

Attachment and aged care: a systematic review of current research

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Attachment theory is an important framework from which to examine familial aged care. Despite this, the role of attachment in later-life caregiving remains unclear. The current study presents a systematic review of papers within the last five years on attachment and various outcomes related to familial aged care. For the caregiver, attachment anxiety was associated with poorer mental health, and attachment insecurity with a more controlling manner of caregiving. The few studies conducted with care recipients found that attachment insecurity was associated with greater self-appraisals of dementia symptoms and a lower sense of security. Research continues to suffer from the use of inadequate assessments of individual differences into adult attachment.

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Caring for an ageing family member (usually a parent or spouse) can be both difficult and taxing [1,2]. This is not only due to the demands of the caregiving role, but also because a carer must come to terms with the ailing health and potential passing of a significant other that has been an important source of love, comfort, and security [3,4^{*}]. We therefore contend that attachment theory [5] is an important framework for understanding various aspects of familial aged care, including behaviours and processes related to caregiving and care receiving, as well as the psychological and physical wellbeing of both carers and care recipients.

Research on attachment and families in later life goes as far back as the mid-1970s [6], and yet, our understanding of attachment processes during the later stages of family life and within the context of aged care is somewhat limited.

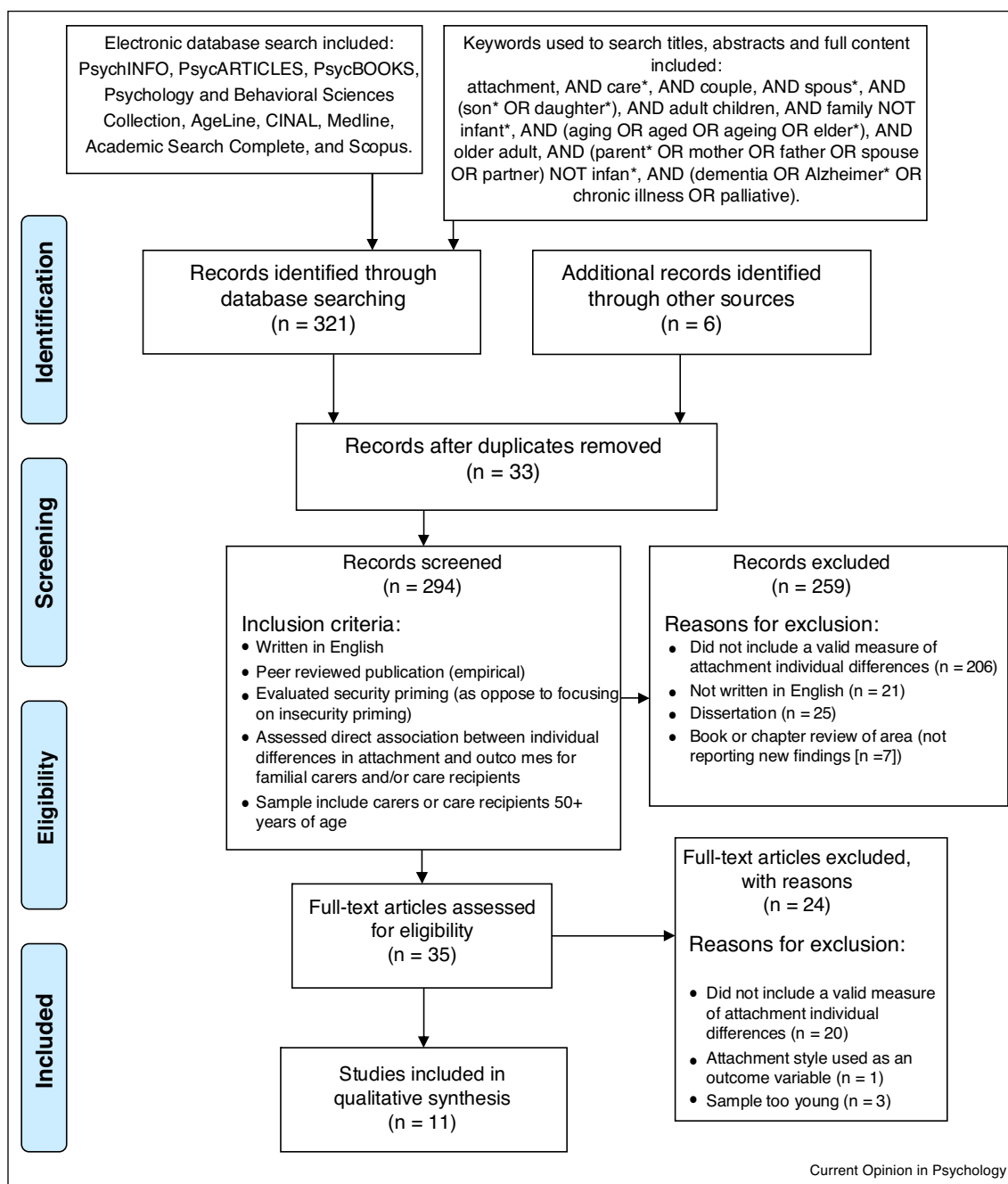
One of the major reasons for this limited understanding relates to the inherent difficulties in how best to operationalize and measure adult familial analogues of concepts central to attachment theory (such as the strength of attachment bonds, attachment states of mind, and attachment styles) previously studied in infant-parent and romantic attachment bonds. Many studies claiming to have investigated attachment within the context of caregiving in later life have often conflated attachment with related but distinct concepts, such as affection, intergenerational solidarity, and relationship closeness [7,8], instead of clearly articulating assessments of attachment styles and attachment states of mind. It is only in the last decade that researchers studying ageing families have made more concerted efforts to directly use or adapt attachment measures which not only reflect mainstream developmental and social psychology approaches to the study of individual differences in attachment, but capture many of Bowlby's central ideas regarding aspects of attachment cognitions and behaviours [4^{*}]. To this end, our understanding of attachment in later life familial bonds and aged care is muddled by these conceptual and measurement issues.

Given these issues, we undertook a systematic review of the aged care literature using inclusion criteria that reflect assessments of adult attachment that are widely accepted to reflect concepts akin with individual differences in attachment, whether they be differences in: adult attachment styles (i.e. people's chronic cognitions and behaviours regarding close relationships [9,10], attachment states of mind (i.e. coherence of narrative regarding early attachment experiences, C. George *et al.*, unpublished), or attachment strength (i.e. the closeness of the attachment bond [11]). In doing so, we aimed to better understand the associations between individual differences in adult attachment and processes related to caregiving and care receiving, as well as the physical and mental health outcomes for both carers and care recipients. Given that the focus of COIP is to review research published in the last few years, we limited our qualitative synthesis to recently published papers.

Method

The systematic review was conducted in line with the Preferred Reporting Items for Systematic Reviews and Meta-Analyses (PRISMA; see Figure 1). Electronic databases were used to conduct literature searches with a variety of keywords to identify articles (see Figure 1). Further articles were identified through scanning the reference lists of publications recovered through the

Figure 1



A flow diagram detailing the application of PRISMA to the qualitative synthesis of published studies into attachment and familial aged care conducted between January 2013 and January 2018.

databases to ensure relevant studies were not missed. We limited the search to articles published between January 2013 and January 2018. Each study was assessed against a set of inclusion and exclusion criteria. Excluded studies were tabulated against reasons for exclusion (see Figure 1). A full-text review was conducted for eligible studies, with the finalised set of published studies subjected to qualitative synthesis.

Results

Three hundred and twenty-seven published studies were identified as part of the systematic search, with a final set of 11 studies included for qualitative synthesis (details for each study are presented in Tables 1 and 2). The features and characteristics (research design, samples, and attachment measures and outcome variables used) of each study along with sample characteristics are presented across

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