

For those with limited genetic knowledge, at-home ancestry tests fuel misconceptions that genes dictate race

University of Pennsylvania sociologist Wendy Roth [wondered] whether these do-it-yourself tests also fueled the idea that genes dictate race.

After spending two years compiling data from more than 800 people, she found her answer: It depends.

[According to Roth's new study](#), those with low genetic literacy had more entrenched views of racial essentialism, or the idea that different races have fixed attributes. However, those with more genetic knowledge were less likely to hold essentialist views of race. In short, reading simple color-coded charts is easy; properly interpreting results is harder.

"People who take ancestry tests without that knowledge take the results at face value and perhaps misinterpret them, attributing more meaning to them than the tests actually have," Roth said in a telephone interview with The Times of Israel.

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The idea of racial essentialism, that genes dictate race, which in turn dictates a person's intelligence, physical attributes, and skill sets, has an insidious history. It fueled the Holocaust, South African apartheid, the Rwandan genocide, and Jim Crow laws.

New York University sociologist Dr. Ann Morning, who is familiar with Roth's work in this field, agreed the danger with these tests is that a lot of people interpret the findings as objective truth.

"I think these tests are the latest iteration of using science to back up our pre-existing ideas about race," Morning said.

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