

More than one in ten Canadians want to be in an open relationship

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Nichole Fairbrother, the study's lead author and assistant professor in the University of British Columbia's department of psychiatry. Credit: Nichole Fairbrother

A sizeable number of Canadian adults are either in or would like to be in an open relationship, suggests new research from the University of British Columbia.

That's one of the key findings of a new study published today in the *Journal of Sex Research*. The study is the first outside of the United States to assess the prevalence of open relationships using a representative sample.

Researchers analyzing data from a nationally representative survey of about 2,000 Canadian adults found that four per cent of those in relationships reported being in an open [relationship](#), while 20 per cent reported having been in an open relationship in the past. Meanwhile, more than one in ten (12 per cent) reported that open relationships were their "ideal relationship type."

"Our findings suggest that more people would like to be in an open relationship than already are, possibly because of the stigma associated with these types of relationships and the difficulty of broaching this subject with partners," said Nichole Fairbrother, the study's lead author and assistant professor in the UBC department of psychiatry. "Even with the stigma, however, it still appears that a sizeable number of Canadian adults are either in or would like to be in an open relationship."

Open relationships are those in which individuals agree to participate in sexual, emotional and romantic interactions with more than one partner. Examples include polyamory (engaging in multiple [romantic relationships](#)) and swinging (engaging in multiple [sexual relationships](#) outside of a relationship, alone or together, with minimal or no emotional or [romantic involvement](#)).

For the study, the researchers had market research firm Ipsos administer an online questionnaire to a [representative sample](#) of about 2,000 Canadians between the ages of 18 and 94. Nearly equal numbers of men and women responded to the survey. Fifty-five per cent of respondents were married or living with a romantic partner, while 31 per cent were single, 10 per cent were separated or divorced and nearly four per cent

were widowed.

Among the key findings, the researchers found that people engaging in and preferring open relationships tended to be slightly younger. Men were also more likely to have reported being in an open relationship and to identify open as their ideal relationship type. Relationship satisfaction didn't differ significantly between individuals in monogamous and open relationships. Rather, having a match between one's actual and preferred relationship type was associated with greater relationship satisfaction, the researchers found.

As for why greater numbers of men tend to prefer open to monogamous relationships, the researchers suggest it could be partially due to the greater prevalence of open relationships among same-sex male couples. They say more research is needed to fully understand the factors behind men preferring open relationships more than women.

Fairbrother said the findings have clinical implications for mental health providers, especially for those who provide couples therapy.

"Given that a significant minority of respondents say they prefer open relationships, it may be useful for [mental health providers](#) to consider ways of making it easier for couples to talk about their relationship preferences in therapy," she said.

The researchers have also collected survey answers from hundreds of UBC and Ryerson University students to analyze the characteristics of people who prefer different relationship configurations. They are analyzing this data now.

The study was co-authored by Trevor Hart, a psychology professor and director of the HIV prevention lab at Ryerson University, and Malcolm Fairbrother, a sociologist at Umeå University in Sweden. It was

supported by a Ryerson University faculty of arts new initiatives award, awarded to Hart.

More information: Nichole Fairbrother et al, Open Relationship Prevalence, Characteristics, and Correlates in a Nationally Representative Sample of Canadian Adults, *The Journal of Sex Research* (2019). [DOI: 10.1080/00224499.2019.1580667](https://doi.org/10.1080/00224499.2019.1580667)

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