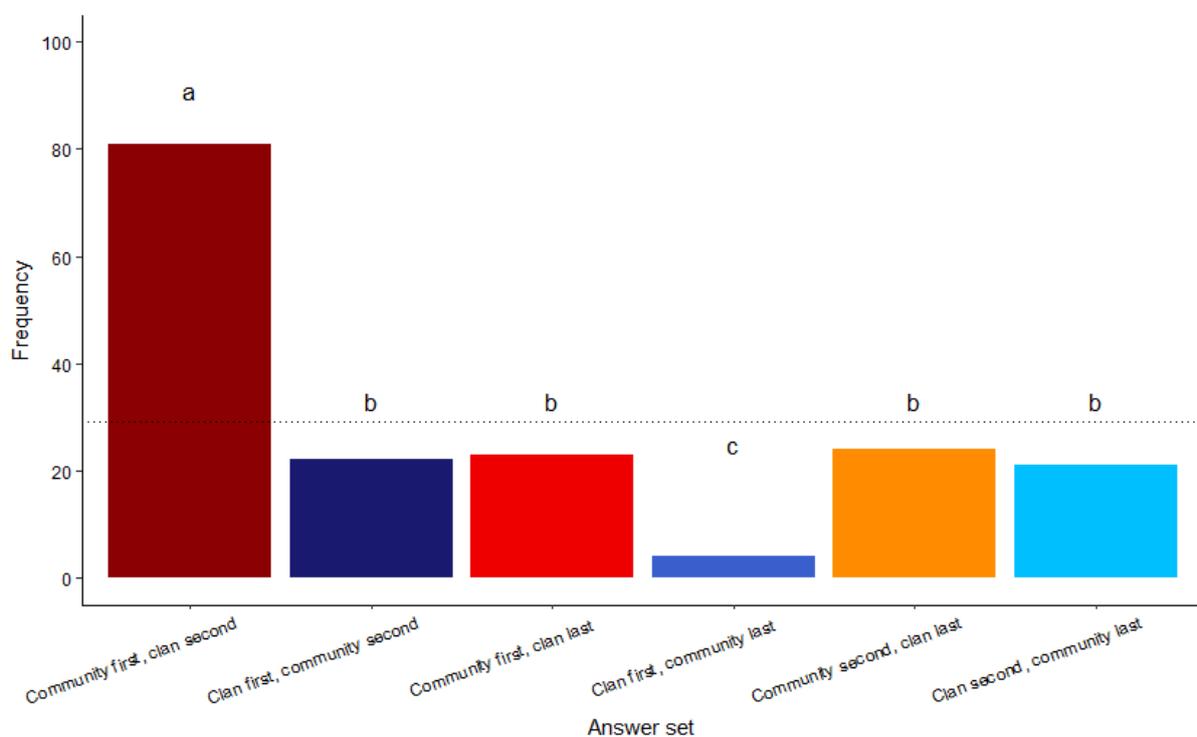


Figure 4. Frequencies of sets of answers to the question “With whom are you most likely to meet and interact regularly?” Letters show statistically significant differences (i.e. categories with the same letter are not significantly different from each other). The dotted line shows the average expected frequency for each answer set.

For the question “Who would be most likely to ask you for help?” (i.e. to whom would you give help?) (Figure 5), the most common set of answers was “community first, clan second”, which was higher than average ($G=28$, $p<0.001$). The three next most common answer sets were no different to average or to each other: “clan first, community second”, “community first, clan last”, and “clan first, community last” ($G=0.2$, $G=1.8$, $G=0.4$, respectively; all $p>0.1$). Finally, “community second, clan last” and “clan second, community last” were below average and no different to each other ($G=9.7$, $G=13$, respectively; both $p<0.002$).

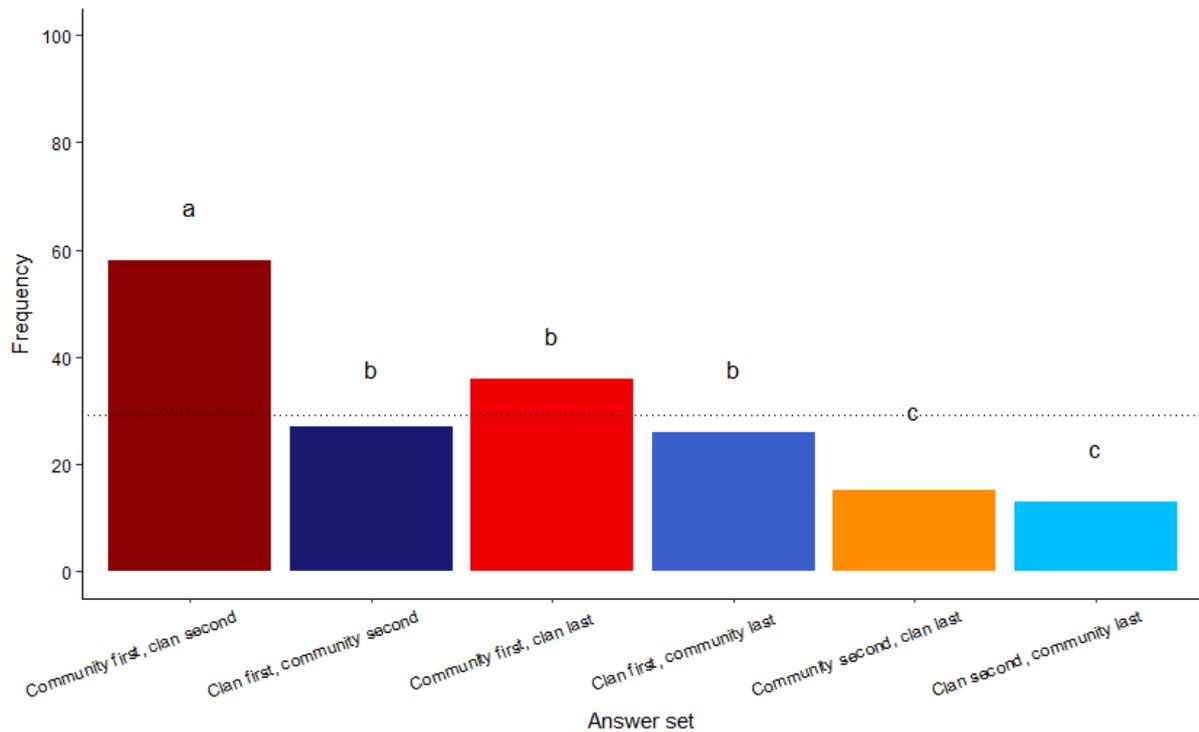


Figure 5. Frequencies of sets of answers to the question “Who would be most likely to ask you for help?” Letters show statistically significant differences (i.e. categories with the same letter are not significantly different from each other). The dotted line shows the average expected frequency for each answer set.

For the question “Who would you be most likely to ask for help?” (i.e. from whom would you receive help?) (Figure 6), the two most common answer sets were “community first, clan second”, and “clan first, community second”, which were higher than average and not different to each other ($G=31$, $G=10$, respectively; both $p<0.002$). The three next most common answer sets were no different to average or to each other: “community first, clan last”, “community second, clan last”, and “clan second, community last” ($G=1.7$, $G=3.8$, $G=9.7$, respectively; all $p>0.018$, which is not significant with Bonferroni corrections for multiple comparisons). The final set of answers, “clan first, community last”, was below average ($G=17$, $p<0.001$), but no different in frequency to “clan second, community last” ($G=0.7$, $p=0.40$).

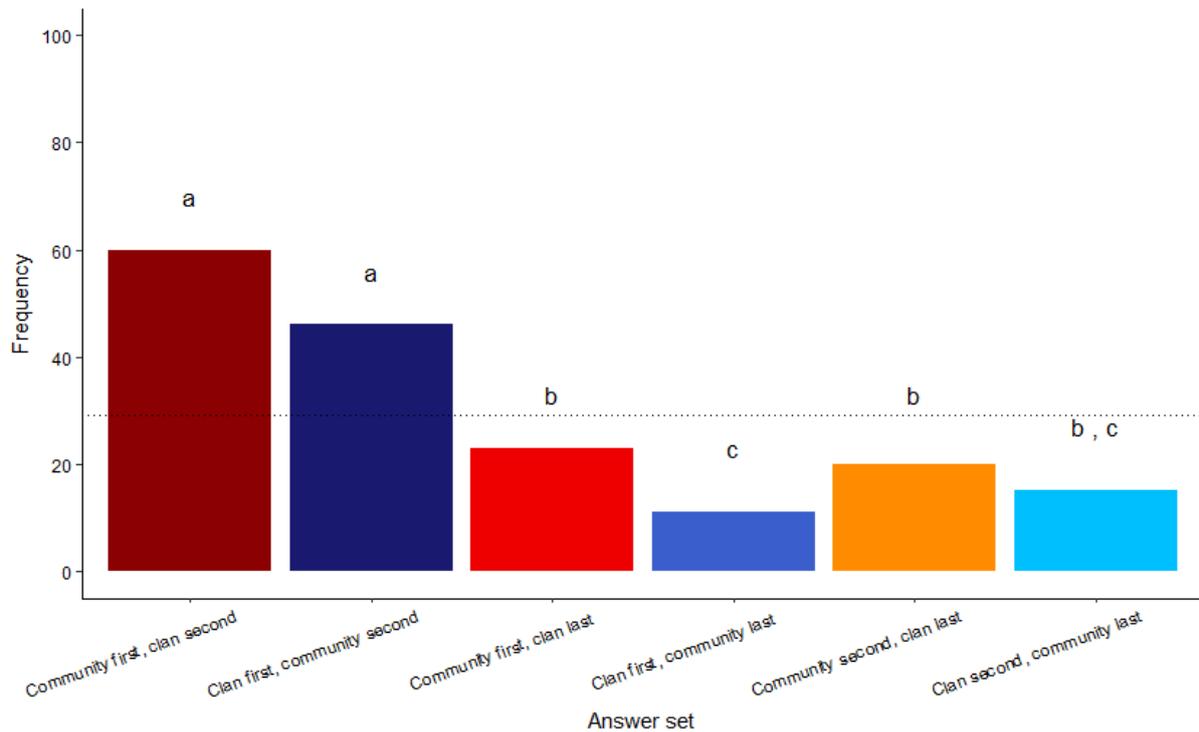


Figure 6. Frequencies of sets of answers to the question “Who would you be most likely to ask for help?” Letters show statistically significant differences (i.e. categories with the same letter are not significantly different from each other). The dotted line shows the average expected frequency for each answer set.

Conclusions: the results from the three individual questions generally reflect those from the three questions combined. That is, people chose shared over unshared identity, and community over clan identity.

We now ask whether the frequencies of answer sets are the same for each question (i.e. with whom you expect to interact, to whom you expect to give help, and from whom you expect to receive help) (Figure 7). The answer set “clan first, community second” was more common for receiving help than it was for regular interaction ($G=8.7, p=0.003$). The answer set “clan first, community last” was more common for giving help than for regular interaction ($G=18, p<0.001$), and more common for giving help than for receiving help ($G=6.3, p=0.012$).

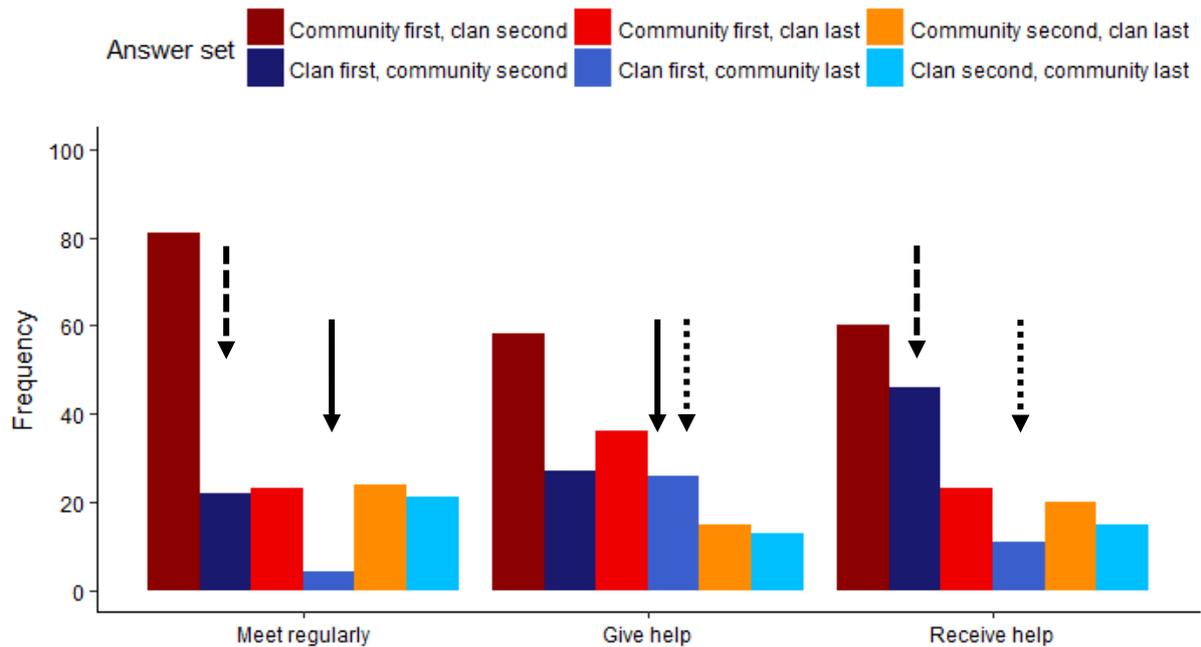


Figure 7. Frequencies of sets of answers to the three questions (taken from Figures 2, 3 and 4). Arrows of the same type (solid, dashed, or dotted) indicate answers that differ between questions.

Conclusions: (1) People expect to interact on a regular basis more frequently with community members than clan members. (2) Both community identity and clan identity are important in people's expectations about giving and receiving help.

Discussion

The participants in this study were mostly Tlingit, and mostly from communities in Southeast Alaska. Families were mobile: the majority of people were not born in the same community in which their mother or father were born, and did not grow up in the same community in which they themselves were born. Participants showed high levels of identification with their ethnic group (Alaska Native), as well as their clan and home community. This suggests that people perceive both community members and clan members to share their group identities.

Having one aspect of shared identity (community or clan) was important in people's expectations about who they interact with regularly, and who they give help to and receive help from: expectations for each of these behaviors were lower for people with whom neither aspect of identity was shared. In general, participants thought all of these behaviors were more likely when people shared community identity versus clan identity. This may seem to contradict the finding that participants did not identify more strongly with community than clan. However, we also found that the majority of participants lived in the community where they take part in cultural ceremonies, and the majority did *not* live in the community where their clan house is located. This suggests that although people do strongly identify with their clan, from a practical standpoint they are less likely to interact with members of the same clan than members of the same community. Expectations about giving and receiving help largely mapped onto expectations about interactions, which is consistent with the hypothesis that cooperation (helping) depends on how likely people think they are to interact with others and to have ongoing exchanges of help, and that these expectations are formed by group identity.

Future directions

At the time of writing this report (January 2018), we plan to submit a manuscript containing the results presented here to a scientific journal. The results point to several directions for future research, for which we plan to return to Southeast Alaska in order to continue data collection for the study. First, the survey questions about helping concerned very general situations. A follow-up would ask about specific situations (e.g. helping someone build a house, repair a boat, organize a funeral), to see whether certain group identities are more important in certain contexts. Second, as the same clans are distributed across multiple communities, there is a possible role for clan membership in maintaining ties among communities. A follow-up would investigate whether and how clan identity influences inter-community interactions. Third, behavioral economic games provide a complement to the survey questions, by revealing people's actual actions in addition to their expectations. A follow-up would determine how people's decisions in such games are influenced by their own group identities and those of fellow participants.

Data availability

The data from this study are anonymous and available from the authors on request.

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