

# Genetic ancestry test users 'cherry-pick' which races to identify with

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Genetic ancestry tests are often advertised as a tool to uncover new connections to diverse cultures and ancestries, but new research from the University of British Columbia has found people tend to pick and choose which races they identify with based on preconceived biases.

Ancestry testing is part of a rapidly growing, billion-dollar industry that claims to use DNA to tell people about the parts of the world from which their ancestors originated. In research published this week in the *American Journal of Sociology*, sociologists found that, rather than embrace all their [test](#) results, people who use genetic ancestry tests tend to selectively identify with ethnicities they view as positive while disregarding others.

"People often buy these genetic ancestry tests because they're looking for a sense of belonging or to confirm a story that's been passed down in their family," said Wendy Roth, associate professor in the department of sociology and the study's lead author. "But if the test results don't support what they want to believe, we found that people will often ignore the results or criticize them. We tend to cherry-pick the parts of our family story that we like most and want to emphasize."

For the study, researchers interviewed 100 American genetic ancestry test users who said they identified before the test as white, black, Hispanic/Latino, Asian, or Native American. Study participants were asked questions about their ethnic and racial identities over their lifetime. The participants were interviewed a second time, 18 months after genetic testing, to examine how they made sense of test results and how their identities had changed over time.

One study participant, "Eduardo," identified as a white Mexican-American before the test, but his genetic ancestry test results reported Native American, Celtic and Jewish ancestries. The researchers found that Eduardo disregarded his

Celtic ancestry but embraced his Jewish [identity](#), explaining: "I always looked up to the Jewish people... I thought of them as higher than me." Another participant, "Shannon," was adopted and always believed she had Native American lineage through her birth parents. When her [test results](#) revealed no Native American ancestry, she decided the test was incorrect and continued to identify as Native American.

White respondents were more likely to embrace new racial identities, as long as they felt others would still accept them, the researchers found.

"White identity is something that lots of people around them have, so it doesn't feel special," said Roth. "Part of it may be guilt about being white and feeling somewhat privileged. They want something that makes them feel unique, whereas for many people of colour, they've known all along that they have some racial mixture in their ancestry, and it's not as surprising."

Roth noted there are at least 74 companies that have sold [genetic ancestry](#) tests, but she warned that their tests should be taken with a grain of salt.

"There are many ways in which genetic tests that tell you the percentages of your [ancestry](#) are misleading and they're often misunderstood," said Roth. "Some tests can be useful for helping people track down long-lost relatives who are genetic matches, if they're lucky. But [people](#) who use these tests to determine their race or inform their sense of identity should be aware that this isn't the right way to think about it."

**More information:** Wendy D. Roth et al, Genetic Options: The Impact of Genetic Ancestry Testing on Consumers' Racial and Ethnic Identities, *American Journal of Sociology* (2018). [DOI: 10.1086/697487](https://doi.org/10.1086/697487)

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