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Guapa, it's your genetic ancestry I love

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Next time you catch a stranger's eye and feel a surge of attraction, here's something to ponder: is your ardour based partly on shared genetic ancestry? That's the intriguing question raised by a new study of Latino populations.

A team led by [Neil Risch](#) and [Esteban González Burchard](#) of the University of California, San Francisco, took DNA samples from married couples in Mexican and Puerto Rican populations, examining around 100 genetic markers from across the genome. From these markers, the researchers were able to discern the proportions of Native American, European and African ancestry for each person.

They found that within Mexican populations, people tended to pick partners with similar proportions of Native American and European ancestry, while in Puerto Rican populations couples had paired up based on their shared balance of European and African ancestry.

The team also noted each person's socioeconomic profile to see if this explained their choice of partner as convincingly as ancestry did. But these factors couldn't explain the pairings.

Sizing up

What's more, the same patterns emerged for Mexicans living in the San Francisco Bay Area as for Mexicans in Mexico, and for Puerto Ricans in both Puerto Rico and New York. So presumably people had cued into subtle variations in appearance, behaviour and even odour.

"I think it's fascinating," says Burchard. "People are sizing up their partners, maybe in subconscious ways."

The tendency to seek genetically similar mates could confuse researchers searching for genes that affect our health in populations with mixed ancestry, warns Risch. This is because genetic markers that seem to be inherited along with a particular disease may simply be more common in a sub-group of the population in which that disease is more prevalent.

It's not clear whether similar trends would be seen in less genetically varied populations, such as northern Europeans. But mate choice on the basis of ancestry may be a powerful factor for African Americans, who have a [rich genetic heritage](#) including variable amounts of European ancestry.

Classic method

Companies are already offering [DNA tests to help people choose their partners](#), based on the idea that we prefer people with immune system genes that differ from our own.

So can we expect DNA dating services to start trying to match people based on shared ancestry? Tamara Brown, who runs [GenePartner](#), based in Zurich, Switzerland, says that her company has no immediate plans to introduce ancestry-based matching – although it is a possibility for the future.

The researchers behind the new study are sceptical of DNA-based dating, however. "I prefer the classic method of just running into people while having a drink," says Marc Via, another member of the team.

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