The in/appropriate application of attachment theory by mental health professionals in custody cases: A systematic review of literature

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Permission to Submit Mini-Dissertation (Article Format) for Examination Purposes

I, Dr R Spies the supervisor of this Magister of Arts in Research Psychology study by Tenisha Botha, hereby declare that the mini-dissertation titled *"The in/appropriate application of attachment theory by mental health professionals in custody cases: A systematic review of literature"*, reflects the entire research endeavour as was planned and executed. I hereby grant permission for her to submit the mini-dissertation (article format) for examination purposes and I confirm that the mini-dissertation submitted is in fulfilment of the requirements for the degree, Magister of Arts in Research Psychology at the Potchefstroom Campus of the North-West University. Upon completion of the mini-dissertation, an article to be finalised will be sent to *The Journal of Family Trauma, Child Custody, & Child Development* (this journal offers access to research in the fields of: *family psychology, child development, attachment, child custody, trauma, interpersonal violence and abuse, assessment, parenting, divorce, and other significant areas*).

Dr R. (Ruan) Spies
Supervisor

Declaration by Researcher

I, the researcher of this study, hereby declare that this research study, entitled *"The in/appropriate application of attachment theory by mental health professionals in custody cases: A systematic review of literature"*, is my own work. I further declare that all sources that I have used have been referenced and acknowledged in the text and reference list.

I declare that this mini-dissertation was language edited by a qualified language editor. I also declare that the content of this mini-dissertation was submitted to the Turn-it-in software and a satisfactory report (Appendix 7) was received with regards to plagiarism.

Tenisha Botha

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Dedication

I would like to dedicate my dissertation to my grandfather, “Oupa” Ben Botha, who passed away in 2019. Without your never-ending support and encouragement both of my studies and my personal life I would not have been where I am today. Thank you for believing in me and always wishing me the best. I am forever grateful for every piece of wisdom shared with me. Thank you, this is for you!

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Summary

In the context of custody cases, attachment theory is often applied. This qualitative systematic review explores the way attachment theory inappropriately or appropriately applied by mental health professionals in this situation. To contribute to the current body of literature on attachment theory and custody cases, this systematic review addresses the following review question: *"How is attachment theory inappropriately or appropriately applied by mental health professionals in custody cases as reported in literature?".*

To be able to answer this question, a methodologically sound qualitative systematic review was conducted using the *10 Key STEPS* and *sub-steps in the systematic review process* as the research design. Inclusion and exclusion criteria (eligibility criteria) were set to identify all available and relevant primary studies on attachment theory and custody cases, nationally and internationally, from 1986 to 2020. Keywords were identified and then used to search EBSCO Discovery Services (EDS), according to international guidelines for review studies. The following databases were selected: Academic Search Complete, APA PsycArticles, APA PsycInfo, Medline, Science Direct, Scopus, and SoccINDEX with Full Text. To complement and supplement this search activity, Google Scholar was searched using the same keywords. The search activities initially identified a total of 135 potential studies. After applying the inclusion criteria, it was found that only 10 studies met all the inclusion criteria.

These findings or results; and discussion or conclusion sections of the 10 included studies were analysed by means of thematic analysis. Two themes emerged: *multimethod assessments* and *understanding attachment theory: scientific meaning*. The findings of this systematic review study suggest that most mental health professionals are aware of the ways in which attachment theory can be inappropriately applied in custody cases. As a result, these mental health professionals applied attachment theory appropriately in custody cases. In the

light of the findings of this research study, the recommendation is that mental health professionals base custody decisions on the *best interests principle* together with the *three attachment theory principles relevant to court practice*. This should ensure that they apply attachment theory appropriately in custody cases.

Further research should be conducted on the definition of the *best interests principle*, together with the *three attachment theory principles relevant to court practice*, to develop context specific models to determine best practice.

Keywords: Attachment; attachment theory; custody cases; mental health professionals

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Chapter 1

Introduction and Rationale

Introduction

Chapter 1 serves as an introduction to the key concepts in this systematic review study. First, the terms *attachment*, *attachment theory*, *mental health professionals*, and *custody cases* are defined and discussed, as they are used in this systematic review study. Thereafter, the study is contextualised and the problem statement, the aim of the study, and the methodology employed are presented. The aim of this study was to conduct a systematic review in order to explore how mental health professionals inappropriately or appropriately apply attachment theory in custody cases. This systematic review study was situated in an international context as there is little South African literature on the topic. The scholarly literature revealed three major issues related to the application of attachment theory (Byrne et al., 2005). All of these are situated in child custody cases. The first concerns the family evaluations that mental health professionals undertake when they are asked to recommend (report) custody and/or visitation or parenting plans to the court that are in the best interests of the child/ren (De Wit, 2014). These recommendations significantly influence the court's decisions (Davis et al., 2010). To be in a position to make the best recommendations possible, applying the *best interests principle* together with the *three attachment principles relevant to court practice*, mental health professionals have to have a sound understanding of attachment theory. However, both mental health and legal professionals frequently lack this (Ludolph & Dale, 2012). Mental health professionals often lack sufficient knowledge of attachment or may not have the time to expand their knowledge regarding current research on attachment (Ludolph & Dale, 2012). This means that some mental health professionals do not apply systematic methods or well-researched models when assessing the parent-child attachment relationships (Lee et al., 2011). A related

problem is that many mental health professionals have not received training in attachment theory and apply the underlying concepts inappropriately (Calloway & Erard, 2009; Ludolph & Dale, 2012). A second problem is that mental health professionals fail to recognise that both parents should be deemed equally important in child rearing (Lowenstein, 2010; Sirvanli-Ozen, 2005) because an attachment is first formed between the child and both parents (primary caregivers) and later with other people (Bowlby, 1969; Crowell et al., 2009; Finzi et al., 2000; Lowenstein, 2010). Thirdly, children being separated or alienated from a parent causes great distress to the child (Lowenstein, 2010; Main et al., 2011).

Keywords and Definitions

Attachment

The concept *attachment* has several connotations to it and is often wrongly, interchangeably used with relationships, bonding or affection (Mooney, 2010). To establish a clear understanding of what *attachment* refers to in the context of attachment theory, the views of its pioneers, John Bowlby (1982) and Mary Ainsworth (1967), including their views of attachment as an infant-caregiver connection promoting protection and safety regulation are discussed. Within this context, attachment is understood as a strong and lasting emotional connection that an infant develops with the primary caregiver, a connection that is biologically embedded in the task of protection from endangerment (Bowlby, 1982). Similarly, Ainsworth (1967) sees attachment as an affectionate tie that an individual or animal develops with a particular other that connects them in space for an appreciable time.

Attachment Theory

Attachment has been defined as a mutual and lasting emotional connection between an infant and mother (caregiver), with both individuals adding equally to this connection (Ainsworth, 1985). As every individual human is biologically predisposed to seek proximity to a caregiver to address his or her survival needs, he or she develops an attachment

relationship (Ainsworth, 1985). The security that is sought and the security that is provided entails "... protection, soothing, comfort and help" (Bretherton, 1985, p. 5).

Bowlby (1960) believed that the mother-child attachment is crucial for later development and has significant outcomes for the child's personality functioning. Ainsworth, who built on Bowlby's work in the1960s and 1970s, was especially interested in the quality of the tie/connection between mother and child. Crucial to the development of the parent-infant attachment relationship is attentive behaviour on the part of the attachment figure (Main et al., 2011). As Ainsworth and Wittig (1969) and Bowlby (1969) explain, infants become securely attached to caregivers who are sensitive and responsive in their social interactions and who remain consistent caregivers for a period of time. Therefore, attentive behaviour on the part of the attachment figure refers to the attachment figure's appropriate, timely and consistent response to both the emotional and physical needs of the child/ren concerned (Ainsworth, 1985). Current research suggests that although maternal sensitivity (responsiveness) plays a role in attachment relationships (attachment security), it remains a weak predictor of security: much more research on environmental determinants of attachment is necessary before a firmer conclusion can be drawn (Fearson & Roisman, 2017).

The famous "strange situation procedure" (p. 32) employed by Ainsworth et al. (2015) to measure the quality of children's attachment relationships to their primary caregivers made it possible for them to identify qualitative and categorical distinctions in the types of *secure* and *insecure attachment relationships* between children and their caregivers. Children with *secure attachment relationships* view their mother as a secure base from which they can be separated to explore their environments on their own (Ainsworth, 1985). Although they object to being separated from their mother, as soon as their mother returns, they promptly quiet down and accept comfort from her and continue their exploration of their environment (Ainsworth, 1985). Bowlby (1980) explains that when a secure attachment relationship exists

between an infant and primary caregiver the infant is prone to have a representational model of the attachment figure/s "... as being available, responsive, and helpful" (p. 242).

Ainsworth et al. (2015) also identified two categories of insecure attachment in children, namely, *anxious-ambivalent attachment* and *anxious-avoidant attachment*. According to Ainsworth and Bell (1970) parent-child dyads with *anxious-ambivalent attachment relationships* display an ambivalent behavioural style towards the attachment figure. The usual response of children with anxious-ambivalent attachment relationships to separation is distress upon separation. During reunion their reaction to the caregiver's attempts to comfort them may be ambivalent (Ainsworth et al., 2015). Ainsworth initially hypothesised that this ambivalent type of behaviour could be a result of the inconsistency of the attachment figure's response to the needs of the child/ren; the attachment figure is responsive to the needs of the child/ren and at times the attachment figure neglects the needs of the child/ren (Ainsworth, 1970).

Behrens et al. (2007) argue that dyads with *avoidant attachment relationships* appear both physically and emotionally independent of the attachment figure. Children who exhibit behaviours associated with avoidant attachment patterns usually respond to separation from the mother with little or no sign of distress, as well as little response to the mother's return, and often appear as detached and uncaring (Ainsworth et al., 2015). This kind of attachment figure displays little response to the child when it is distressed and discourages the child from crying and urges independence and exploration. Ainsworth believed that the attachment figure, in such cases, is likely to be insensitive to and indifferent to the child's needs (Ainsworth, 1979).

Main and Solomon (1986) identified a third category of insecure attachment, known as *disorganised-disoriented attachment*. Dyads with *disorganised-disoriented attachment relationships* who are separated from their primary caregiver tend to respond with recurring,

contradictory or misdirected behaviours, and they evidently do not have a coherent behavioural strategy to cope with the stress of separation (Ainsworth et al., 2015). In addition, these children seem disoriented, confused or bewildered (Rathus, 2014). Disorganised attachment can be associated with a caregiver who displays frightening or frightened behaviour; behaviour that is intrusive or destructive and distancing from the child/ren; role and boundary confusion; emotional communication; and child mistreatment (Lowenstein, 2010).

Mental Health Professionals

In the context of child custody or custody access evaluation processes there are several mental health professionals involved in determining custody decisions, such as psychologists, psychiatrists, counsellors, and social workers (Grohol, 2019; Lowenstein, 2010; Main, et al., 2011).

Child custody or custody access evaluation processes require mental health professionals, typically clinical psychologists and social workers, to evaluate the family and make recommendations (provide reports) to the court for custody and/or visitation or parenting plans that are in the best interest of the child/ren (De Wit, 2014). The reports written by these professionals have a considerable impact on the court's decisions on custody and visitation (Davis et al., 2010). The judge evaluates and considers the psychological evaluation/assessment carefully before making his or her custody decision (Byrne et al., 2005).

Custody Cases

The Legal Dictionary (2015:1) defines custody as "[t]he protective care of something, or someone". Yambu (2017:1) provides a more nuanced definition of custody as "[t]he legal right to take care of a child and have direct responsibility over the child", which emphasises that custody entails having the legal right (responsibility) to take care of the child/ren. In

South Africa, according to the *Children's Act* 38 of 2005, a child is "... a person under the age of 18 years". In a divorce, custody battles frequently arise that require a court to determine which parent should have physical and/or legal power and accountability of a child younger than eighteen years of age (USLegal, 2019a). In the context of this study, it is important to consider 'divorce' from both a *legal* perspective and a *psychological* perspective to place the study in context. Firstly, from the *perspective of the law,* divorce can be defined as "... the legal termination of a marriage by a court in a legal proceeding, requiring a petition or complaint for divorce..." (USLegal, 2019b, p. 1) or as "... a legal separation of a couple" (Western Cape Government, 2019, p. 1). From the definitions provided, it is evident that divorce from a legal perspective entails the *legal* cessation or parting of a marriage or couple. Secondly, from a *psychological perspective,* divorce can be explained as "... a process perspective that addresses stress, risk and resilience" (Greene et al., 2012, p. 102). Consequently, divorce is regarded as a series of potentially stressful adjustments and disturbances in the physical and social surroundings of both adults and children and not merely a single negative incident (Amato, 2010; Hetherington, 2006).

Custody during divorce cases includes legal custody, physical custody, sole custody and joint custody (Champlin et al., 2015; Sherer Law Offices, 2019; USLegal, 2019a). *Legal custody* refers to one or both parents who are legally responsible for making decisions about how their child/ren are brought up (Champlin et al., 2015; Sherer Law Offices, 2019; USLegal, 2019a). This entails fundamental issues concerning their child/ren's welfare which includes medical care, education, religion and extra-curricular activities (Champlin et al., 2015; Sherer Law Offices, 2019; USLegal, 2019a). *Physical custody,* on the other hand, refers to where the child/ren actually live, or with which parent the child/ren reside (Champlin et al., 2015; Sherer Law Offices, 2019; USLegal, 2019a).

Sole custody and *joint custody* may be employed to explain both physical and legal custody of children (Champlin et al., 2015). In the case where one parent is granted sole custody, physical and legal, that parent is provided exclusive rights to look after the child/ren in particular aspects (Champlin et al., 2015). Likewise, Yambu (2017) explains that sole custody means having exclusive physical and legal custody rights over the child/ren. This further indicates that the custodial parent will be solely responsible for the rearing and care of the child/ren (Yambu, 2017). *Joint legal* custody is where both parents are obligated to confer with each other and make key decisions together (Champlin et al., 2015). *Joint physical* custody means the child/ren to move frequently between houses as both parents providing a physical residence for the child/ren (Byrne et al., 2005). More clearly put, *joint legal* custody implies that both parents will be responsible for the upbringing of the child/ren and *joint physical* custody indicates that both parents have the right to have their child/ren live with them (Yambu, 2017). It is essential to be aware that *sole custody* does not mean that when a parent has been declared as an unfit parent that this parent may not see the child/ren nor that the unfit parent may not have access and visitation rights: in most custody cases, access and visitation rights are granted, albeit under strict supervision (Yambu, 2017).

Contextualisation

Main et al. (2011) posit that the main emphasis of attachment theory and research is on identifying the early conditions which affect a developing child's sense of security with his/her parents. According to Byrne et al. (2005), the term attachment is regularly applied within the context of custody cases and is explicitly mentioned in several guidelines. Within the context of custody cases numerous specific components of attachment theory are especially important. Biologically, the role of an attachment relationship is to allow attachment relationships that are appropriate to all stages of life to develop and be maintained, which is essential for survival (Bowlby, 1969, 1982). Hence, children gain protection against

injury as well as a sense of emotional security (a secure base) from their attachment relationships (Ainsworth, 1967; Bowlby, 1982).

The need for attachment assessments is becoming increasingly important especially in high-conflict, controversial divorces (Marvin & Schutz, 2009). Attachment assessments that are conducted and analysed by well-trained professionals, using validated instruments, are extremely valuable mechanisms for providing clear-cut, empirically-based substantiation of the vulnerabilities, risks, and barriers in the attachment relationship (George et al., 2011). Moreover, along with scientifically-based proof concerning the child and parents' competence to cope with difficulties related to the threat of parental estrangement (divorce) and conflict, a comprehensive assessment of attachment relationships offers insight into the current parent-child attachment relationship at the time of evaluation (George et al., 2011). Comprehensive attachment assessments also make it possible to customise recommendations for specific families as there is no agreed, universal visitation schedule or custody decision suitable for all families (Marvin & Schutz, 2009; McIntosh et al., 2010; Solomon & George, 1999). When validated attachment assessments are used, they assist professionals to make predictions about the course of the parent-child attachment relationship, if the context were to remain the same, and to identify possible elements regarding attachment, caregiving, resilience, and risk that could either benefit or stunt the developmental growth of the child (George et al., 2011).

Lowenstein (2010) and Skelton et al. (2010) contend that a maternal preference rule has traditionally been employed in courts. This rule was based on the concept that the quality of the parent-child relationship (attachment relationship) was determined by gender, in that women have a mothering purpose (Skelton et al., 2010). However, Bowlby (1951) concluded that an attachment relationship does not have to be solely with a single person (and at that, the mother): it is important that children have secure relationships with various caregivers to enhance their normal social and emotional development. Similarly, Sirvanli-Ozen (2005)

emphasised the importance of child/ren having a positive and beneficial attachment relationship with both parents (mother and father) in order to do as well as possible regarding their development.

Research on attachment and attachment theory is constantly developing. The diversity and volume means that the findings are, at times, inconsistent and contradictory (Cassidy et al., 2014; Fearon et al., 2010; Ludolph & Dale, 2012). Research has found that children may have different types of attachment relationships with each parent due to the history of care they have received, as well as other variables that are not in the control of the parent or the child (Steele et al., 1996). Based on the fact that children can have different attachment relationships with each parent, Byrne et al. (2005) emphasise the importance of assessing the child's attachment to each of the parents to determine his or her attachment relationships. During custody cases, it is essential for the court to take account of the types of attachment relationships and the quality of the attachment relationships a child has with each parent, so it can make an informed custody decision (Talley, 2012). The quality of the attachment relationships is especially important, considering that children will form attachment relationships with both parents, irrespective of how well the parent can provide for their needs (Talley, 2012).

Furthermore, attachment theory suggests that the type of care (parenting) a child receives, specifically regarding sensitivity and responsiveness (environmental determinants), contributes towards the development of secure or insecure attachment relationship. It seems that a specific aspect of parenting (sensitivity) plays a fundamental role in determining the type of attachment relationship a child develops with the caregiver concerned (Ainsworth & Wittig, 1969; Bowlby, 1969; Fearon & Roisman, 2017; Talley, 2012). For example, if the caregiver is sensitive and responsive to social interaction with the infant or child, the possibility of a secure attachment relationship between any consistent caregiver and infant or

young child is likely to increase (Berger, 2001; Honig, 2002; Mash & Wolfe, 2016; Mooney, 2010). Based on their research, De Wolf and van IJzendoorn (1997) and Fearon and Roisman (2017) concluded that sensitivity and responsiveness are essential. However, they found that these are not exclusive prerequisites of attachment security. Although there seems to be a causal relationship between attachment and sensitivity, more research is needed on this topic and other aspects (Fearon & Roisman, 2017; Spies & Duschinsky, 2021). Other aspects of parenting that play an even more important role in determining the type of attachment relationship between a child and parent include socio-economic variables (parents' financial means, education, marital status, maternal age at childbirth, substance use, ethnicity); genetics; priorities; culture; health; and time available to spend with the child (Cyr et al., 2010; Solomon & George, 1996; Talley, 2012).

These attachment relationships and experiences are linked to future development by putting adaptive and maladaptive pathways in place (Bowlby, 1988). The word *pathways* is used to clearly indicate that attachment experiences, at any stage of development, do not shape subsequent development in a fixed, determinist way (Bowlby, 1988; Sroufe, 2005). For instance, while a child with a secure attachment relationship develops the resilience to cope with stress, a child with an insecure attachment relationship is placed at risk for subsequent developmental difficulties by means of a number of hypothesised mechanisms (Byrne et al., 2005). However, secure attachment relationships are not a safeguard against pathology, just as insecure attachment relationships are not synonymous with pathology (Byrne et al., 2005).

Another component of attachment theory which is relevant to custody determination is that early attachment relationships are internalised and carried forward to influence other essential relationships later in life (Bowlby, 1980). The mechanism mediating this process is called an *internal working model* (Bowlby, 1980). The term *internal working model* infers that people possess a representational system that allows them to envision interactions and

conversations with other individuals, based on their previous experiences with them (Bowlby, 1980). For example, a child who has a parent with a history of providing consistent and sensitive care will develop a model of self and others as lovable and loving/helpful (Bowlby, 1980). An internal working model of self and others as lovable and loving/helpful may help the child to manage challenges and stress, for example, by turning to others for support or guidance (Byrne et al., 2005). A child's attachment working models are based "on real-life experiences of day-to-day interactions with his parents" (Bowlby, 1988, p. 129). Thus, considerable changes in the quality of the attachment relationship may be anticipated, leading to changes in the security of the attachment relationship (Ammaniti et al., 2000; Bowlby, 1969, 1982, 1988).

The stability of attachment relationships in infancy, adolescence, and adulthood have been researched (Hamilton, 2000; Opie et al., 2020; Pinquart et al., 2013; Sroufe et al., 2005; Waters et al., 2000; Weinfeld et al., 2000). The findings of these studies have shown that various factors (risks) such as divorce, a family member passing away, single parenting, a parent abusing drugs, a life-threatening illness in the family, and other negative life incidents are all suggestive of alterations to secure attachment relationships, changing from secure to insecure attachment relationships (Hamilton, 2000; Pinquart et al., 2013; Waters et al., 2000; Weinfeld, et al., 2000). Other studies, however, have found factors such as more emotional openness, relationship satisfaction, growth of family and social sources, attachment specific interventions, and, to a lesser degree, negative life incidents such as maltreating parental behaviour and cumulative socio-economic risks may cause insecure attachment relationships to become secure attachment relationships (Cyr et al., 2010; Egeland & Farber, 1984; Opie et al., 2020; Stern et al., 2017; Vondra et al., 1999).

Problem Statement

Divorce has become a global concern as international research evidence reflects an ongoing increase in divorce rates (DePaulo, 2019; Wang & Schofer, 2018). Statistics show that the divorce rate has more than doubled between 1970 and 2008, from 2,6 divorces for every 1 000 married individuals to 5.5 (Wang & Schofer, 2018). In South Africa alone, thousands of children under the age of 18 years are affected by divorces annually (Statistics South Africa [Stats SA], 2016, 2017, 2018, 2019).

In 2016, there were 13,922 (55, 0%) of 25 326 divorce cases in which children under the age of 18 years were affected (Stats SA, 2016). Stats SA (2017) reported that in 2017, 14 121 (55, 6%) of the 25 390 divorce cases affected children under the age of 18 years. During 2018, 14 302 (56, 6%) of 25 284 the divorce cases affected children younger than 18 years (Stats SA, 2018) and, in 2019, 13 264 (55, 9%) of the 23 710 divorce cases were reported to have affected children younger than 18 years (Stats SA, 2019). The statistics provided by Stats SA (2016, 2017, 2018, 2019) make it evident that the majority of divorce cases since the year 2016 involved children younger than 18. It is important to note that divorce requires families to undergo an intricate series of marital transitions and family reorganisations that change roles and relationships and affect individual adjustment parents and children have to make (Gharaibeh, 2015; Greene et al., 2012).

These transitions within families as a result of divorce affect the children of divorcees children at various levels (Amato, 2000; Amato, 2001; Arkes, 2015; Bing et al., 2009; Feeney & Monin, 2008; Fladmo & Hertlein, 2017; Lowenstein, 2010; Uphold-Carrier & Utz, 2012). As Weiten (2014) comments, divorce is usually a very stressful incident that disrupts children's lives. Even though there is strong evidence that a majority of children from divorced families do not suffer lasting detrimental effects, it still seems that divorce places children at risk in a wide range of developmental domains (Arkes, 2015; Hashemi &

Homayuni, 2017; Weiten, 2014). Among these are: problems in relating to peers (problematic social relationships); a negative self-concept; academic or achievement issues (lower student achievement); lifestyle changes such as relocating; new family structures; changes in mood and behaviour (emotional and behavioural problems); detached attachment relationships between a parent and child and the likelihood of the process of alienation, either from a parent and/or sibling/(s) (which seems to cause immense distress for the child); possible depression; and adjustment problems (Amato, 2001; Amato & Keith, 1991; Arkes, 2015; Garber, 1991; Garber, 2004; Lowenstein, 2007; Lowenstein, 2010; Main et al., 2011; Theunissen et al., 2017). In addition, Main et al. (2011) explain that attachment's relevancy to child custody is consequently self-evident, given that divorce creates stresses and disruptions in attachment relationships (Lowenstein, 2010). Disruptions in attachment relationships (being separated from a parental figure) are expected to result in anxiety and fear. This highlights the need to be close or near to the attachment figure (seeking proximity), more specifically in the case of young children (Bowlby, 1963). Bowlby (1951, 1999) emphasised that an infant primarily seeks proximity with an identified attachment figure, and if this is not provided, the infant will experience substantial distress and apprehension. If a child is separated from a parent, the parent-child relationship could suffer in the short term, particularly with regard to the attachment quality (Byrne et al., 2005). Furthermore, being separated from one parent affects the child's attachment relationships with both the father and the mother (Bowlby, 1973, 1980). In cases where joint custody has been awarded, children may find it stressful to move between houses (Byrne et al., 2005).

Skelton et al. (2010) caution that "[i]n the event of a divorce the welfare of minor or dependent children is of significance" (p. 141). It has been accepted that a general staring point in common law is that making decisions about children in divorce proceedings/custody cases should be based on the dominant principle of the best interests of the child (Skelton et

al., 2010). According to Skelton et al. (2010), this principle should have a central role in all affairs regarding children, as is enshrined in the Constitution of the Republic of South Africa, 1996. The *Children's Act* 38 of 2005 has set out a comprehensive list of factors concerning the best interests of the child. Some of the factors which the court must consider as set out in the *Children's Act* 38 of 2005 are: the nature of the personal relationship between the child and the parents; the likely effect of separation from either parent and from a sibling or other person with whom the child has been living; the child's physical and emotional security and development.

Similarly, in the United States of America, the welfare of children during divorce proceedings/custody cases is of the utmost importance: custody evaluators are counselled by the American Psychological Association to protect the welfare of children (American Psychological Association [APA], 1994, 2010). According to the Child Welfare Information Gateway (2020), the best interests of the child principle is typically applied by the courts when deliberating and determining which parent is best suited to take care of the child, and what type of amenities, measures, and orders will best serve a child. Additional factors the courts consider that are related to the best interest principle are: the child's conditions; the parent or caregiver's conditions; and their ability to parent, with the safety and well-being of the child being of utmost importance (Child Welfare Information Gateway, 2020). In addition, other countries, including England, Switzerland, Spain, Finland, Australia, Canada, Germany, Austria, Estonia, Ireland, Sweden, Norway, and Denmark, have adopted the *best interests principle* (Skivenes & Sørsdal, 2018).

It is important for decision-makers (mental health experts) to see expert knowledge of attachment as related to the *best interests principle* (Skivenes & Pösö, 2017). The choices made during custody cases entail complex predictions about the outcomes of those choices and future consequences (Skivenes & Sørsdal, 2018). Hence, it is vital to be aware that

decisions made about children in divorce proceedings/custody cases should take account of the child's best interests (*best interests principle*). Although, the best interests principle is still viewed as playing an important role in protecting children's rights and viewpoints, as well as providing courts the freedom to determine what may be in the best interests of the child, there is a need for it to be more specifically defined to guide court practice (Belmont, 2017; Forslund et al., 2021; Nevondwe et al., 2016; Schneider, 1991; Skelton et al., 2010). In practice, it can be extremely challenging to determine the child's best interests as the courts have to consider the many factors that could affect the child's present stage of development, while also taking account of the child's plausible future development (Belmont, 2017; Nevondwe et al., 2016; Salter, 2012). For this reason, Forslund et al. (2021) recommend that professionals base their decisions on the following three attachment principles relevant to court practice:

Principle 1: The Child's Need for Familiar, Non-Abusive, and Non-Neglecting Caregivers

Forslund et al. (2021) posit that it is frequently constructive for children to have continuing contact with their caregivers, provided that it is safe and not against the welfare or explicit wishes of the children. These attachment relationships children develop and maintain with their familiar, non-abusive and non-neglecting caregivers may have a positive effect on their psychosocial development (Forslund et al., 2021).

Principle 2: The Value of Continuity of Good-Enough Care

Particular and familiar attachment relationships create expectations about the availability of a safe haven, which cannot just be transferred (Forslund et al., 2021). For children to have these expectations about the availability of a safe haven or provision, they need to experience sufficient continuous interaction (continuity of good-enough care) with their caregivers (Forslund et al., 2021). The value of continuity of good enough care should be

given considerable weight when it comes to decision making (Forslund et al., 2021). Thus, even if other caregivers are determined to be better suited than the child's current caregivers (as measured on some level), the value of continuity of good enough care should still inform the decision making (Forslund et al., 2021).

Principle 3: A Network of Attachment Relationships as an Asset for Children

It is very valuable for children to have other attachment relationships which do not disrupt existing attachment relationships unless they pose a threat to or obstruct access to the existing attachment relationships (Forslund et al., 2021). This principle is relevant to custody decisions as an attachment to both caregivers is desirable. Although developing and maintaining an attachment to both caregivers requires an adequate amount of time which each of them, it is not desirable when one or both of the caregivers endanger the child's well-being or when one or both parents decide not to be part of the child's life (Forslund et al., 2021). Other attachment relationships that should be considered part of a child's attachment network during the decision-making period include foster parents, adoptive parents, grandparents, stepparents, siblings and extended family members (Forslund et al., 2021). These networks of attachment can play an immense role in protecting children's well-being and safety (Forslund et al., 2021).

A further complication is that *attachment* is frequently misunderstood within both mental health and legal societies (Alexius & Hollander, 2014; Granqvist, 2016; Granqvist et al., 2017; Ludolph & Dale, 2012). Mental health professionals often lack sufficient knowledge of the field of attachment or may not have the time to keep up to date on current research on attachment (Boris & Renk, 2017; Granqvist et al., 2017; Kelly & Lamb, 2000; Ludolph & Dale, 2012). According to Lee et al. (2011), the assessments made of parent-child relationships that are used to inform child custody decisions during divorce settlements are unscientific and arbitrary. Many professionals/evaluators do not use systematic methods or

well-researched theoretical models to assess parent-child attachment relationships (Lee et al., 2011). The majority of mental health professionals or child custody evaluators regard the quality of the parent-child relationship, including the attachment relationship, as an essential element in custody evaluations. However, many of those mental health professionals have not received training in attachment and do not use the term appropriately (Boris & Renk, 2017; Calloway & Erard, 2009; Granqvist et al., 2017; Ludolph & Dale, 2012). For example, they misrepresent or distort the scientific meaning of the term (Calloway & Erard, 2009; Ludolph & Dale, 2012) when they refer to *attachment* as *parental warmth* or *parent-child bonding*. (Calloway & Erard, 2009; Ludolph & Dale, 2012). Frequently, descriptions such as *the child is attached to both parents*; *the child is bonded to both parents*; or the child seems to have a *primary attachment figure* are applied to the parent who provides most care to the child care found in custody evaluation reports (Lee et al., 2011; Ludolph & Dale, 2012). These descriptions are used loosely and are based on informal assessments of the parent-child relationship. There is also a concern that in many child custody evaluations, the procedures employed are unsuccessful in generating the data that are required to correctly apply attachment phenomena (Lee et al., 2011; Ludolph & Dale, 2012). Another way in which attachment theory is misunderstood and not appropriately applied specifically pertains to the two attachment classifications: *secure attachment* and *insecure attachment*. This is also true of three categories of insecure attachment: *anxious-ambivalent attachment*, *anxious-avoidant attachment*, and *disorganised-disoriented attachment* (Granqvist et al., 2017). In particular, *disorganised-disoriented attachment* has often been inappropriately applied when making child removal decisions (Granqvist et al., 2017). Disorganised-disoriented attachment is regularly viewed as a sound predictor of pathology; it cannot be altered through attachment specific interventions, and it automatically implies that a child is being maltreated (Granqvist et al., 2017). Similarly, White et al. (2019) posit that disorganised-disoriented attachment has

regularly been viewed as a sign of a child having an abusive parent and has also been associated with wide-ranging detrimental consequences for children. Due to attachment theory being a valuable contribution to child custody cases, disorganised-disoriented attachment should be given due attention (White et al., 2019).

Despite all the knowledge on attachment theory and custody cases, there is a need for more research on attachment theory and custody cases in order to reveal the various pathways that role players, including mental health professionals, can take to guarantee the health and well-being of all the family members involved (Feeney & Monin, 2008; Granqvist et al., 2017). It is evident that the application of attachment theory – inappropriately or appropriately – by mental health professionals in custody cases is an area that is in urgent need of research, specifically a systematic review. At present, no systematic review studies have been conducted and there is a dearth of literature available on the application of attachment theory. It is also apparent that there are quite a few inconsistencies within the literature when it comes to attachment theory and custody cases, especially mental health professionals' understanding and application of attachment theory and its underlying concepts.

Purpose Statement

The purpose of this systematic review study is to explore how attachment theory is inappropriately or appropriately applied by mental health professionals in custody cases as reported in literature nationally and internationally from 1986 to 2020.

Review Question

"How is attachment theory inappropriately or appropriately applied by mental health professionals in custody as reported in literature?"

Research Aim

The aim of this systematic review study is to explore how attachment theory is inappropriately or appropriately applied by mental health professionals in custody cases as

reported in literature, by critically reviewing primary studies on attachment theory and how it is applied by mental health professionals in custody cases.

Research Methodology

Research methodology is about the nature of research designs and methods. More specifically, it is about how research is structured and conducted (Sarantakos, 2013). In the research process, methodology occupies a central position because to arrive at sound conclusions research has to depend on sound methodological principles (Sarantakos, 2013; 6 & Bellamy, 2012). A systematic review is a type of literature review that is conducted through identifying as well as critically appraising all available and relevant evidence and synthesising the findings to best answer the review question (Dickson et al., 2017; Melnyk & Fineout-Overholt, 2005). Additionally, a systematic review aims to provide a fully exhaustive account of the available literature; it is also viewed as an endeavour to limit bias: it aims to provide an answer to a particular review question, rather than merely summarising all that there is to know about a specific topic or issue (Petticrew & Roberts, 2006). Schlosser (2007) adds that a systematic review is aimed at reducing bias in discovering, choosing, and coding aggregating individual studies. It is this kind of rigour in reducing bias that makes a review a systematic review. Systematic reviews (secondary studies), just like any other primary study, have to rigorously apply a methodology (Dickson et al., 2017; Gough et al., 2017; Petticrew & Roberts, 2006). Dickson et al. (2017) reiterate this statement, emphasising that systematic reviews have to adhere to explicit and rigorous methodology that requires specific steps to be followed to ensure the methodological soundness of the research.

More specifically, this systematic review study adopted a qualitative analysis/synthesis approach (method) involving certain steps to be followed (see Diagram 1). According to Bearman and Dawson (2013), qualitative analysis/synthesis entails the systematic interpretation of study findings. This includes the interpretation of the findings of qualitative

studies, and occasionally quantitative studies and mixed-method studies, via a sequence of expert judgements to represent the meaning of the collected research. Cherry et al. (2017) and Seers (2012) explain that the findings of qualitative research can result in new or greater understandings of sensitive problems that research has often addressed. It offers rich data related to the topic at hand, insights into better practice, and understandings that assist the scientific community to realise *what* works and *why* (Cherry et al., 2017; Seers, 2012; Seers, 2015). Qualitative analysis/synthesis was the most appropriate approach as it allowed me to explore *how* something works (*How is attachment theory inappropriately or appropriately applied by mental health professionals in custody cases?)* in more depth (Cherry et al., 2017). Thus, a qualitative systematic review was conducted to identify and synthesise all the relevant methodologically sound studies that addressed the topic at hand (Cullum et al., 2008). In this systematic review study, the topic addressed was *attachment theory and how it is inappropriately or appropriately applied by mental health professionals in custody cases as reported in literature.*

Research Design

There are various systematic review research designs (steps to follow) available in order to conduct methodologically sound research. For example, popular systematic review designs include the one by Khan et al. (2003), who provide five steps to conduct a systematic review, and the one by Petticrew and Roberts (2006) who introduce seven steps of a systematic review. However, in this study, the *ten Key STEPS in the systematic review process* designed by Cherry et al. (2017) were employed. The reason for doing so is that it is a more recent design that offers a way of reporting all the methods employed transparently. This means that readers can more easily assess the validity of the systematic review as rich description is given of every Key STEP and all of the sub-steps (see Diagram 1) (Dickson et al., 2017).

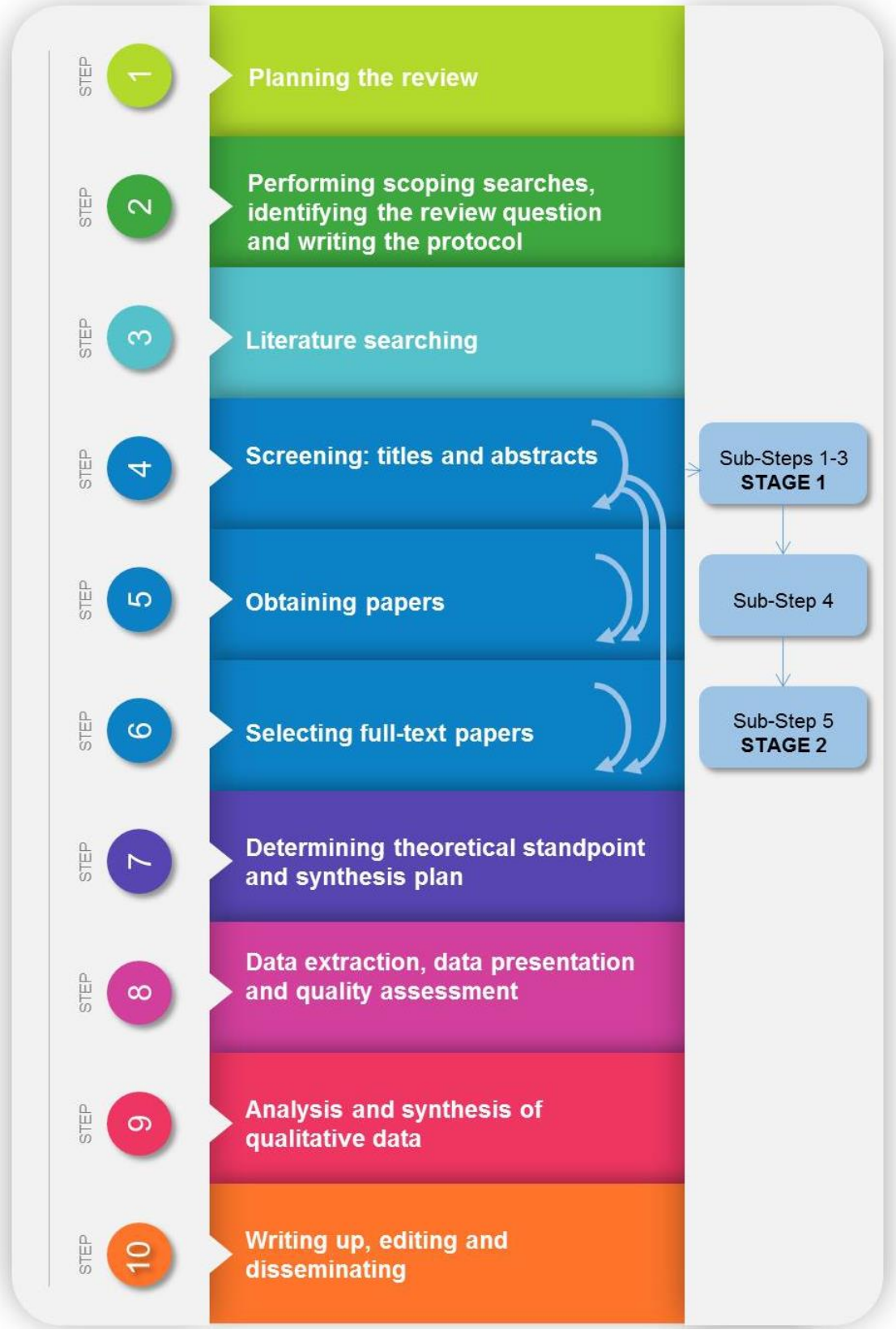

Diagram 1. Systematic review process: 10 Key STEPS (Cherry et al., 2017; Dickson et al., 2017; Dundar & Fleeman, 2017a)

In the section below each of the ten Key STEPS with the sub-steps (Cherry et al., 2017; Dickson et al., 2017; Dundar & Fleeman, 2017a) in the systematic review process is discussed in the context of this systematic review study.

STEP 1: Planning the review. This key step as illustrated in Figure 1 below focused on how the systematic review activities were co-ordinated and how the resources available were utilised to maximise the chances that the systematic review would proceed efficiently (Pilkington & Hounsome, 2017). It entailed planning the review by considering the most appropriate way to use time and resources available (Dickson et al., 2017).

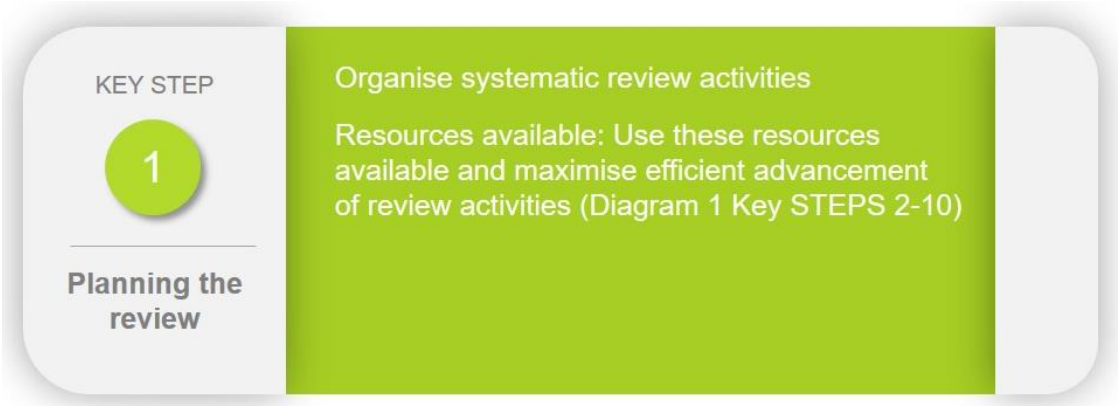

Figure 1. Key STEP 1: Planning the review. Adapted from Pilkington and Hounsome (2017, p. 22)

In order to manage time and co-ordinating activities during the planning of this systematic review, Key STEPS 2 to 10 in the systematic review process were used (see Diagram 1) as a checklist to ensure that the systematic review was efficiently planned (Pilkington & Hounsome, 2017).

STEP 2: Performing scoping searches, identifying the review question and writing the protocol. Cherry and Dickson (2017) state that the development and the refinement of a research question is the most crucial step in any research study. In a systematic review study, the task of developing and refining the review question firstly entails

that the review question be defined, whereafter the inclusion and exclusion criteria are identified.

However, Cherry and Dickson (2017) emphasise that the development of the review question and the inclusion and exclusion criteria should be seen as complementary tasks and not as distinct tasks. Adopting this approach made it possible for the researcher to assess the extent to which the review question defined the inclusion and exclusion criteria and also made it possible to use the set inclusion and exclusion criteria to identify and develop a review question that was not too general or too focused, or too vague or too definite. Employing the *ten key steps* (Key STEP 1 and 2) not only allowed for the use of a more flexible approach, but also assisted in developing an appropriately focused review question; *"How is attachment theory inappropriately or appropriately applied by mental health professionals in custody cases as reported in literature?"*.

STEP 2 of the ten key steps in the systematic review process (Figure 2) requires the researcher to conduct scoping searches to assist in identifying background literature to be able to define, as well as refine the review question and to set the inclusion and exclusion criteria (Dickson et al., 2017). This necessitated the writing of a protocol (research proposal) for Key STEP 2: sub-step 6. The research proposal served as a 'map' of the research journey that helped to set out the approach that would be employed to answer the review question (Dickson et al., 2017; Cherry & Dickson, 2017).

Six sub-steps are recommended by Cherry and Dickson (2017) in order to develop a clear and well-defined review question and ultimately to determine the inclusion and exclusion criteria.

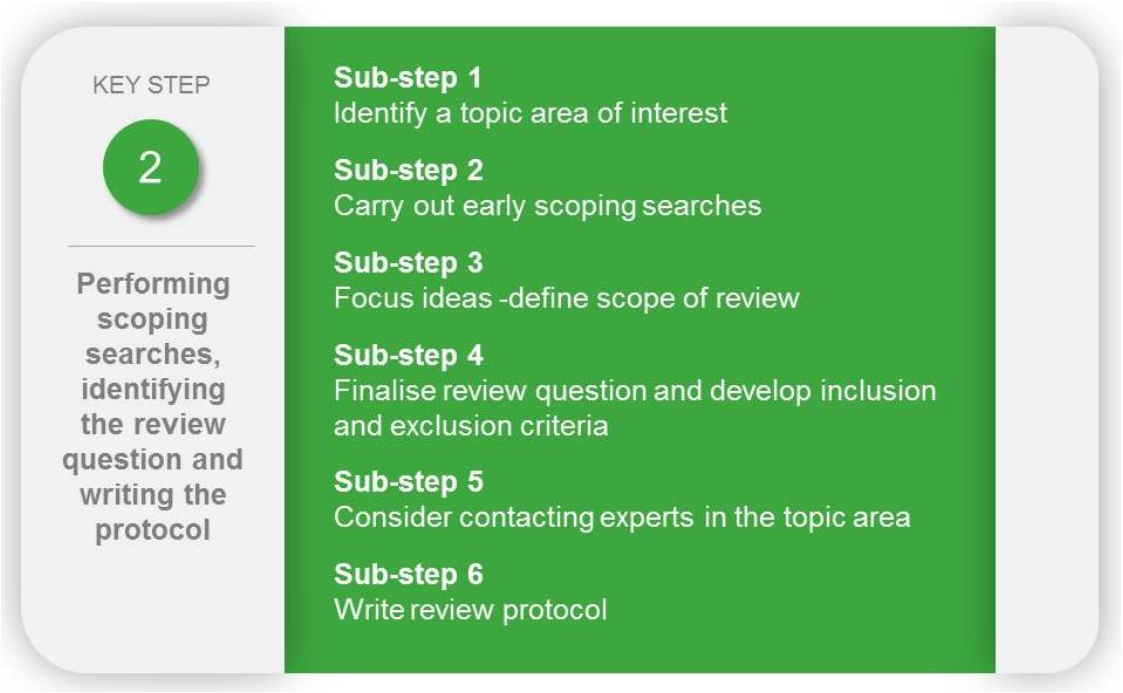

Figure 2. Key STEP 2: Performing scoping searches, identifying the review question and writing the protocol (adopted from Cherry & Dickson, 2017, p. 44)

Sub-step 1: Identify a topic area of interest. "What do you want to know, and about what topics?" (Siddaway et al., 2019, p. 756). Well-defined, clear-cut, and answerable review questions are essential for a transparent and comprehensive systematic review (Siddaway et al., 2019). It is important to determine a review question in a topic area that is of interest to the researcher. Although it was a time-consuming process, it assisted the researcher to remain strongly motivated and focused throughout the systematic review process (Cherry & Dickson, 2017). For the purpose of this study, the topic area of interest was 'Attachment theory'.

Sub-step 2: Carry out early scoping searches. Once the topic area of interest (attachment theory) had been identified, the next sub-step was to conduct preliminary literature searches. These searches, which should not be confused with the more comprehensive main search, were conducted to determine whether the topic area identified is suitable subject for a systematic review (Cherry & Dickson, 2017).

The aim of carrying out the scope searches was to provide an idea of the current state of knowledge relating to the topic area of choice (Cherry & Dickson, 2017). The North-West University's online library, *NWU Library LibGuides A-Z Databases (libguides.nwu.ac.za)* was used, to search the following search platforms/quick links (searchable collection of information): EBSCOhost, Google Scholar, and Scopus so that the following databases could be selected: Academic Search Complete; APA PsycArticles; APA PsycInfo; EBook Collection (EBSCOhost); E-Journals Medline; Open Dissertations; and SoccINDEX. The rationale for selecting these search platforms and databases was that they offered the most comprehensive collection of information and knowledge available on the current state of the topic of interest.

Sub-step 3: Focus ideas – Define scope of review. This sub-step was about focusing on the direction the systematic review should take. A short summary of the researcher's ideas were given to the supervisor, and these ideas were explored together (Cherry & Dickson, 2017). See Diagram 2 below that represents the scope of the developmental progression of the search phrases that was employed to develop the review question. The results of the earlier scoping searches (sub-step 2) were a useful way to summarise the ideas as they offered a way to highlight crucial issues that might not have been previously considered.

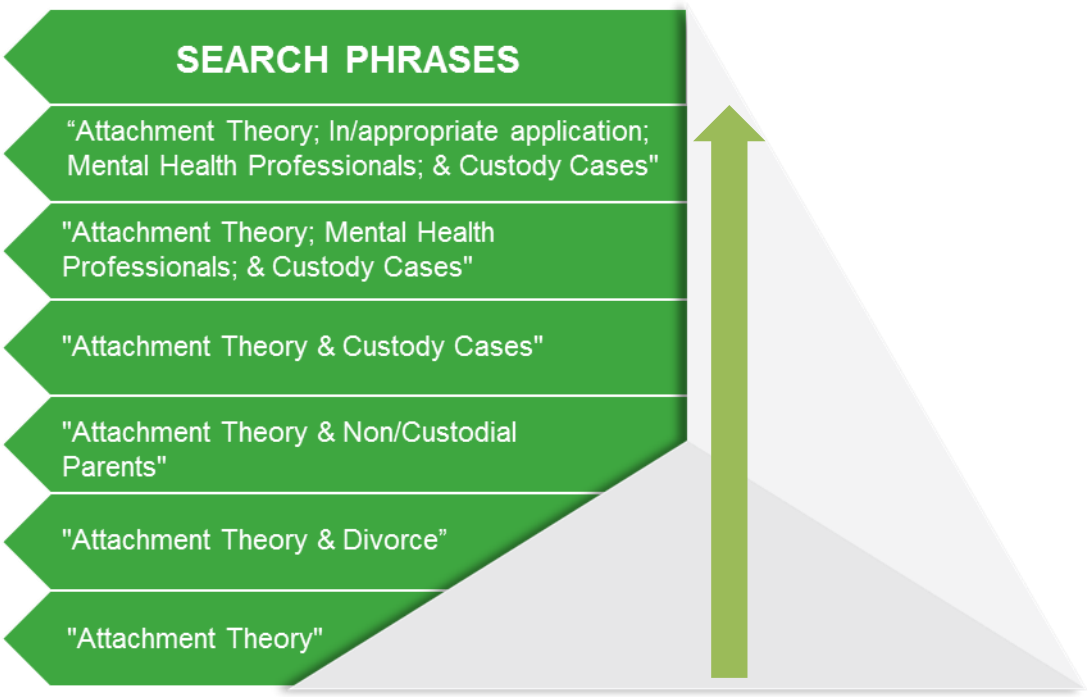

Diagram 2. Building of search phrases to develop a review question

Sub-step 4: Finalise review question and develop inclusion and exclusion criteria. Cherry and Dickson (2017) define a review question as “a formal statement of the intention of your systematic review” (p. 50). The review question develops from what you know to what you want to know or know more about (Cherry & Dickson, 2017). Exploring the review question is the aim of the systematic review and, therefore, the question should be clear and researchable, should focus on evidence that is accessible, and it should not be too general or too closely defined, too vague or too definite (Cherry & Dickson, 2017; Gough & Thomas, 2017).

It was very important for the researcher to develop a clearly articulated review question that encapsulated the aim of this systematic review and that would also assist in finding and including all of the studies that were relevant and excluding those that were not (Cherry & Dickson, 2017; Dickson et al., 2017). The researcher also made sure that the review question was sufficiently defined to ensure that the search for relevant studies would

not be more difficult than it needed to be and that it would not cause confusion during the systematic review process (Dickson et al., 2017; Cherry & Dickson, 2017).

In the context of this research study, the review question that was developed is: *"How is attachment theory inappropriately or appropriately applied by mental health professionals in custody cases as reported in literature?"* which clearly states the intention of this planned systematic review.

Once the review question was well-defined, the inclusion and exclusion criteria needed to be determined so that it would be easy to distinguish between the literature that was relevant and the literature that was not (Petticrew & Roberts, 2006). Brunton et al. (2017) state that inclusion criteria specify the type and boundaries of the evidence (literature) that the review will consider. In other words, the inclusion criteria describe the specific qualities literature must have to be included in the systematic review. This type of criteria is also known as eligibility criteria (Cherry & Dickson, 2017). Exclusion criteria, on the other hand, describe the specific qualities that disqualify literature from being included in the systematic review (Cherry & Dickson, 2017).

PICo is a tool in qualitative systematic reviews that comprises **P**opulation to be investigated; phenomena of **I**nterest (it can be a condition or intervention) and the **Co**ntext (Cherry et al., 2017; Joanna Briggs Institute [JBI], 2014). **PICo** (Table 1) was used in this systematic review study as it is a qualitative systematic review study that does not require an outcome statement or a comparator unlike the quantitative systematic reviews that make use of **PICO/PICOS/PICOSS**: **P**opulation, **I**ntervention, **C**omparator, **S**etting, **S**tudy Design, and **O**utcome (American Dietetic Association [ADA], 2008; Cherry & Dickson, 2017; Cherry et al, 2017; JBI, 2014; Melnyk & Fineout-Overholt, 2005). As mentioned earlier, the development of the review question and setting the inclusion and exclusion criteria were seen as complementary tasks rather than discrete tasks. This allowed for the flexibility to go back

and forth between the review question and the inclusion and exclusion criteria, and to make changes/adjustments.

PICo (JBI, 2014) also allowed the researcher to select the type of studies that should be included in the systematic review, without risking excluding relevant studies (Cherry et al., 2017).

Table 1

PICo Table (Cherry et al., 2017, p. 199)

PICo	Justification
Review question	*"How is attachment theory inappropriately or appropriately applied by mental health professionals in custody cases as reported in literature?"*
Population (participants) to be investigated: *mental health professionals*. (Any age, no specific conditions).	The **p**opulation (participants) was *mental health professionals*. "*Mental health professionals*" were thus part of the main focus of the systematic review. Studies about mental health professionals applying/using attachment theory in custody cases were included.
Intervention/ phenomenon of **I**nterest (condition): *the inappropriate or appropriate application of attachment theory*.	This systematic review excluded interventions as the phenomenon of **I**nterest was the *inappropriate* or *appropriate application of attachment theory.* Studies about the application/use of attachment theory in custody cases were, therefore, included.
Context: geographic location of studies (**Co**ntext; country): *Nationally* and *internationally.*	This study is situated in an *international context.* It could not be limited to South African (*national*) literature because so little exists.
Context: context within which attachment theory is applied (**Co**ntext; custody cases):	Studies related to *custody cases* were of especial interest.

studies conducted within the context of *custody* cases.	

In Table 2 below the inclusion and exclusion criteria that were identified for this systematic review study, are described in full. This set of inclusion and exclusion criteria was used to select the literature that was included in the systematic review and the irrelevant literature that was excluded.

Table 2

Inclusion and Exclusion Criteria

Inclusion Criteria	Justification
Date/year of publication: all studies from 1986-2020	There are two types of attachment: secure attachment and insecure attachment. Insecure attachment can be subdivided into three categories: *anxious-ambivalent attachment*, *anxious-avoidant attachment*, and *disorganised-disoriented attachment*. Studies on the last mentioned were first published in 1986 (Main & Solomon, 1986). Therefore, the time frame of the search was from 1986 to 2020.
Studies published in English and Afrikaans	The supervisor and researcher are fully competent to read and interpret English and Afrikaans studies. Including both English and Afrikaans studies reduced language bias (Stern & Kleijnen, 2020).
Full-text journal studies	Full-text studies offered the researcher adequate and efficient exposure to the topic, making it possible to answer the review question. They

	thus made it possible to do a more comprehensive systematic review (Bettany-Saltikov, 2010; Dickson et al., 2017).
Peer reviewed studies	Peer reviewed studies in journals have the advantage of having been critically reviewed by subject experts. They are generally deemed to be research of the highest quality (Bettany-Saltikov, 2010; Darthard, 2009).
Grey literature (*PhD theses and Masters' dissertations/mini-dissertations*)	The following types of grey literature were included in this systematic review study: PhD theses and Master's dissertations/mini-dissertations that met the inclusion and exclusion criteria. This enhanced the comprehensiveness and representativeness of this systemic review study. It also decreased the possibility of publication bias (Bettany-Saltikov, 2010; Dickson et al., 2017; Dundar & Fleeman, 2017b; Siddaway et al., 2019).
Study methodology (*Quantitative, qualitative, and mixed-method*) and study designs (*any*)	A systematic review is a literature review that is aimed at locating, appraising and synthesising the best accessible evidence on a particular review question to be able to offer informative and evidence-based findings (Bettany-Saltikov, 2010; Dickson et al., 2017). According to Cherry et al. (2017), it may not be sufficient to use a detailed, precise, and complex search strategy as would be the case in a quantitative systematic review, especially since certain research papers may have significant data hidden within a larger study. They advise using a broader and less precise search strategy which would provide more titles and abstracts to search during screening. Studies of quantitative,

	qualitative, or mixed-method methodology with any research design were included if they met all the inclusion criteria.

Exclusion Criteria	Justification
Studies published before 1986 will be excluded	There are two main kinds of attachment: secure attachment and insecure attachment; and three categories of insecure attachment, namely, *anxious-ambivalent attachment*, *anxious-avoidant attachment*, and *disorganised-disoriented attachment*. The studies on the last-mentioned category (*disorganised-disoriented attachment*) were first published in 1986 (Main & Solomon, 1986). Studies published before 1986 were, therefore, excluded.
Studies published in languages other than English or Afrikaans will be excluded	These studies were excluded as the researcher did not have the funding to pay for translations of studies published in languages other than English and/or Afrikaans.
Grey literature (*Non-peer reviewed studies and conference proceedings*)	The following grey-literature (unpublished literature) was excluded; non-peer reviewed studies, and conference proceedings.
Non-peer reviewed studies	Non-peer reviewed studies may itself present bias and it may obtain a lower quality/standard of methodological quality and often lack clear explanations on how the research was conducted and fail to provide comprehensive data (Puzic, 2016).
Conference proceedings	Conference proceedings were also excluded as this type of grey-literature is harder to search systematically and transparently and the peer-

	review status is often not clear-cut. Thus data are more likely be biased and lack detail on the methods used (Dundar & Fleeman, 2017b; Schlosser, 2007).
Review studies	Review studies (secondary research) were excluded as this systematic review study was concerned only with the findings of primary research studies (Gough et al., 2017).

Sub-step 5: Consider contacting experts in the topic area. The purpose of this sub-step is to be certain that the review question is appropriate and to obtain assurance that the study is unique and on the correct track (Cherry & Dickson, 2017). For the purpose of this systematic review study, the supervisor and researcher worked closely together to ensure that the review question was relevant and appropriate and to obtain assurance that the study was indeed unique and could commence.

The supervisor is considered an expert in the field of attachment and attachment theory and also has the necessary and relevant research skills in and knowledge of conducting systematic review studies. Furthermore, the research proposal (review protocol; sub-step 6) that comprised the topic area (title) and review question was reviewed for relevancy and scientific soundness by various scientific research committees such as small group, COMPRES (Community Psychosocial Research), and the HREC (Health Research Ethics Committee) at the Faculty of Health Sciences, North-West University Potchefstroom Campus. The HREC granted permission to commence with the study.

Sub-step 6: Write review protocol. The review protocol is also known as the research proposal. It is a well-thought-out plan that explains the existing evidence-based literature on the topic. It highlights a gap/problem in the literature that should be addressed, identifies the

question that the review will attend to (aim to answer), and describes and explains the methods to be followed to ultimately answer the review question (Cherry & Dickson, 2017).

The review question to be answered was: *"How is attachment theory inappropriately or appropriately applied by mental health professionals in custody cases as reported in literature?"* In the context of this research study, the Research Project Application for Review Studies form (COMPRES, Faculty of Health Sciences) was submitted for reviewing to small group, COMPRES, and HREC, and an additional form (Ethics Application Form for a Systematic Review) was submitted to HREC. The proposal format used in this study included the following: Proposed Title, Keywords and Definitions, Executive Summary, Contextualization, Problem Statement, Contribution of the Study, Review Question, Aims and Objectives, Review Approach, Registration of Research Protocol, Search Strategy, Method of Determining Relevance (possible studies), Method of Quality Appraisal, Data Extraction, Data Analysis/ Synthesis Methods, Ethics, Research Budget, Timeframe, Choice and Structure of Report, and References.

STEP 3: Literature searching. Figure 3 highlights Key STEP 3 in the systematic review process that aims at identifying data (published and unpublished), utilising databases and additional data resources which can be employed to answer the review question (Dickson et al., 2017).

Key STEP 3 in the systematic review process together with the six sub-steps is the curation strategy used. Strictly adhering to these steps helped to make me aware of the importance of objectivity during the search phase of the systematic review. Dundar and Fleeman (2017b) suggest six sub-steps to follow when planning the main literature search. Although the sub-steps are introduced in sequence, the search process is an iterative process, therefore, the researcher was able to revisit certain sub-steps of the main literature search.

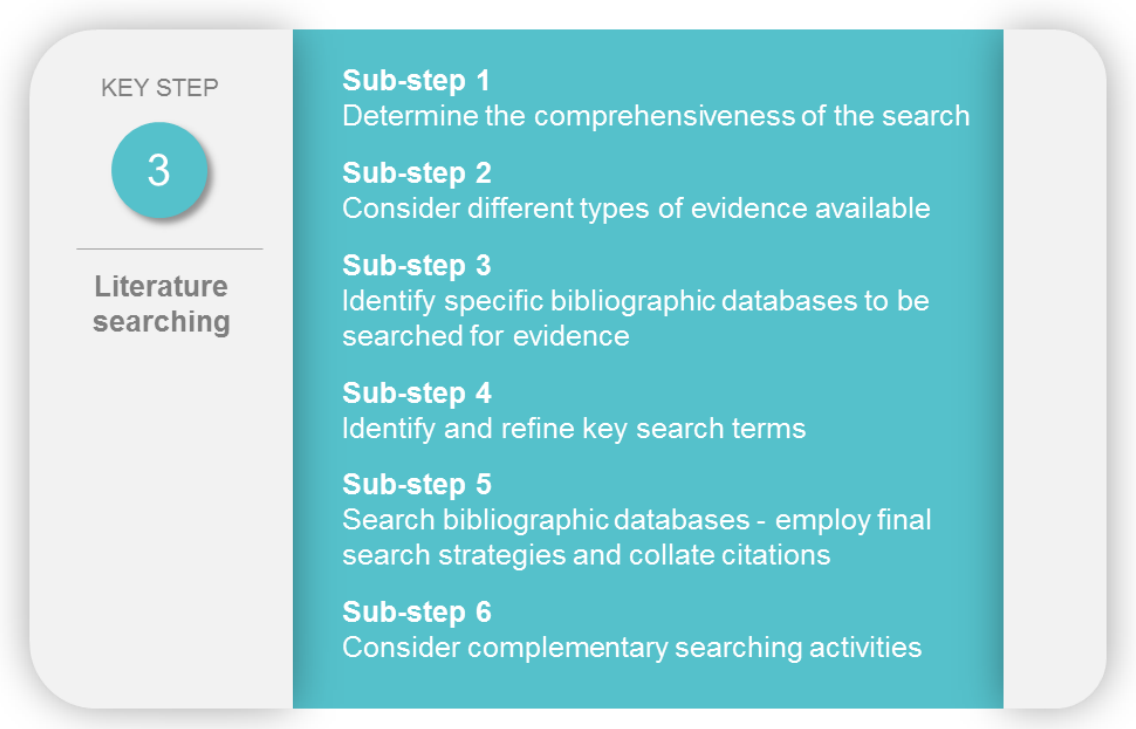

Figure 3. Key STEP 3: Literature searching. Adopted from Dundar and Fleeman (2017b, p.64)

Sub-step 1: Determine the comprehensiveness of the search. While it is important for the search to comprehensively cover the review question and the topic area, Dundar and Fleeman (2017b) suggest that the researcher should be pragmatic. For the purpose of this study, the main search was sufficiently balanced in respect of specificity (it aided in determining the significant data) and also sensitivity (it assisted in not identifying too many insignificant sources or fragments of data) (Dundar & Fleeman, 2017b).

Sub-step 2: Consider different types of evidence available. The different types of evidence available to the researcher were determined by the inclusion and exclusion criteria as indicated in *Key STEP 2: Performing: Scoping Searches, Identifying the Review Question and Writing the Protocol* (Table 2). Dundar and Fleeman (2017b) distinguish between two types of evidence (literature) namely published literature and grey-literature (unpublished literature). Published literature commonly comprise academic books and peer-reviewed

journal articles, and the major resources of published literature comprise volumes of specialist journals, bibliographic databases, and reference lists from already retrieved articles and newspaper archives (Dundar & Fleeman, 2017b). On the other hand, grey literature (unpublished literature) comprises of Master's dissertations or mini-dissertations, PhD theses, annual reports, government documents or databases, bulletins, statistics and legislation (Dundar & Fleeman, 2017b). In this study, *published literature* was *included*: full-text journal studies, peer reviewed studies, quantitative studies, qualitative studies, and mixed-method studies, as well as the following *grey literature*: online published PhD theses and Masters' dissertations/mini-dissertations. The following *grey literature* was *excluded*: non-peer reviewed studies and conference proceedings. This was done as most grey literature is harder to search systematically. It is not as transparent and its peer-review status is often not clear. Therefore, the data are more likely be biased, and it is more difficult to report clearly on the methods used (Dundar & Fleeman, 2017b; Schlosser, 2007). Review studies (secondary studies) were also *excluded* as this systematic review study brought together the findings of primary research (Gough et al., 2017). Studies published in languages other than English or Afrikaans were excluded because no provision had been made to translate these studies.

Sub-step 3: Identify specific bibliographic databases to be searched for evidence. Once the researcher decided what types of literature to search for (sub-step 2), the next step was to devise a plan to determine which procedures would be used to search for the literature (how the researcher plans to search for the literature). Bibliographic databases are a widely held used by systematic reviews (Dundar & Fleeman, 2017b). Accordingly, in this systematic review the researcher decided to use databases to search for the necessary literature. The researcher also ensured that only those databases most relevant to the review question and topic area were included and searched.

For the main search, the North-West University's online library, was used, more specifically EBSCO Discovery Service (EDS) was used to conduct the main search. This search platform made it possible to select the following databases: Academic Search Complete, APA PsycArticles, APA PsycInfo, Medline, Science Direct, Scopus, and SoccINDEX with Full Text. Google Scholar, another search engine, was used as a complementary search activity (see sub-step 6).

These databases were purposely selected based on accessibility, relevance (databases by discipline: behavioural, health and social sciences), basic and advanced search options, reliable peer-review content, and extensiveness in identifying as many studies as possible in the topic area (*The inappropriate or appropriate application of attachment theory by mental health professionals in custody cases*).

Sub-step 4: Identify and refine key search terms. The researcher needs to decide on key search terms and refine them until a final search strategy is determined for each database (Dundar & Fleeman, 2017b). Unambiguous search terms need to be formulated that operationalise the review question/(s). In this study, this entailed breaking the review question up into individual concepts to establish specific search terms (Siddaway et al., 2019). The search terms were then used to successfully identify all possibly relevant literature (Siddaway et al., 2019). The following main key search terms were identified: *attachment theory*; *mental health professionals*; and *custody cases*.

Siddaway et al. (2019) also suggest that the researcher should consider different terminology (synonyms). This includes thinking of alternative terms and concepts that could describe the same phenomenon or research topic or that could possibly address the same question. In the case of this systematic review study, the researcher took due care not to miss any relevant literature (Siddaway et al., 2019). This was achieved by considering synonyms for all of the main key search terms:

Attachment theory – "attachment" OR "attachment theory" OR "attachment assessments" OR "attachment status" OR "secure attachment" OR "insecure attachment" OR "anxious-ambivalent attachment" OR "anxious-avoidant attachment" OR "disorganised-disoriented attachment"

AND

Mental health professionals – "mental health professionals" OR "mental health experts" OR "mental health practitioners" OR "clinicians" OR "custody evaluators" OR "clinical psychologists" OR "psychologists" OR "psychiatrists" OR "developmental psychologists" OR "family psychologists" OR "therapists" OR "counsellors" OR "social workers"

AND

Custody cases – "custody" OR "custody cases" OR "custody evaluations" OR "custody proceedings" OR "custody processes" OR "child custody" OR "child custody cases" OR "child custody evaluations" OR "child custody proceedings" OR "child custody processes" OR "child custody evaluation processes" OR divorce proceedings"

Sub-step 5: Search bibliographic databases – Employ final search strategies and collate citations. Siddaway et al. (2019) state that the literature search should include at least two different electronic databases as the aim is to obtain all of the relevant literature necessary to address the review question/(s). To be really thorough, eight databases (as mentioned in sub-step 3) were searched: this systematic review: Academic Search Complete, APA PsycArticles, APA PsycInfo, Medline, Science Direct, Scopus, SoccINDEX with Full Text, and Google Scholar.

Once the key search terms (search strategies) had been identified and finalised (as discussed in sub-step 4), the researcher searched the chosen databases and collated all the identified citations (Dundar & Fleeman, 2017b). All the identified citations were listed in a Microsoft Word document (Appendix 1: Attachment 1 – List of Total Citations Identified).

Sub-step 6: Consider complementary searching activities. Sub-step 6 is important as these activities may result in identifying new references which will have to be added to the reference management software (Dundar & Fleeman, 2017b). For the purposes of this study, the only complementary searching activity used was citation chaining (snowballing) as it was the most applicable one. This entailed searching *Google Scholar*, a search engine (forward searching) (Dundar & Fleeman, 2017b). The researcher kept a record of all the identified citations (total of citations identified) in a *Microsoft Word document* (Appendix 1: Attachment 1 – List of Total Citations Identified).

The following sections provide an overview of Key STEPS 4, 5, and 6 that are intertwined and consist of two stages: Key STEP 4, which comprises sub-steps 1, 2, and 3 (Stage 1), Key STEP 5, which comprises sub-step 4 of Key STEP 4, and Key STEP 6, which comprises sub-step 5 of Key STEP 4 (Stage 2).

STEP 4: Screening titles and abstracts. According to Dickson et al. (2017) this key step in the systematic review process entails reading titles and abstracts of studies identified by the searches. Furthermore, it entails saving (including) studies that may be of significance to the review question and excluding those studies that are not significant to the review question. The process of screening titles and abstracts is known as *screening and selection* and it is carried out in two stages: Stage 1, screening titles and abstracts, and Stage 2, screening and selecting full-text papers (Dundar & Fleeman, 2017a). Figure 4 below accentuates three of the five sub-steps involved in key STEP 4, which intertwines with key STEPS 5 and 6, in order to choose studies to be included when screening titles and abstracts (Dundar & Fleeman, 2017a). The Preferred Reporting of Items for Systematic Reviews and Meta-Analysis checklist (PRISMA) flow diagram, (Appendix 1: Attachment 2 – PRISMA Flow Diagram) was used to guide this systematic review study to report on the screening and

selection process that includes (Key STEPS 4, 5, and 6. The adopted the PRISMA flow diagram as created by Page et al. (2020).

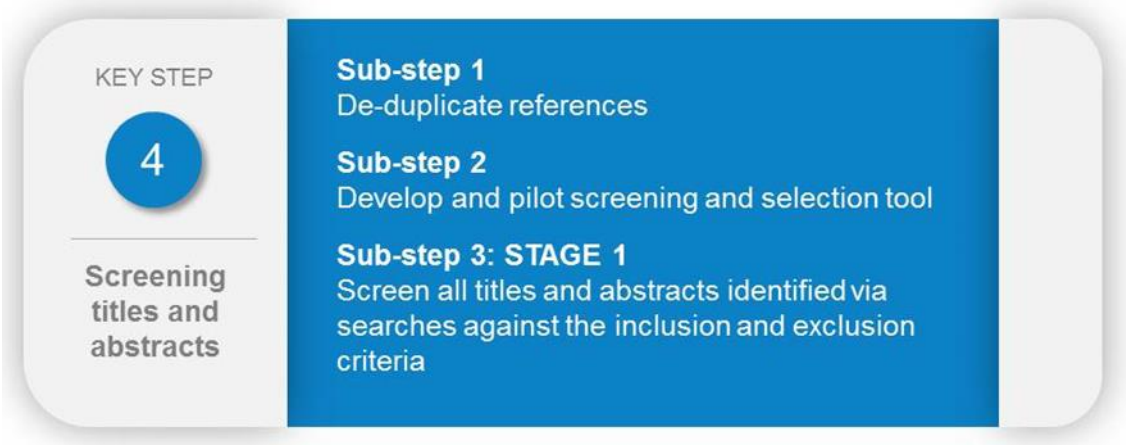

Figure 4. Key STEP 4: Screening titles and abstracts. Adopted from Dundar and Fleeman (2017a, p. 80)

Sub-step 1: De-duplicate references. The researcher de-duplicated the references first before applying the inclusion and exclusion criteria to the long list of potentially significant studies. De-duplicating references entailed identifying and deleting any duplicate references from the main search results (Dundar & Fleeman, 2017a). It is important to note that duplicates were the only references deleted (Dundar & Fleeman, 2017a). The researcher kept a record of the number of references the main search identified and how many of them were duplicates that were deleted, in a *Microsoft Word document* (Appendix 1: Attachment 3 – List of Duplicate Citations).

Sub-step 2: Develop and pilot screening and selection tool. For the purpose of this systematic review study, the researcher developed and piloted a screening and selection tool. To develop the screening and selection tool, the identified and set inclusion and exclusion criteria were used to create a screening and selection tool. The screening and selection tool was developed as a Microsoft Word document and then exported to a PDF form (online document) (Appendix 1: Attachment 4 – Screening and Selection Tool) to be completed for

each citation when screening and selecting titles and abstracts as well as screening and selecting full-text papers. This tool was saved in EpiData, software program used for data entry and data documentation. The researcher used it for each citation to conduct the screening and selection for titles and abstracts and also to screen and select of the full text-papers. This was done as a backup method to save and keep a record of all the citations.

This tool was employed to screen potentially significant full-text papers against the set inclusion and exclusion criteria and to select the studies that were of significance to the review question (Dundar & Fleeman, 2017a). As Dundar and Fleeman (2017a) suggest, the supervisor and researcher piloted the developed screening and selection tool individually and then met up to discuss and compare the studies included and studies excluded. This was done to create an opportunity to adjust the screening and selection tool where necessary and reduce the likelihood of frequent disagreements on which studies should be included and which studies should be excluded at a later point in the study (Dundar & Fleeman, 2017a). The screening and selection tool was piloted on about 30 titles and abstracts (Fleeman & Dundar, 2017a).

Sub-step 3: Screen all titles and abstracts identified via searches against the inclusion and exclusion criteria (Stage 1). Sub-step 3 is also referred to as Stage 1 screening titles and abstracts. It involved applying the inclusion and exclusion criteria to the titles and abstracts (using the screening and selection tool) to determine whether a study seemed to be relevant to the review question and met the inclusion criteria (Dundar & Fleeman, 2017a). A list of the citations to be screened, after the duplicates had been deleted, was saved in a Microsoft Word document (Appendix 1: Attachment 5 – List of Citations without Duplicates). The developed screening and selection tool, a PDF form, was completed for every identified study while screening and selecting the titles and abstracts and was saved in a file. EpiData, which automatically saves all the data entered, was also employed to screen the

titles and abstracts of all the studies identified during the search (Dundar & Fleeman, 2017b). A list of all the included studies were saved in a Microsoft Word document file (Appendix 1: Attachment 6 – List of Included Studies after Screening and Selecting Titles and Abstracts). All the excluded studies were saved in a separate Microsoft Word document and the reasons for exclusion were also recorded in the document (Appendix 1: Attachment 7 – List of Excluded Studies after Screening and Selecting Titles and Abstracts: Reasons for Exclusion). During sub-step 3 (Stage 1) the supervisor and researcher worked closely together to dual screen each reference for inclusion in the review, to reduce the possibility of bias and assist in making the review more robust (Dundar & Fleeman, 2017a).

STEP 5: Obtaining papers. Key STEP 5 as illustrated in Figure 5 below entails obtaining papers as a key step in the systematic review process.

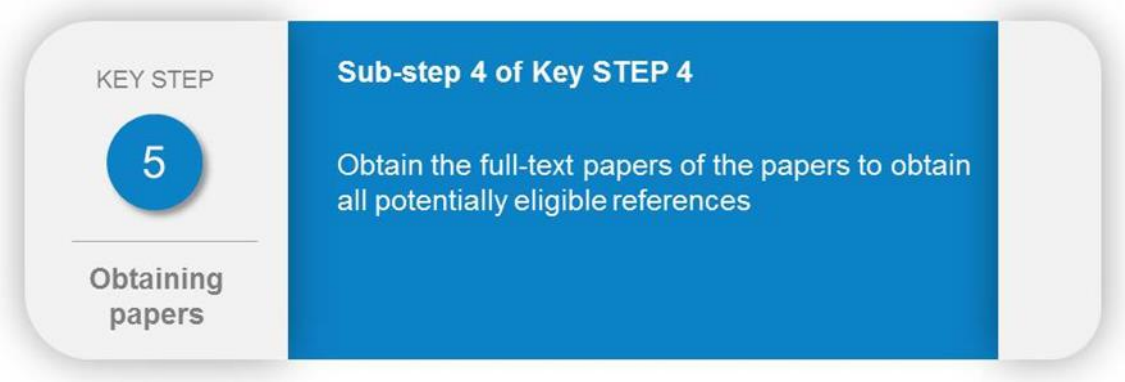

Figure 5. Key STEP 5: Obtaining papers. Adopted from Dundar and Fleeman (2017a, p. 80)

Sub-step 4 of Key STEP 4: Obtain the full-text of the papers to obtain all potentially eligible references. This process consists of acquiring the full-text papers of the evidence as identified in Key STEP 4 (Dickson et al., 2017). A list of all the full-text papers to be obtained and to be screened was saved in a Microsoft Word document (Appendix 1: Attachment 6 – List of Included Studies after Screening and Selecting Titles and Abstracts) as mentioned in Key STEP 4: Sub-step 3. The researcher then proceeded to obtain copies of all

the full-text papers marked for possible inclusion in the review. This process of obtaining the full-text papers was done in collaboration with the supervisor and library staff at the NWU library. A list of citations of all the obtained full-text papers to be screened was saved in a Microsoft Word document (Appendix 1: Attachment 8 – List of Citations of all the Obtained Full-Text Papers to be Screened). A separate Word document was created to save the list of citations of the full-text papers that could not be obtained (Appendix 1: Attachment 9 – List of Citations of the Full-Text Papers that could not be Obtained). All the full-text papers that were obtained were saved in a folder.

STEP 6: Selecting full-text papers. This key step (Figure 6 below) in the systematic review process requires the researcher to apply the inclusion criteria to the full-text papers and to ruthlessly exclude the full-text papers that do not fit the criteria (Dickson et al., 2017).

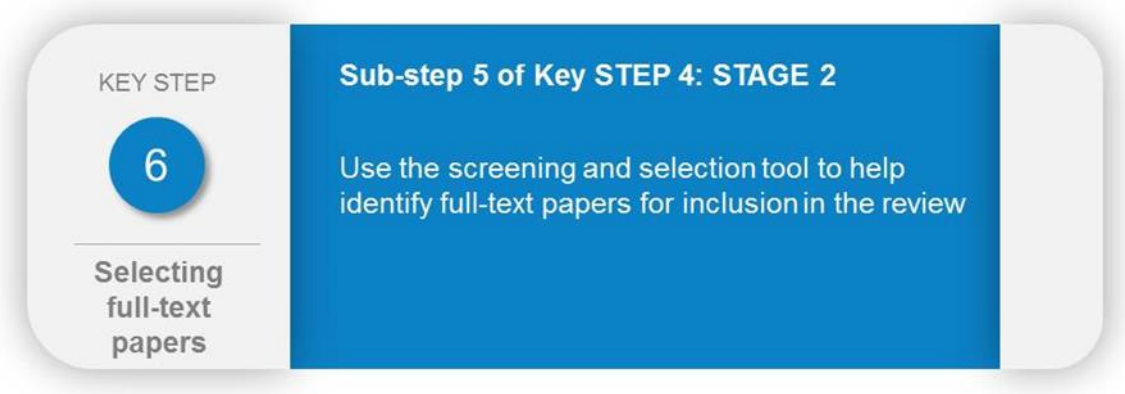

Figure 6. Key STEP 6: Selecting full-text papers. Adapted from Dundar and Fleeman (2017a, p. 80)

Sub-step 5 of Key STEP 4: Use the screening and selection tool to help identify full-text papers for inclusion in the review (Stage 2). Once the researcher obtained the full-text papers, the next action was to determine if these papers really did meet the inclusion criteria (Dundar & Fleeman, 2017a). Each full-text paper was read attentively and the screening and selection tool for each full-text paper was completed.

The same process was used to screen and select full-text papers using the inclusion and exclusion criteria. The screening and selection tool that had been developed, the PDF form, was completed for every included full-text paper during this step and was saved in a file. EpiData was also employed to screen and select the full-text papers that were included after screening and selecting titles and abstracts and to keep a record of which full-text papers had been included and which full-text papers had been excluded (Dundar & Fleeman, 2017a). All the included studies were saved in a file and a Microsoft Word document was created to save a list of all the included studies (Appendix 1: Attachment 10 – List of Included Studies after Screening and Selecting Full-Text Papers). All the excluded studies were saved in a separate file and another Microsoft Word document was created to save the list of all the excluded studies and the reasons for exclusion were also recorded in the document (Appendix 1: Attachment 11 – List of Excluded Studies after Screening and Selecting Full-Text Papers: Reasons for Exclusion).

This sub-step 5 of Key STEP 4 (Stage 2) was also completed in collaboration with the supervisor and meetings were held to discuss the findings.

STEP 7: Determining theoretical standpoint and synthesis plan. Key STEP 7 in the systematic review process commenced once the researcher had a comprehensive list of the final included studies. Figure 7 highlights the step the researcher had to take to determine the theoretical standpoint and synthesis plan (Cherry et al., 2017).

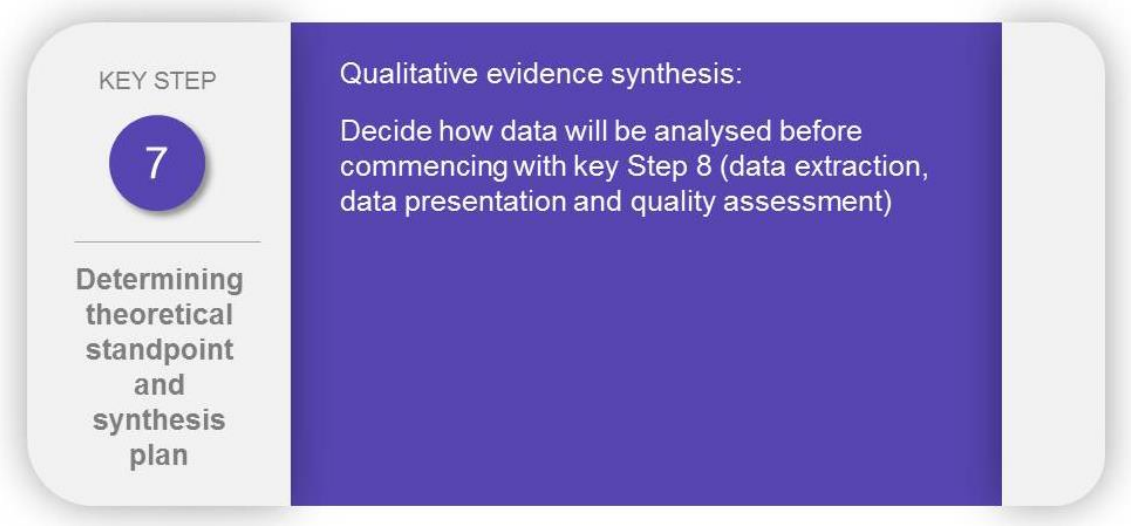

Figure 7. Key STEP 7: Determining theoretical standpoint and synthesis plan

(Cherry et al., 2017, p. 203)

It was important for this key step to be conducted before quality assessment and data extraction, as the synthesising of qualitative evidence has to be grounded on a defined philosophical stance (Cherry et al., 2017; Estabrooks et al., 1994). Qualitative evidence synthesis fundamentally necessitates that the researcher determine how the data will be analysed before quality assessment and data extraction. The reason for this is that qualitative evidence synthesis influences the data that will be extracted, how the researcher views the data and how the researcher draws conclusions from the data (Cherry et al., 2017). There are numerous qualitative evidence synthesis methods available and many of these methods draw on conventional approaches utilised in primary qualitative data analysis strategies (Cherry et al., 2017).

Qualitative evidence synthesis can be grouped into integrative approaches or interpretive approaches (Cherry et al., 2017). *Integrative synthesis* entails that data from primary studies are appropriate for aggregation because it is considered comparable. This approach summarises data where the concepts or themes are already clearly defined or stipulated (Cherry et al., 2017). It essentially entails that the key concepts and themes are well defined from the start of the study and that they are used to extract, describe and summarise

data from several studies. As the researcher has no interest in developing new concepts or themes, integrative synthesis is deductive in its approach (Cherry et al., 2017; Kampira, 2021). Conversely, *interpretive synthesis* is about creating concepts and themes and then developing theories that tie together these developed concepts and themes which are based in the findings/results sections of the included studies (Cherry et al., 2017; Kampira, 2021). Interpretive synthesis essentially entails identifying/developing concepts and themes since these concepts and themes are not fixed in advance. Therefore, interpretive synthesis is inductive in approach (Cherry et al., 2017; Kampira, 2021). It is important to note that there is a substantial overlay between the above-mentioned approaches; they are not entirely distinct (Cherry et al., 2017). Most integrative synthesis will entail some interpretation, and most interpretive synthesis will include some integration (Cherry et al., 2017).

For the purpose of this systematic review study, the researcher opted to use an integrative (deductive) and an interpretive (inductive) approach (Braun & Clarke, 2006; Cherry et al., 2017; Kampira, 2021). More specifically, *thematic analysis/synthesis*, was employed. Thematic analysis is a qualitative evidence synthesis approach that makes use of the methods employed in primary qualitative research analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006; Kampira, 2021; Sarantakos, 2013; Thomas & Harden, 2008).

STEP 8: Data extraction, data presentation and quality assessment. The researcher conducted the *quality assessment* of the included studies before *data extraction*, so that time was not wasted by needlessly extracting data from certain studies (Cherry et al., 2017).

Figure 8 illustrates the process (steps) that the researcher followed to conduct the quality assessment and data extraction.

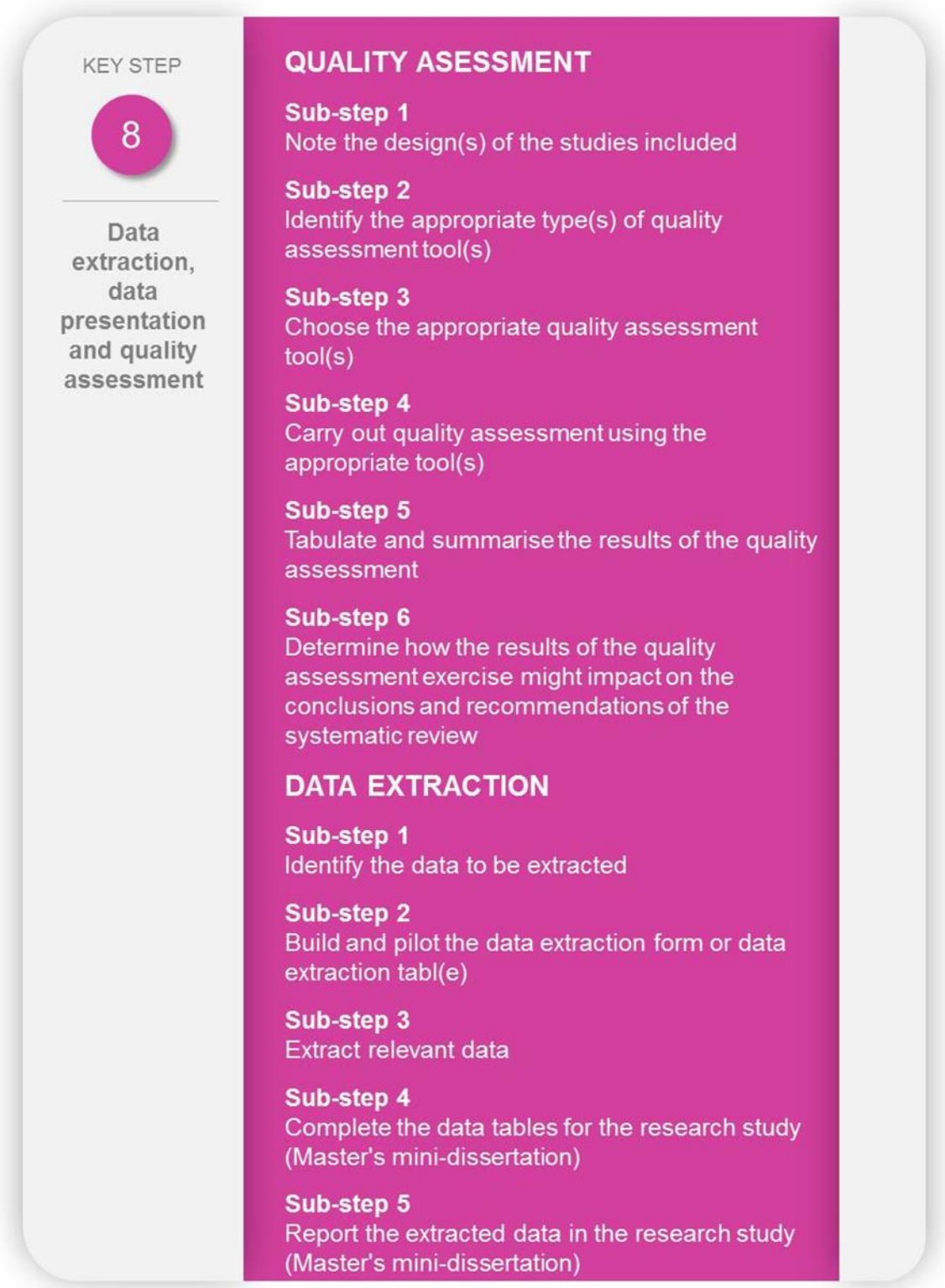

Figure 8. Key STEP 8: Data extraction, data presentation and quality assessment. Adapted from Fleeman and Dundar (2017, p. 95) and Greenhalgh and Brown (2017, p. 112)

Quality assessment entails assessing the methodological quality of all the included full-text papers, utilising a suitable quality assessment tool (Dickson et al., 2017). It is important to note that for the purpose of this systematic review study, both qualitative and quantitative studies (see inclusion criteria) were included. The researcher had to choose appropriate quality assessment tool/(s) to conduct the quality assessment of the included studies (qualitative, quantitative and mixed methods studies) (Greenhalgh & Brown, 2017). However, it was important for the researcher to be aware that the selection of the appropriate quality assessment tool/(s) for the included *quantitative studies* depended on the research designs of the included *quantitative studies'* (Greenhalgh & Brown, 2017). Quality assessment is a time consuming process. Therefore, the researcher allowed sufficient time to rigorously assess the quality of the included studies and to provide a thorough discussion on how the quality assessment influenced the conclusions drawn (Greenhalgh & Brown, 2017).

The methodological quality of a study refers to the extent to which a study utilises measures to reduce error and bias with regard to the research design, research conduct and also the analysis (Khan et al., 2003). There are various advantages to assessing the methodological quality of the included studies (Greenhalgh & Brown, 2017). While differentiating between studies of good quality and poor quality, the researcher had the opportunity to gain a greater understanding of the included studies and their findings (Greenhalgh & Brown, 2017). This enhanced the merit of this research study, as the researcher was in a better position to draw meaningful conclusions from quality data that had been extracted from the studies included (Greenhalgh & Brown, 2017). The following are the sub-steps involved in *quality assessment*.

Quality Assessment – Sub-step 1: Note the design(s) of the studies included. The included studies comprised qualitative, quantitative and mixed methods studies. In this sub-step, the emphasis was on the research design/(s) of the included *quantitative studies* with a

view to choosing the most suitable quality assessment tool/(s) (Greenhalgh & Brown, 2017). During this sub-step, the researcher went through the methodology of all the studies to determine the type of studies (qualitative, quantitative, or mixed methods), and more specifically to determine the research designs of the quantitative studies. The following three quantitative research designs were identified: quantitative descriptive, quantitative non-randomized, and quantitative descriptive.

Quality Assessment – Sub-step 2: Identify the type/(s) of quality assessment tool/(s) to suit the review. The supervisor and researcher identified two types of quality assessment tool/(s): Critical Appraisal Skills Programme (CASP) and Mixed Methods Appraisal Tool (MMAT). CASP comprises the following checklists: CASP Qualitative Checklist; CASP Randomized Control Trial Checklist; CASP Case Control Study Checklist; CASP Diagnostic Checklist; CASP Cohort Study Checklist; CASP Economic Evaluation Checklist; and the CASP Clinical Prediction Checklist (Critical Appraisal Skills Programme [CASP], 2020). MMAT is a quality assessment tool that allows researchers doing a systematic review to quality assess all the included qualitative, quantitative as well as mixed methods studies (Mixed Methods Appraisal Tool [MMAT], 2018). It is a single tool that makes it possible to appraise the methodological quality of the following five types of studies: qualitative, randomized controlled trials, non-randomized, quantitative descriptive, and mixed methods (MMAT, 2018).

Quality Assessment – Sub-step 3: Choose the appropriate quality assessment tool/(s). To decide on an appropriate quality assessment tool/(s) for this systematic review, the researcher consulted the supervisor, and various studies, specifically other similar systematic reviews in the same topic area, to see which quality assessment tools the authors of these reviews had employed (Greenhalgh & Brown, 2017). Furthermore, the researcher had to be aware of the inclusion criterion of qualitative, quantitative, and mixed methods studies as the

quality assessment tool/(s) chosen had to serve the purpose of separately assessing the quality of the included qualitative, quantitative, and mixed methods studies.

For the purpose of this systematic review study, the chosen quality assessment tool appropriate for quality assessing the methodological quality of the included qualitative, quantitative, and mixed methods studies was the MMAT (Appendix 2: Attachment 1 – Mixed Methods Appraisal Tool (MMAT) (Example)) was adopted as captured by MMAT (2018). The MMAT was the most appropriate appraisal tool as it allowed the researcher to appraise the methodological quality of all of the ten included studies: qualitative, quantitative, and mixed methods studies (MMAT, 2018). The MMAT also provided an algorithm/criterion for selecting the study types (categories) to rate using the MMAT. This assisted the researcher to identify the correct category to assign to each included study for the quality assessment (MMAT, 2018). Furthermore, the researcher adopted the CASP Systematic Review Checklist as indicated by CASP (2020) to assess the quality of this systematic review study as it is an appropriate quality assessment tool (see sub-step 6, below). See Appendix 2: Attachment 2 – CASP Systematic Review Checklist (Example).

Quality Assessment – Sub-step 4: Carry out quality assessment using the appropriate tool/(s). At first, the intention was to pilot the selected quality assessment tool to determine whether this chosen tool would be effective (Greenhalgh & Brown, 2017). Working with the supervisor, the researcher took one or two studies to determine whether the quality assessment questions could be answered (Greenhalgh & Brown, 2017). It was very important to assess the quality of all of the studies in the same way (Greenhalgh & Brown, 2017). The supervisor acted as a co-reviewer during piloting, using the tool in the same way the researcher did. Throughout this process, we made notes on the decisions made and noted where the text had been retrieved from a study, when useful. After completing the piloting exercise, the notes made were compared and discussed. Once the supervisor and researcher

were both satisfied with the results of piloting the tool and had gained an understanding was gained of how to appropriately employ the quality assessment tool, the supervisor and researcher commenced the quality assessment of each included study, working independently and settling inconsistencies by consensus.

Quality Assessment – Sub-step 5: Tabulate and summarise the results of the quality assessment. As this is a qualitative systematic review, the researcher opted to discuss (summarise) the findings of the quality assessment in a narrative style (Cherry et al., 2017). Using the MMAT, the quality assessment of each of the 10 included studies was completed (see Appendix 2: Attachments 3-12 – Completed Mixed Methods Appraisal Tool (MMAT)). The overall methodological quality of all 10 included studies was good. The researcher quality assessed qualitative, quantitative (quantitative descriptive and quantitative non-randomized), and mixed methods studies.

Of the 10 included studies, three were *qualitative* studies (LeBlanc, 2020; McIntosh, 2011; Sroufe & McIntosh, 2011). The methodological criteria for evaluating the three qualitative studies comprised *clear research question/s*, *data collected allows to address the research question/s*, *qualitative approach appropriate to answer the research question*; *qualitative data collection methods adequate to answer research question*; *findings adequately derived from data*; *interpretation of results sufficiently substantiated by data*; and *coherence between qualitative data sources, collection, analysis, and interpretation*.

Only one of the three qualitative studies did not provide clear research questions. However, the aim (what the study intended to do) was clear (LeBlanc, 2020). The data collected for all three qualitative studies was appropriate and allowed for the research questions to be answered (LeBlanc, 2020; McIntosh, 2011; Sroufe & McIntosh, 2011). The overall methodological quality concerning the qualitative studies was good (LeBlanc, 2020; McIntosh, 2011; Sroufe & McIntosh, 2011). The qualitative approaches used were

appropriate for the research questions; the data collection methods were adequate to address the research questions; the findings were adequately derived from the collected data; the interpretation of the findings could be sufficiently substantiated by the data collected; and there was a coherence between the qualitative methodology used such as the data collection, data analysis, and the interpretation of the data (LeBlanc, 2020; McIntosh, 2011; Sroufe & McIntosh, 2011).

Of the 10 included studies, two studies were *quantitative descriptive* studies (Marcus & Mirle, 1990; Sager, 2015). The methodological criteria for evaluating the two quantitative descriptive studies comprised *clear research question/s*, *data collected allows to address research question/s*; *sampling strategy relevant to address research question*; *sample representative of the target population*; *appropriate measurements*; *low risk of non-response bias*; and *appropriate statistical analysis to answer the research question*. Neither of the quantitative descriptive studies had clear research questions. However, the aims or what these studies intended was clear (Marcus & Mirle, 1990; Sager, 2015). The data collected for both the quantitative descriptive studies allowed for the research to address the research question (Marcus & Mirle, 1990; Sager, 2015). The overall methodological quality of the two quantitative descriptive studies was good (Marcus & Mirle, 1990; Sager, 2015). The sampling strategy of the one study was relevant to the research question (Sager, 2015), while the other study did not clearly report on the sampling strategy, therefore we could not tell whether the sampling strategy was relevant to the research question or not (Marcus & Mirle, 1990). Neither of the samples of the quantitative descriptive studies was representative of the target population (Marcus & Mirle, 1990; Sager, 2015). The measures used in both these studies were appropriate (Marcus & Mirle, 1990; Sager, 2015). The nonresponse bias in the one of quantitative descriptive study was low (Sager, 2015), while it was unclear in the other study whether the nonresponse bias was low or not, no reporting was done on nonresponse bias

(Marcus & Mirle, 1990). The statistical analysis in both these studies made it possible to answer the research question (Marcus & Mirle, 1990; Sager, 2015).

One of the 10 included studies was a *quantitative non-randomized* study (Schraegle, 2014). The methodological criteria for evaluating this quantitative non-randomized study comprised *clear research question/s*; *data collected allows to address the research question/s*; *participants representative of the target population*; *appropriate measures regarding both the outcome and intervention (or exposure)*; *complete outcome data*; *cofounders accounted for in the design and analysis*; and *intervention (or exposure) administered as intended*. The data collected provided answers to the research questions to the quantitative non-randomized study and its overall methodological quality was good (Schraegle, 2014). The participants were not representative of the population and the study mentioned this as a limitation (Schraegle, 2014). The measures employed were appropriate regarding both the outcome and exposure; there was complete outcome data; the views of the co-founders were also incorporated in the research design and analysis; and during the study period, the exposure was administered as intended (Schraegle, 2014).

Of the 10 included studies, four studies were *mixed methods* studies (George et al., 2011; Isaacs et al., 2009; Kruk, 2010; Purvis et al., 2010). The methodological criteria for evaluating the four *mixed methods* studies encompassed *clear research question/s*; *data collected addressed the research question/s*; *adequate rationale for using a mixed methods design to address research question*; *effective integration of different components of the study to answer the research question*; *adequate interpretation of the outputs of the integration of the qualitative and quantitative components*; *divergences and inconsistencies between quantitative and qualitative results adequately addressed*; and *adherence to the different components of the study to the quality criteria of each tradition of the methods involved*. Two of the mixed methods studies had clear research questions (Isaacs et al., 2009; Kruk 2010).

While the other two mixed methods studies did not respond to clear research questions, the aims (what the studies intended to do) were clear (George et al., 2011; Purvis et al., 2010). The data collected for all four mixed methods studies allowed the research questions to be answered (George et al., 2011; Isaacs et al., 2009; Kruk, 2010; Purvis et al., 2010). The overall methodological quality of the four mixed methods studies was good (George et al., 2011; Isaacs et al., 2009; Kruk, 2010; Purvis et al., 2010). All four mixed methods studies had clear rationales for using a mixed methods designed to address the research questions (George et al., 2011; Isaacs et al., 2009; Kruk, 2010; Purvis et al., 2010). The different components of the four studies were adequately integrated to answer the research questions and the outputs of both the qualitative and quantitative components of the four studies were effectively integrated and interpreted (George et al., 2011; Isaacs et al., 2009; Kruk, 2010; Purvis et al., 2010). The four studies adequately addressed the divergences and inconsistencies between the qualitative and quantitative results, and the different components of these four mixed methods studies adhered to the quality criteria of each tradition of the methods used (George et al., 2011; Isaacs et al., 2009; Kruk, 2010; Purvis et al., 2010).

Quality Assessment – Sub-step 6: Determine how the results of the quality assessment exercise might impact on the conclusions and recommendations of the systematic review. It was valuable to think about how the quality of the studies might have influenced the credibility of the overall findings of this systematic review (Greenhalgh & Brown, 2017). Quality assessment was an important means of gaining a perspective on the weaknesses and strengths in the way these studies reported on the methodology and the specific methods used to enhance trustworthiness (Cherry et al., 2017). According to Cherry et al. (2017), poor reporting on methodology does not necessarily mean that a study is of poor quality. For this reason, the researcher opted to include all the studies assessed, including those studies assessed as of “poor quality” because they can still render valuable contributions

to the synthesis part of this systematic review. As discussed in sub-step 5, the overall methodological quality of the included studies was good, none of the studies were assessed as a “poor quality” study.

Quality assessing one’s own systematic review is also considered time well spent. It assists in identifying any areas of weakness in the conducting or reporting of the systematic review. It is also a requirement for publication in a peer-reviewed journal, which the researcher aims to do (Greenhalgh & Brown, 2017). As part of the quality assessment of this systematic review study, the CASP Systematic Review Checklist was completed (Appendix 2: Attachment 13 – Completed CASP Systematic Review Checklist) (CASP, 2020). This checklist was used rather than a scoring system as the checklist offered more valuable information about the quality of this systematic review study (Greenhalgh & Brown, 2017). The checklist includes individual elements of quality assessment that are not usually incorporated when using a scoring system, which were of great significance (Greenhalgh & Brown, 2017).

After quality assessment had been completed, the researcher commenced the *data extraction* from the included studies. While engaged in the process, the researcher needed to remember to produce a clear overview of the included studies, their similarities and differences across these studies, and to provide an own view of the findings, once the data extraction process had been completed (Cherry et al., 2017). It was necessary to ensure that the data extraction was appropriate for the synthesis approach, the theoretical view and the aim of the systematic review (Cherry et al., 2017). Data extraction and presentation essentially entailed identifying significant data from each included study and then summarising them using forms or tables (Dickson et al., 2017). In this systematic review study, data extraction tables were used (Fleeman & Dundar, 2017).

The following are the sub-steps that were taken into consideration when *extracting* and *reporting* data from the included studies (Fleeman & Dundar, 2017):

Data extraction – Sub-step 1: Identify the data to be extracted. Firstly, the researcher had to decide which data to extract. The researcher followed Fleeman and Dundar's (2017) advice to make a list of all the data that would help to summarise, describe, and interpret the findings of all the included studies. To do this, the researcher found it necessary to reread the review question and protocol as well as to re-familiarise herself with the data extraction strategy. The researcher also skim-read through all of the included studies as this gave a better idea of the data in the studies (Fleeman & Dundar, 2017). The researcher also viewed other systematic review studies in the same topic area, which assisted to identify the data to be extracted.

There are predominantly two types of data of interest to a systematic review: descriptive data (paper characteristics) and analytical data (findings/results) (Fleeman & Dundar, 2017). The first thing to do, regardless of the synthesis approach, was to identify and describe crucial descriptive information from each included study in an informative manner, which then assisted in summarising the central characteristics of the studies in this systematic review study (Cherry et al., 2017). It was vital to start with extracting standard descriptive information that provided the reader with an overview of the characteristics of each study (Cherry, et al., 2017). In this systematic review study, the information (characteristics) was extracted in a standardised manner across all of the included studies. The descriptive information extracted included: *title of study; author(s); year/date of publication; geographic location of study (country); general study focus; study setting; sampling method/approach*; *data collection method(s); and ethics.*

After the descriptive information to be extracted had been identified it was essential to remember to extract only data that were relevant to addressing the review question. To be able

to answer the review question, the researcher also extracted analytical data (findings/results) from the included studies. As this systematic review is more integrative in nature; main concepts and themes were well-defined beforehand and consequently the researcher identified these well-defined concepts and themes within the included studies' findings/results sections and summarised them as a whole (Cherry et al., 2017). However, thematic synthesis also entails a form of interpretation, which meant that additional data (concepts and themes) were identified/developed (extracted) from the findings/results sections, as well as the discussion or conclusion sections of the included studies, as greater familiarity with the included studies was reached (Cherry et al., 2017).

Data extraction – Sub-step 2: Build and pilot the data extraction form or data extraction tables/(s). Once the decision on the data to be extracted had been made (sub-step 1), and the data had been identified, data were set out in the data extraction tables (Fleeman & Dundar, 2017). The supervisor and researcher worked closely together to build and pilot the developed data extraction tables. For this systematic review study, the researcher developed and piloted two data extraction processes based on the existing data extraction tables provided by (Fleeman & Dundar, 2017). The first data extraction table that the researcher adapted was a *study characteristics table* (Appendix 3: Attachment 1 – Study Characteristics Table (Example)) and the second data extraction table adapted, was a *study findings table* (Appendix 3: Attachment 2 – Study Findings Table (Example)) (Fleeman & Dundar, 2017). A pilot test was done on two different studies as Fleeman and Dundar (2017) recommended. It was crucial for both reviewers (the supervisor and researcher) to get together to ensure that both reviewers had the same understanding of the data extraction tables and the specific data that needed to be extracted.

Data extraction – Sub-step 3: Extract relevant data. This sub-step entailed the actual extraction of relevant data. The data extraction process, which was conducted electronically;

involved the copy and paste of significant sections or fragments of data into the extraction tables. This method of conducting data extraction electronically saved time and it decreased the probabilities of making data-entry errors (Fleeman & Dundar, 2017). The data was also stored electronically which made it possible for the researcher to make, and save, backups of all the work done. Moreover, this method made life a bit easier once the researcher got to the data synthesising stage (Fleeman & Dundar, 2017). During the data extraction process, the researcher recorded where the extracted data are situated in the full-text studies. This was done by highlighting the extracted data in the electronic study version. The researcher conducted the data extraction process and the supervisor cross-checked a random sample to help minimize data extraction errors.

Data extraction – Sub-step 4: Complete the data tables for the research study (Master's mini-dissertation). The two data extraction tables were developed and completed: the *study characteristics table* (Appendix 3: Attachment 3 – Completed Studies Characteristics Table) and the *study findings table* (Appendix 3: Attachment 4 – Completed Study Findings Table). All of the extracted data discussed in the mini-dissertation are presented in these two data extraction table (Fleeman & Dundar, 2017).

Data extraction – Sub-step 5: Report the extracted data in the research study (Master's mini-dissertation). This sub-step requires the researcher to report and make sense of the extracted data. It is concerned with using only words (text) to represent the findings, (Fleeman & Dundar, 2017). As this was a qualitative systematic review study, neither the study characteristics table (Appendix 3: Attachment 3 – Completed Studies Characteristics Table) nor the study findings table (Appendix 3: Attachment 4 – Completed Study Findings Table) are accompanied by explanatory summary text. The data tables were developed in a self-explanatory form making explanatory summary text superfluous (Fleeman & Dundar,

2017). The two data tables are used to present the extracted data from each individual study and to report the overall findings.

STEP 9: Analysis and synthesis of qualitative data. This key step in the systematic review process (Figure 9 below) includes scrutinising and synthesising the data (Dickson et al., 2017).

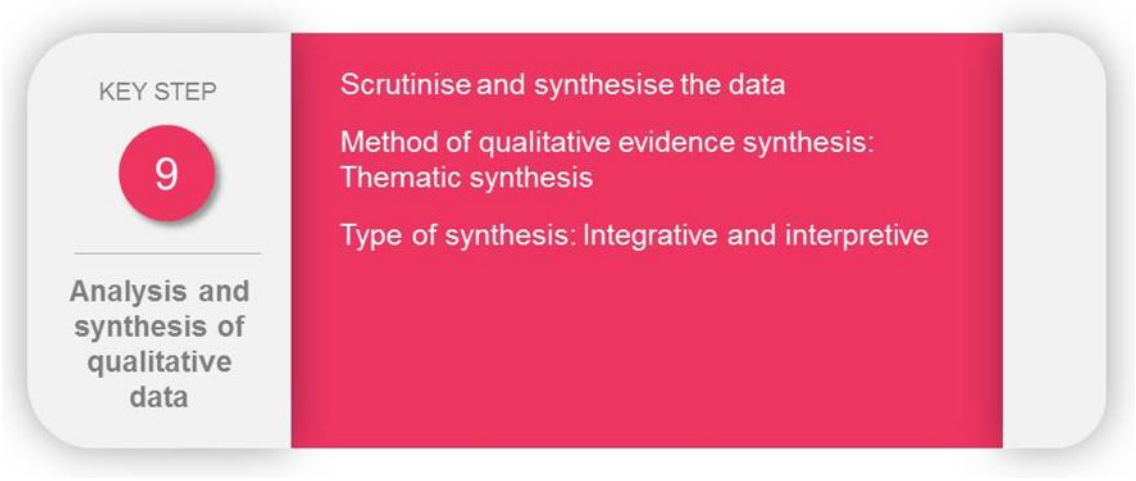

Figure 9. Key STEP 9: Analysis and synthesis of qualitative data. Adapted from Cherry et al. (2017, p. 206) and Dickson et al. (2017, p. 9)

According to Cherry et al. (2017), Key STEP 9 in the systematic review process, analysing and synthesising qualitative data, is disputably the most essential, yet boldest key step in performing a qualitative evidence synthesis. In contrast with linear steps taken in a quantitative systematic review, qualitative evidence synthesis employs a more iterative approach to sampling and data extraction (Cherry et al., 2017). This iterative approach continues into the analysis and synthesis step of a review (Cherry et al., 2017). Thus, this key step in the systematic review process was essentially about bringing together and making sense of the data from all of the included studies.

Although, this systematic review study was more integrative (aggregative) and aimed to collect data across studies with the focus being on summarising data according to concepts

or themes which were mainly well-defined or specified beforehand (Cherry et al., 2017), this systematic review also had an interpretive element. This meant that concepts or themes emerged through interpreting the findings or results and/or the discussion and conclusion sections of the included studies. Thus, themes were identified prior to data extraction, during data extraction, and during data analysis. Once the data had been extracted, they were synthesised according to these themes which were determined prior to data extraction and also during data extraction and data analysis.

The specific data analysis method that was used in this systematic review was thematic analysis. According to Sarantakos (2013), thematic analysis is a method which is used to analyse data to determine themes that are established through thematic coding. It is a method of analysis that focuses on identifying, describing, explaining, substantiating and linking themes (Kampira, 2021). Thematic analysis, therefore, makes it possible to identify, analyse, and report on themes (patterns) within the data (Braun & Clarke, 2006). It is a way of organising and describing the data set in full detail (Braun & Clarke, 2006, 2012). Thematic analysis thus goes beyond just organising and describing the data set in rich detail; it also interprets different aspects of the research topic (Braun & Clarke, 2006).

Thematic analysis is viewed as a flexible and effective research approach that can provide a rich and comprehensive, yet multidimensional, interpretation of the data attributable to its theoretical freedom (Braun & Clarke, 2006). This flexibility and ease of utilising thematic analysis is considered one of its core advantages (Braun & Clarke, 2006; Nowell et al., 2017). It can also be applied to various theoretical and philosophical frameworks (Kampira, 2021).

As mentioned in Key STEP 7, the researcher undertook both an integrative (deductive) and interpretive (inductive) theoretical and philosophical underpinning to conduct the data analysis which thematic analysis allows (Braun & Clarke, 2006; Kampira, 2021;

Nowell et al., 2017). Deductive thematic analysis (integrative approach) was applied to themes that were developed prior to data extraction and data analysis (Cherry et al., 2017). These themes were developed with regard to existing research, theories, and concepts, rather than developed from the dataset (ten included studies) (Cherry et al., 2017; Kampira, 2021). Inductive thematic analysis (interpretive approach) entailed interpreting the data and developing the themes which were guided by the content of the dataset (ten included studies) (Cherry et al., 2017; Kampira, 2021). Thus, in this systematic review study the themes were also developed from the extracted and analysed dataset (ten included studies) (Cherry et al., 2017; Kampira, 2021).

During Key STEP 9, the supervisor and researcher worked together on the thematic analysis. More specifically the supervisor acted as the co-coder to ensure accuracy and to add to the trustworthiness of the findings. Braun and Clarke (2006) propose the following 6 phases which was used as a step-by-step guide throughout data analysis:

Phase 1: Familiarising yourself with your data

The first phase requires the researcher to read and re-read through the data and note down initial ideas (Braun & Clarke, 2006). During this time, the researcher has to be fully immersed in the data. This was achieved by reading and re-reading through all the data. More specifically, the process of becoming familiar with the data entailed reading through the data of the included studies since Key STEP 4, when screening titles and abstracts and re-reading the data; during Key STEP 5 when obtaining papers; during Key STEP 6 when selecting full-text papers; when re-reading the data during Key STEP 8 when conducting quality assessment; and once more when performing data extraction. During all these key steps the researcher made notes and searched for meanings and patterns in the data (interesting facts were written down). Thus, even before conducting Key STEP 9 the actual analysis and

synthesis of the data, phase 1, the researcher had familiarised herself with the data and was fully familiar with the data of the final ten included studies.

Phase 2: Generating initial codes

This phase entailed the identifying, marking and labelling text or content that held meaning and was interesting to the researcher (Braun & Clarke, 2006). It also entailed highlighting and labelling content that was of interest in answering the review question: *"How is attachment theory inappropriately or appropriately applied by mental health professionals in custody cases as reported in literature?"* The researcher made sure to keep the review question in mind while generating the initial codes. Words, partial sentences and full sentences were identified and highlighted and codes/labels were written down that would assist in understanding how mental health professionals apply attachment theory both inappropriately and appropriately in custody cases (Kampira, 2021).

Phase 3: Searching for themes

During phase 3, the researcher sorted the list of codes into potential themes (Braun & Clarke, 2006). The researcher grouped all the codes that were similar together under one group/theme (Kampira, 2021). Next, the researcher started to consider what the relationship between the codes, between the themes, and between the various levels of themes were (main overarching themes and sub-themes) (Braun & Clarke, 2006). During this phase, the researcher made use of visual representations (tables) to assist sorting the different codes into main overarching themes and sub-themes within them.

Phase 4: Reviewing themes

Phase 4, involved the refining and revising of the candidate themes and the collated extracts (evidence) that were grouped and created during phase 3 (Braun & Clarke, 2006). The researcher had to engage in two levels of reviewing. Level 1 consisted of reading (reviewing and revising) the collated extracts for all the themes and considering whether they

formed a coherent pattern (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Level 2 entailed a similar procedure, but it consisted of reading (reviewing and revising) the collated extracts to identify themes and consider whether they formed a coherent pattern in relation to the entire data set. The researcher had to consider the validity the individual themes had and how they related to the whole data set. The researcher also had to make sure that the themes and collated extracts reflected the meanings of the data set as a total (Braun & Clarke, 2006). The goal of this phase was to ensure that the themes and collated extracts accurately represented the data set (Braun & Clarke, 2006). At the end of this phase, the researcher had a good idea about what the various themes were, how they fitted together and the overall story they told about the data. Consequently, this phase optimally entailed adding themes and collated extracts, removing (deleting) themes and collated extracts, as well as editing or moving themes and collated extracts around to make greater sense and to create a coherent pattern and to ensure the data were accurately presented.

Phase 5: Defining and naming themes

The fifth phase was concerned with further definition and refinement of the themes (Braun & Clarke, 2006). This specifically entailed identifying what the essence of each theme and of the overall themes was and also determining what aspect of the data every theme encapsulated (Braun & Clarke, 2006). When defining and refining the themes the researcher has to remember not to make the themes too complex or too broad. The researcher achieved this by going back to the data extracts and organising them into a comprehensible and internally consistent account with supplementary narratives (Braun & Clarke, 2006). The further refinement of the themes also entailed determining whether the main themes required sub-themes or not. Sub-themes are the themes within a main theme or overarching theme (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Sub-themes are important as they can structure a complex or bigger theme and demonstrate the hierarchy of meaning that exists within the data (Braun & Clarke,

2006). By the end of this phase, the researcher could clearly define what the themes and sub-themes were and accord names to each theme and sub-theme that were concise and instantaneously provide the reader with a sense of what each theme was about (Braun & Clarke, 2006).

Phase 6: Producing the report

Phase 6 commenced once a complete set of themes had been developed. This phase involved the final analysis and writing of the report (Braun & Clarke, 2006). See Table 3 below that provides the Systematic Review Findings (Systematic Review Findings: Themes and Sub-Themes) that emerged during data analysis. It was important to tell a complicated narrative of the data in such a manner that it convinces the reader of the validity and quality of the analysis that was conducted (Braun & Clarke, 2006). The reporting of the themes had to be informed by enough evidence (sufficient evidence of the themes within the data) (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Thus, this step was the last chance for analysis. It fundamentally entailed doing the final analysis of the data extracts that were selected and ensuring that the data extracts which were selected were strong and engaging examples. It also entailed ensuring that the final analysis related back to the review question and the literature in order to write a scientific and evidence-based report (Braun & Clarke, 2006). The reporting on the themes and sub-themes that were developed are discussed in detail in Chapter 2 (Article) of this mini-dissertation.

Table 3

Systematic Review Findings: Themes and Sub-Themes

Themes	Sub-Themes
Theme 1	**Sub-theme 1**
Multimethod assessments	Incremental validity
	Sub-theme 2
	Advantages of multimethod assessments

Theme 2

Understanding attachment theory: scientific meaning

STEP 10: Writing up, editing and disseminating. The last key step in the systematic review process as illustrated in Figure 10 entailed bringing together all the work by writing up the background, methods and findings, reviewing the findings, drawing conclusions from the systematic review and distributing the findings (Dickson et al., 2017).

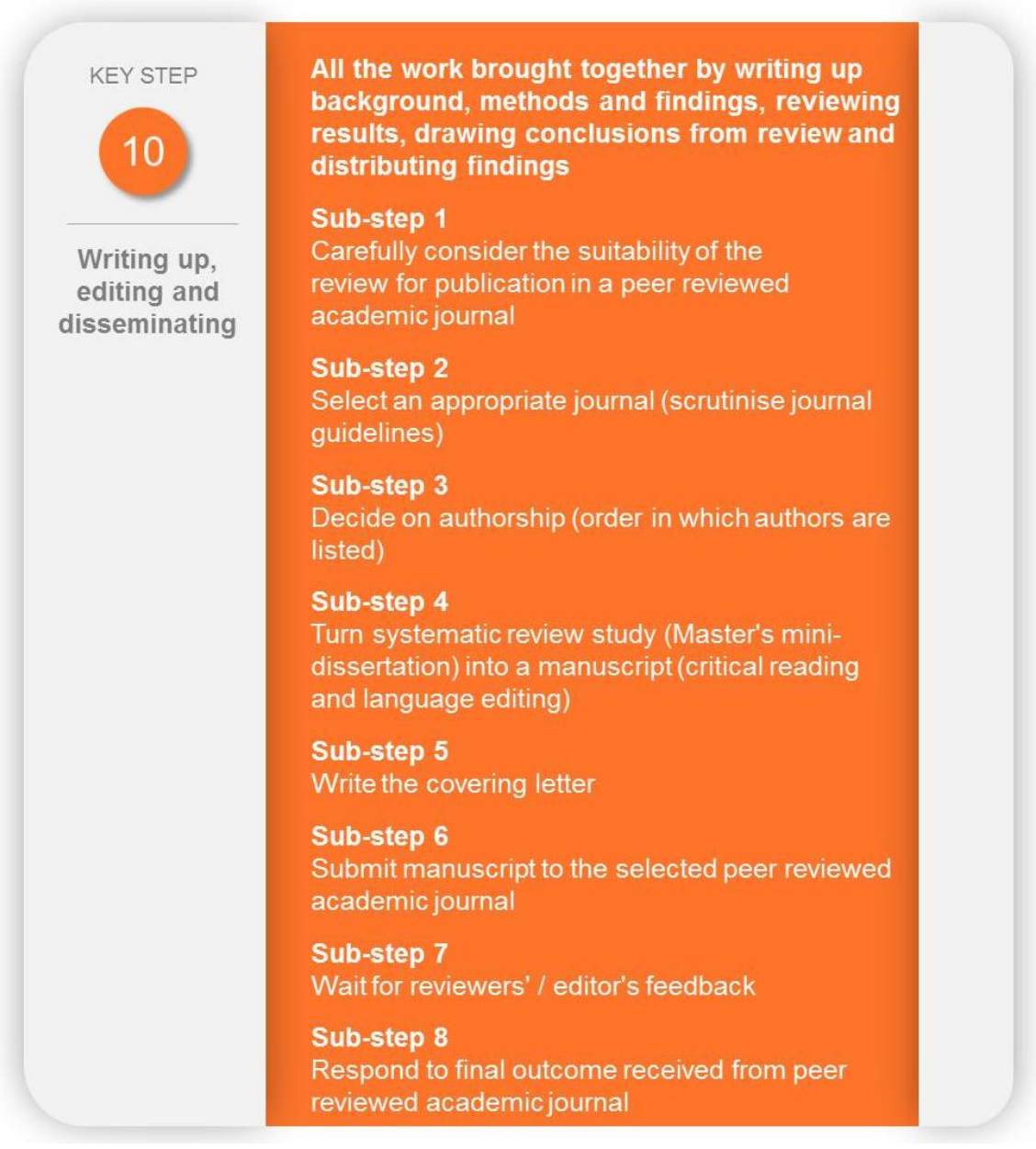

Figure 10. Key STEP 10: Writing up, editing and disseminating. Adapted from Cherry and Pilkington (2017, p. 179)

In the context of this systematic review study, writing up, editing and disseminating the research (Key STEP 10) is relevant as this research study, including the article that had to be submitted for examination, formed part of what was required for this Master's degree. Chapter 2 of this mini-dissertation comprised the article. The researcher followed the eight sub-steps as suggested by Cherry and Pilkington (2017) (see Figure 10 above). After scrutinising the aim and scope of the *Journal of Family Trauma, Child Custody, & Child Development (JFT),* formerly known as the *Journal of Child Custody,* the researcher decided that it would be an appropriate journal to which to submit the article. It invites submissions concerned with the following fields: attachment, child custody, divorce, parenting, assessment, child development, family psychology, interpersonal violence and abuse, trauma, and other significant fields. The research that is published in this journal enable professionals to keep abreast of the latest advances in practice and theory in the fields of child and family functioning. It gives them access to debates on complex legal and psychological difficulties experienced in conducting assessments or evaluations, including professional and ethical considerations related to child and family matters, and legal issues such as interventions, legal representation, testimony, and advocacy. What made the JFT especially appropriate for the researcher's purposes is that it publishes reviews of relevant literature.

A double-blind process of reviewing the submissions is used. In other words, the author's identity is not known to the reviewers and the reviewers' identity is not known to the author. The editorial board which comprises the peer reviewers consists of experts and professionals (mental health professionals, child custody evaluators, social workers, attorneys, judges, law enforcement professionals, medical professionals, and researchers) across disciplines

(interdisciplinary editorial board). They are dedicated to upholding the safety and best interests of children and families, particularly as they relate to different kinds of court cases.

Trustworthiness

Given and Saumure (2008) state that trustworthiness "allows researchers to describe the virtues of qualitative terms outside of the parameters that are typically applied in quantitative research" (p. 895). Trustworthiness has become an essential element in qualitative research. In this systematic review study, the researcher used Guba's (1981) model of trustworthiness to ensure trustworthiness. Krefting (1991) describes Guba's model of trustworthiness as having four standards and a strategy for each standard to enhance the trustworthiness of a research study: *truth value* (credibility), *applicability* (transferability), *consistency* (dependability) and *neutrality* (confirmability). Botma et al. (2010) included *authenticity* as a fifth element or standard. Although these standards and strategies to ensure trustworthiness are not conventionally used in systematic reviews, on the advice of the supervisor who has considerable experience of conducting systematic review research studies, these standards and accompanying strategies form part of the overall framework in this case. The trustworthiness model relevant to this systematic review study is presented in Table 4 below.

Table 4

Trustworthiness

Standard and Strategies	Application of Criteria to this Research
Truth Value establishes that the researcher has ascertained the truth of the research findings (Guba, 1981; Krefting, 1991). *Credibility* is the best strategy to enhance the truth value (Guba, 1981; Krefting, 1991).	• *Prolonged engagement* was used to enhance credibility. This criterion requires the researcher to be present and fully immersed in the research from data collection, through to data analysis and the reporting of the findings

	(engagement throughout the entire research process). • *Reflexivity* was also employed to enhance credibility. Constant reflection was a means of eliminating researcher bias and subjectivity (see Chapter 3: Critical Reflection). • The use of thematic analysis enhanced credibility (Braun & Clarke, 2006; Nowell et al., 2017). It was a way of ensuring that the findings were reported accurately. • Following the ten key steps in the systematic review process (especially conducting Key STEP 4-10) was another means of ensuring that the findings were truthfully/ accurately reported.
Applicability is the extent to which the findings can be applied to various settings and groups and refers to the generalisability of the findings (Guba, 1981; Krefting, 1991). The strategy to enhance applicability is *transferability* (Guba, 1981; Krefting, 1991).	• A *selection of sources and sampling* was used a means of enhancing transferability. This included a detailed description of the steps followed to develop inclusion and exclusion criteria as well as a discussion and explanation of the reasons for the inclusion or exclusion of studies. • Another criterion used to enhance transferability was *thick/dense descriptions*. This entailed providing a detailed description of the systematic review process; more specifically the ten key steps and all the sub-steps that were followed. All processes and procedures (e.g. the research plan and methodology) were discussed in detail.

	The limitations of the research study were also acknowledged.
	• Although a systematic review cannot be said to be completely applicable in the true sense of primary qualitative research, reporting the synthesised findings in a narrative style strengthened the transferability of this systemic review (Botma et al., 2010).
Consistency is concerned about whether consistent findings will be obtained if the inquiry is reproduced in a comparable setting (Guba, 1981; Krefting, 1991). *Dependability* is the best strategy to improve consistency (Guba, 1981; Krefting, 1991).	• The criterion of *stepwise replication* was applied in this study to improve its dependability. In this case, it involved reaching a consensus regarding screening titles and abstracts, obtaining papers, selecting full-text papers, determining theoretical standpoint and synthesis plan, data extraction, data presentation and quality appraisal/quality assessment, and analysis and synthesis of the data. The supervisor and researcher agreed on all decisions made.
	• Another criterion that was fused to enhance dependability was *code-recode/co-coder*. This was done during the analysis phase. Two weeks after the initial coding of the data, they were re-coded from scratch) and the findings were compared and necessary changes were made. The researcher also made use of a co-coder. The supervisor who has the expertise and the necessary skills to conduct high-level research (analysis) assisted with the coding and acted as the co-coder. The two of them worked independently of each other

	before comparing and discussing their findings. Once again the necessary changes were made.
Neutrality refers to the research process and the descriptions of the findings being free from bias (objective) (Guba, 1981; Krefting, 1991). It represents the extent to which the findings are merely a function of the conditions of the research. The strategy to enhance neutrality is *confirmability* (Guba, 1981; Krefting, 1991).	• *Reflexivity* was used to enhance confirmability. This meant the researcher needed to engage in constant reflection to remain aware/mindful of her own biases, prejudices and experiences throughout the entire research process (see Chapter 3: Critical Reflection). The supervisor and researcher held frequent discussions and meetings (constant communication) to reflect on all the decisions that were made, why these decisions were made and what decisions still needed to be made. The researcher also made observational and personal notes throughout the whole research process.
Authenticity is about the degree to which the research presents impartially and truly a range of various realities (Botma et al., 2010). *Fairness* is the appropriate strategy to enhance authenticity (Botma et al., 2010).	• T*he criterion, thick description,* was used to enhance impartiality (Amin et al., 2020). The researcher described the methodology for the systematic review in detail from the onset of planning to the end of the research study when writing the article (the ten key steps and all the sub-steps are described and discussed in detail). • The researcher also enhanced impartiality through establishing a set of inclusion and exclusion criteria to ensure that all the potentially significant data were included (Amin et al., 2020). The researcher viewed the process of this systematic review as an intensive process of consideration and

re-consideration and as a process of reflection and clarification.

Ethical Considerations

Ethical clearance (Ethics number NWU: NWU-00472-20-A1) was obtained from the Health Research Ethics Committee (HREC) from the North-West University before data collection commenced (See Appendix 5: Ethics Approval Letter of Study). This systematic review research study was considered a minimal risk study since no human or animal participants were involved. To ensure that this research study remained professional and ethically sound, the researcher acknowledged the research of other authors throughout the entire systematic review study. The researcher also employed the correct citations and reference techniques at all times to prevent plagiarism (Johnson, 2004; Mertens & Ginsberg, 2009; Shaughnessy et al., 2012; Wager & Wiffin, 2011).

The researcher monitored the implementation this systematic review study as designed and set out according to the ten key steps in the systematic review process. The researcher made sure to fully understand her role and responsibilities; what was expected during the various respective key steps and sub-steps as planned, explained, and described in the research proposal. In addition, the supervisor and researcher had regular meetings to discuss the progress made as well as the implementation of the step/s to follow. The researcher systematically and rigorously followed the relevant protocol for each key step and sub-steps of the systematic review.

To establish the highest ethical standards in this research study, the researcher rigorously met the requirements of professional and ethical practice (Sarantakos, 2013) This entailed ensuring that data was not falsified, fabricated, or inaccurately reported; that only applicable research methodology and appropriate methods were employed; that there were detailed descriptions of the screening and selection and that the appropriate inclusion and exclusion criteria, as well as the rationales for choosing them were detailed; that quality appraisal were

done; that appropriate data extraction was done; and that data analysis and synthesis were done. The researcher also made every effort to demonstrate a sense of responsibility, proficiency and respectability and to maintain professional integrity and objectivity (Wager & Wiffin, 2011).

The researcher also ensured that the included studies in this systematic review study were ethical. This meant ascertaining that the included studies had obtained ethical clearance (ethical approval); that the researchers had obtained the informed consent of the participants; and that the studies had met any other requirements of ethically sound research. The researcher also checked to see that the researchers concerned had employed rigorous and accountable methods and had reported the methodology transparently (explicitly) so that the findings could be interpreted and assessed correctly. Both the supervisor and researcher had considerable experience of reviewing articles. This was primarily gained during MA/MSC Research Psychology degree studies. The supervisor acquired ample experience of reviewing articles and conducting systematic reviews during his involvement in the supervision of students and self-published systematic reviews.

Before making any amendments during the execution of the research study, the researcher first sought advice and approval from the supervisor and the relevant ethics committees. The researcher rigorously met the requirement to report and record any aspect of the study that did not form part of the original research proposal (blue-print) that was approved. Although the research did not include working with human participants or animal participants, the researcher, nevertheless, meticulously reported any incidents that arose during the research process.

Summary

In Chapter 1, a detailed description of the contextualisation and problem statement was provided, that highlighted the significance of this systematic review study and discussed

the purpose statement that underscored the goal of this study. The review question, research aim and research methodology were also described. Particular attention was given to the choice of research design and the *ten Key STEPS* and all sub-steps *in the systematic review process* as proposed by Cherry et al. (2017) and Dickson et al. (2017) so that a transparent and clear description of all the methods that were employed was given.

The chapter also provided the rationale of the study and described the ways in which trustworthiness and ethical requirements for conducting a systematic review of scientific literature were. Chapter 2 provides the article that was written for possible publication in the *Journal of Family Trauma, Child Custody & Child Development*. The article includes the discussion of the findings of this systematic review study.

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Chapter 2

Article

Introduction

Chapter 2 of this qualitative systematic review study is an article titled "Attachment theory in/appropriately applied by mental health professionals in custody cases: A systematic review". The article below was constructed to meet the submission criteria for the *Journal of Family Trauma, Child Custody & Child Development* (see Journal Guidelines below).

Journal Guidelines

The ***Journal of Family Trauma, Child Custody, & Child Development (JFT),*** formerly *Journal of Child Custody,* provides access to the research, theories, ideas, commentaries, and experiences of leading experts in the fields of family psychology, child development, attachment, child custody, trauma, interpersonal violence and abuse, assessment, parenting, divorce, and other relevant areas. It keeps professionals up to date with the latest developments in the research and practice on these important areas of family and child functioning, as well as discussions about complex legal and psychological issues involved in their assessment or evaluations. While it will not shy away from controversial topics and ideas, the ***JFT*** is committed to publishing accurate, balanced, and scholarly articles as well as insightful reviews of relevant literature, research, and books covering these areas. It is important for practitioners to be aware and understand the latest techniques, science, ethical factors, best practices, and applications regarding child and family issues such that they are able to conduct evaluations, interventions, legal representation, testimony, and advocacy with respect to their profession and discipline. The journal is anonymously peer reviewed with an interdisciplinary editorial board comprised of child custody evaluators, mental health, social work, law enforcement and medical professionals, researchers, attorneys, and judges

committed to the safety and best interests of children and families, especially as they relate to various types of court cases.

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Attachment theory in/appropriately applied by mental health professionals in custody cases: A systematic review

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Abstract

Attachment theory is often applied in the context of custody cases with varying appropriateness. This qualitative systematic review aims at exploring how attachment theory tends to be inappropriately or appropriately applied by mental health professionals in custody cases. In order to facilitate this process, inclusion and exclusion criteria (eligibility criteria) were developed to identify all of the available and relevant studies within a particular period. Next, EBSCO Discovery Services (EDS) was employed to obtain a list of studies done between 1986 and 2020. The Preferred Reporting Items for Systematic Reviews and Meta-Analysis (PRISMA) guidelines was utilized to report the screening and selection process. A total of 10 studies met all the inclusion criteria. Thematic analysis of the findings or results and the discussion or conclusion sections of these studies allowed the following themes to emerge: *multimethod assessments* and *understanding attachment theory: scientific meaning*. The findings suggest that most mental health professionals are aware of the ways in which attachment theory can be inappropriately applied in custody cases. As a result these mental health professionals are able to apply attachment theory appropriately in custody cases. Taking the findings into consideration, the *best interests principle*, together with the *three attachment theory principles relevant to court practice*, is suggested as a way forward to guide mental health professionals in child custody decision making to promote the appropriate application of attachment theory in custody cases.

Keywords: Attachment; attachment theory; custody cases; mental health professionals

Introduction

In the last few decades, research has focused on the role of attachment theory in making recommendations regarding custody and visitation in custody cases (Forslund et al., 2021; George et al., 2011; Lowenstein, 2010; Main et al., 2011; Marvin & Schutz, 2009; McIntosh,

2011; McIntosh et al., 2010). Attachment theory, specifically linked theory and research on child development in the custody context, makes it possible to assess the child-parent attachment relationships and make recommendations (related to custody and visitation decisions) that promote the child's best interests (Child Welfare Information Gateway, 2020; De Wit, 2014; LeBlanc, 2020; Main et al., 2011; Marvin & Schutz, 2009; McIntosh, 2011; McIntosh et al., 2010).

In the next section, the problem statement is provided. This is related to the rising divorce rate that affects thousands of children annually, leading to change in family structures and reorganization that create stresses and disruptions in attachment relationships, negatively affecting children's development in various ways (Gharaibeh, 2015; Main et al., 2011). In child custody cases, it is important not only to apply attachment theory to promote the best interests of the child, but also to apply it appropriately. Not to do so can have a negative impact on children's development.

Next, a discussion of the conceptual and theoretical framework in which the review of attachment theory and custody cases is situated is presented. This discussion highlights the relevance of attachment theory to child custody cases and how mental health professionals who apply the three attachment theory principles relevant to court practice can appropriately apply attachment theory. Thereafter, the research methods employed in this systematic review study are described. Finally, the findings of this review are presented and discussed, before recommending how mental health professionals can promote the best interests of children by appropriately applying attachment theory in custody cases.

Problem statement

The rising divorce rate has become a matter of global concern (DePaulo, 2019; Wang & Schofer, 2018). Statistics show that the divorce rate more than doubled between 1970 and 2008, from 2.6 divorces for every 1,000 married individuals to 5.5 (Wang & Schofer, 2018).

Main et al. (2011) explain that attachment theory is directly relevant to child custody since divorce produces stress and disrupts attachment relationships, especially those between children and their parents. Divorce means that families have to undergo an intricate series of marital transitions and family reorganizations which not only lead to changes in family roles and family relationships, but also affect the individual adjustment parents and children have to make (Gharaibeh, 2015). As a result of divorce, these transitions within families affect the divorcees' children at various developmental levels (Amato, 2001; Arkes, 2015; Bing et al., 2009; Fladmo & Hertlein, 2017; Lowenstein, 2010). Even though research has shown that children from divorced families do not necessarily suffer lasting detrimental consequences, divorce still puts children at risk in a wide range of various developmental domains (Arkes, 2015; Hashemi & Homayuni, 2017). Some of the possible developmental effects entail problems relating to peers; a negative self-concept; academic or achievement issues; lifestyle changes such as relocating; new family structures; negative changes in mood and behavior; detached attachment relationships between a parent and child and the likelihood of alienation from a parent and/or a sibling, which seem to cause the child immense distress and possible depression and lead to adjustment problems (Amato, 2001; Arkes, 2015; Garber, 2004; Lowenstein, 2010; Main et al., 2011; Theunissen et al., 2017).

The need for attachment assessments, especially in high-conflict controversial divorces, has become increasingly important (Marvin & Schutz, 2009). Comprehensive attachment assessments have to be done before mental health professionals can customize recommendations for the family concerned; there is no universal visitation schedule or custody

decision suitable for all families (Marvin & Schutz, 2009; McIntosh et al., 2010). Mental health professionals can use validated attachment assessments to predict the likely course of the parent-child attachment relationship. The proviso here is that the context needs to remain the same and mental health professionals need to do validated assessments to identify possible factors regarding attachment, resilience, caregiving, as well as risks that could either benefit or retard the developmental growth of the child (George et al., 2011).

Attachment theory is frequently misunderstood and inappropriately applied by members of the mental health and legal professions, which could lead to clinical errors and minimize the scientific credibility of the custody and visitation recommendations made (Forslund et al., 2021; Granqvist et al., 2017; LeBlanc, 2020). One reason for misunderstanding attachment theory is inadequate knowledge of attachment theory. It seems that some mental health professionals do not have the time to expand their knowledge of current research on attachment theory and its relevance to custody cases (Boris & Renk, 2017; Granqvist et al., 2017; Ludolph & Dale, 2012). Many of them apply attachment theory inappropriately because they have not had the necessary training (in attachment theory or the use of validated attachment assessments) to be able to apply it to custody cases (Ludolph & Dale, 2012). Various attachment theory concepts are not well-understood, and sometimes informal attachment assessments of the parent-child relationship are used. As a consequence, the procedures mental health professionals employ do not generate the data that are required for appropriate application of attachment theory (Lee et al., 2011; Ludolph & Dale, 2012; Spies & Duschinsky, 2021). Another way in which attachment theory has been inappropriately applied in custody cases is that incorrect assumptions are made: mothers are awarded custody, on the grounds of gender, in the belief that women are better caregivers (Lowenstein, 2010; Skelton et al., 2010); only one parent is awarded primary custody on the assumption that children can develop and maintain a secure attachment relationship with only one primary attachment caregiver (Forslund et al., 2021); custody decisions are made in

the mistaken belief that attachment relationships are fixed and cannot change (Opie et al., 2020; Pinquart et al., 2013; Sroufe, 2005); and decisions are made that reinforce the idea that insecure attachment relationships equal pathology (Granqvist et al., 2017). In particular, it seems that disorganized-disoriented attachment as a category of insecure attachment has been inappropriately applied. It is regularly viewed as a sound predictor of pathology that cannot be changed through attachment specific interventions, and also that it automatically implies that a child is being maltreated (Granqvist et al., 2017).

The aim of the research reported in this article is to shed light on how attachment theory is inappropriately or appropriately applied in custody cases by mental health professionals.

The following review question was used: *How is attachment theory inappropriately or appropriately applied by mental health professionals in custody cases reported in the literature?* The qualitative systematic review was limited to custody cases reported in scholarly publications between 1986 and 2020. The rationale for choosing a systematic review is that it provides a comprehensive overview of all available evidence on the review topic at a particular time and helps to identify research gaps in the current understanding of the subject of interest.

Conceptual and theoretical framework against which the systematic review was done

The pioneers of attachment theory, John Bowlby (1960) and Mary Ainsworth (1967), view attachment as an infant-caregiver connection promoting protection and safety regulation. Attachment is a strong and lasting emotional connection that an infant develops with the primary caregiver, a connection that is biologically embedded in the task of protection from endangerment (Bowlby, 1982). Fundamentally, a child gains a sense of protection against injury as well as a sense of having emotional security (a secure base) for their attachment relationships (Ainsworth, 1967; Bowlby, 1982). These attachment relationships are viewed as crucial for

later development, particularly regarding children's personality functioning (Bowlby, 1960; McIntosh, 2011).

In the context of child custody there are several mental health professionals involved in determining custody decisions (Grohol, 2019; Main, et al., 2011). Ideally, mental health professionals, typically clinical psychologists and social workers, evaluate the family and make recommendations (reports) to the court with regard to custody and/or visitation or parenting plans that are in the best interests of the child (De Wit, 2014; LeBlanc, 2020; Schraegle, 2014; Skelton et al., 2010; Skivenes & Sørsdal, 2018). This dominant principle (best interests principle) is widely seen as a way of assisting mental health professionals to apply attachment theory appropriately in custody cases as it takes account of various factors related to the protection (security) and well-being of children (American Psychological Association [APA], 2010; Belmont, 2017; Child Welfare Information Gateway, 2020; Isaacs et al., 2009; Purvis et al., 2010). When attachment theory is appropriately applied in custody cases, it assists mental health professionals to develop and recommend supportive and evidence-based interventions, which contribute to the protection of children, and promote their well-being and socioemotional development (Forslund et al., 2021). On the other hand, when attachment theory is inappropriately applied in custody cases, it can have a deleterious effect on children's development (Forslund et al., 2021).

Forslund et al. (2021) recommend three attachment theory principles relevant to court practice which can guide mental health professionals (set of criteria) to appropriately apply attachment theory:

Principle 1: The child's need for familiar, non-abusive, and non-neglecting caregivers

The attachment relationships children develop and maintain with their familiar, non-abusive and non-neglecting caregivers may contribute to their psychosocial development (Forslund et al., 2021; George et al., 2011; McIntosh, 2011). This principle also makes provision for the

consideration and identification of other types of care (i.e., institutional care or foster care) when needed. However, if they are not being abused or neglected, children are likely to be better off with their familiar, non-abusive and non-neglecting caregivers (Forslund et al., 2021; Kruk, 2010).

Principle 2: The value of continuity of good-enough care

For children to develop the expectation of having a safe haven, they need to experience sufficient continuous interaction (continuity of good-enough care) with their caregivers (Forslund et al., 2021). Even if other caregivers seem set to be better suited than the child's current caregiver(s), the value of continuity of good enough care should still be part of the decision making and a way of ensuring this, through interventions or programs, should be offered to the new caregivers (Forslund et al., 2021; George et al., 2011; Sager, 2015).

Principle 3: A network of attachment relationships as an asset for children

It can be a great strength for children to have a network of multiple attachment relationships (Forslund et al., 2021; Kruk, 2010; Sroufe & McIntosh, 2011). During the custody decision making process, additional attachment relationships should be considered such as foster parents, adoptive parents, grandparents, stepparents, siblings and extended family members (Forslund et al., 2021). These networks of attachment relationships can play an immense role in protecting children's sense of well-being and safety (Forslund et al., 2021; Marcus & Mirle, 1990).

Non-compliance on the part of mental health professionals with the three attachment theory principles relevant to court practice (criteria) that were noted above is likely to result in the inappropriate application of attachment theory in custody cases.

The following section describes the research design and the methods used to explore how attachment theory had been inappropriately or appropriately applied in custody cases by mental health professionals reported in the literature.

Research method

Research design

A qualitative systematic review was conducted, employing the *10 Key STEPS* and *sub-steps in the systematic review process* as proposed by Cherry et al. (2017), Dickson et al. (2017) and Dundar and Fleeman (2017a) as the research design. Inclusion and exclusion criteria (eligibility criteria) were set to identify all available and relevant primary research on attachment theory and custody cases published between 1986 and 2020. This decision was based on the publication of the attachment classifications and attachment categories. There are two attachment classifications – secure attachment and insecure attachment – as well as three categories of insecure attachment, namely anxious-ambivalent attachment, anxious-avoidant attachment, and disorganized-disoriented attachment. The latter category (disorganized-disoriented attachment) was published for the first time in 1986 (Main & Solomon, 1986). The findings or results and the discussion or conclusion sections of the final 10 included studies were then thematically analyzed in order to best answer the review question.

Inclusion and exclusion criteria (eligibility criteria)

To define and develop the inclusion criteria **PICo**, a tool used in qualitative systematic reviews that comprises: **P**opulation (participants) to be investigated; phenomena of **I**nterest (it can be a condition or intervention) and the **Co**ntext (Cherry et al., 2017; Joanna Briggs Institute [JBI], 2014) was employed. **PICo** allowed to select the type of studies that should be included in the systematic review without risking excluding any potentially relevant studies (Cherry et al.,

2017). In this systematic review, the specific inclusion criteria based on **PICo** entailed: **P**opulation (participants): *mental health professionals*; Phenomenon of **I**nterest: *the inappropriate or appropriate application of attachment theory* (The application/use of attachment theory); **Co**ntext: *custody cases, nationally and internationally.*

All full-text journal studies, peer reviewed studies, PhD theses and Master's dissertations or mini-dissertations published online (the only type of grey literature included), and studies with any research methodology and any research design (e.g. quantitative, qualitative, and mixed-methods) published between 1986 and 2020 in English or Afrikaans (the languages in which the authors are proficient) were included. Reviews (secondary) studies were excluded as this systematic review was concerned only with the results of primary research studies (Gough et al., 2017).

Search strategy

Databases and keywords. For the main search, a South African university's online library was used. More specifically the electronic EBSCO Discovery Service (EDS) was used to conduct the main search on the basis of the following keywords and synonyms: *Attachment theory* – "attachment" OR "attachment theory" OR "attachment assessments" OR "attachment status" OR "secure attachment" OR "insecure attachment" OR "anxious-ambivalent attachment" OR "anxious-avoidant attachment" OR "disorganised-disoriented attachment" AND *Mental health professionals* – "mental health professionals" OR "mental health experts" OR "mental health practitioners" OR "clinicians" OR "custody evaluators" OR "clinical psychologists" OR "psychologists" OR "psychiatrists" OR "developmental psychologists" OR "family psychologists" OR "therapists" OR "counsellors" OR "social workers" AND *Custody cases* – "custody" OR "custody cases" OR "custody evaluations" OR "custody proceedings" OR "custody processes" OR "child custody" OR "child custody cases" OR "child custody

evaluations" OR "child custody proceedings" OR "child custody processes" OR "child custody evaluation processes" OR divorce proceedings". This search platform made it possible to select the following databases: Academic Search Complete, APA PsycArticles, APA PsycInfo, Medline, Science Direct, Scopus, and SoccINDEX with Full Text. Google Scholar was used as a complementary search activity using the keywords as mentioned above (Dundar & Fleeman, 2017b).

It is important to note that *inappropriate* and *appropriate* were not adopted as keywords as they did not provide enough relevant studies. The choice of the keywords listed above ensured that the search was sufficiently balanced when it came to specifying (identifying relevant studies) and sensitivity (not identifying too many irrelevant studies) (Dundar & Fleeman, 2017b).

Screening and selection process

The screening and selection process yielded 10 studies to be evaluated/assessed against the set inclusion and exclusion criteria (eligibility criteria) mentioned earlier. The search initially yielded 135 potential studies, of which 15 studies were duplicates, meaning a study appeared more than once. The duplicates were deleted. The remaining 120 potential studies were screened (Stage 1: screening titles and abstracts only). As a result, 94 of these studies were excluded as they did not meet all of the inclusion criteria. One of the remaining 26 full-text studies could not be retrieved. Stage 2 was then conducted, which entailed screening the remaining 25 full-text studies. 15 full-text studies were excluded as they did not meet all of the inclusion criteria. As already mentioned, a total of 10 studies met all of the inclusion criteria and were included in the systematic review. These studies were: George et al. (2011), Isaacs et al. (2009), Kruk (2010), LeBlanc (2020), Marcus and Mirle (1990), McIntosh (2011), Purvis et al. (2010), Sager (2015), Schraegle (2014), Sroufe and McIntosh (2011).

The Preferred Reporting of Items for Systematic Reviews and Meta-Analysis (PRISMA) guidelines was used to report on the screening and selection process as explained above and schematically represented in Figure 1 below (Page et al., 2020).

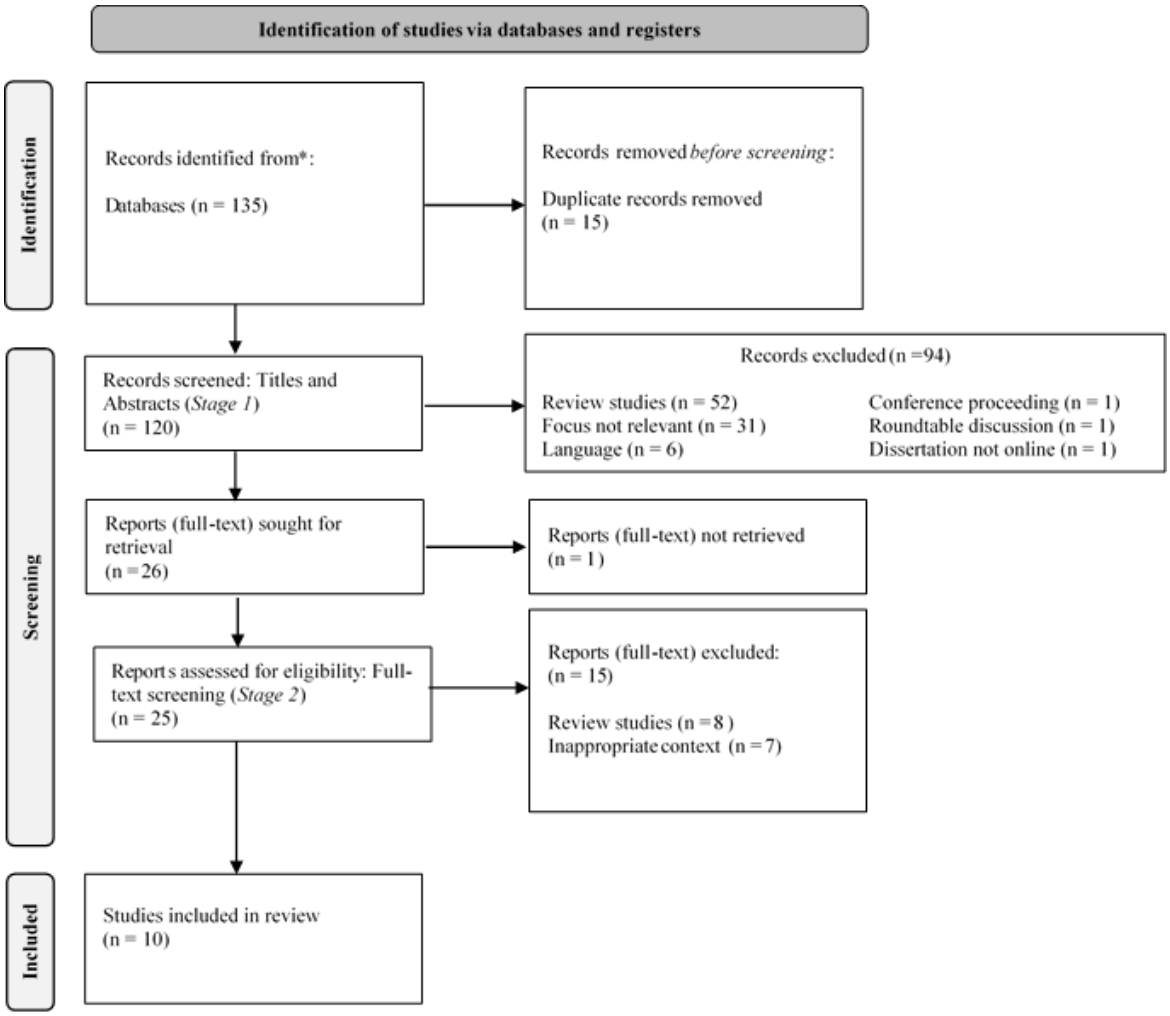

Figure 1. Flow diagram of the screening and selection process following the Preferred Reporting Items for Systematic Reviews and Meta-Analysis (PRISMA) guidelines.

Quality assessment

The Mixed Methods Appraisal Tool (MMAT) is a tool that granted the opportunity to appraise the methodological quality of the following types of studies namely: i) qualitative studies, ii) quantitative non-randomized studies, iii) quantitative descriptive studies, and iv)

mixed methods studies (Mixed Methods Appraisal Tool [MMAT], 2018). The MMAT was adopted, therefore, adopted as the most appropriate appraisal tool as it allowed for the appraisal of the methodological quality (MMAT, 2018) of all of the 10 included studies of this systematic review study.

It is important to take note that although the quality assessment did not aim at answering the review question, it was a key step in the systematic review process (Cherry et al., 2017; Greenhalgh & Brown, 2017). The quality assessment step also provided the knowledge regarding the possible influence the methodological quality of the 10 included studies might have on the credibility of the main findings of this systematic review (Greenhalgh & Brown, 2017). The methodological quality of the 10 included studies was assessed as good (see Table 1 below).

Table 1. Methodological quality.

Mixed Method Appraisal Tool (MMAT) adopted from MMAT (2018): Methodological Criteria (Checklist)	10 Included Studies	Type of Studies	Determined Overall Methodological Quality
Clear research question/s; data collected makes it possible to address the research question/s; qualitative approach appropriate to answer the research question; qualitative data collection methods adequate to answer research question; findings adequately derived from data; interpretation of results sufficiently substantiated by data; and coherence between qualitative data sources, collection, analysis and interpretation (MMAT, 2018).	LeBlanc (2020) McIntosh (2011) Sroufe and McIntosh (2011)	3 Qualitative studies	Good Good Good
Clear research question/s; data collected makes it possible to address the research question/s; participants representative of the target population; appropriate measures regarding both the outcome and intervention (or exposure); complete outcome data; cofounders accounted for in the design and analysis; and intervention (or exposure) administered as intended (MMAT, 2018).	Schraegle (2014)	1 Quantitative Non-Randomized Study	Good
Clear research question/s; data collected makes it possible to address the research question/s; sampling strategy relevant to research question; sample representative of the target population; appropriate measurements; low risk of non-response bias; and appropriate statistical analysis to answer the research question (MMAT, 2018).	Marcus and Mirle (1990) Sager (2015)	2 Quantitative Descriptive Studies	Good Good
Clear research question/s; data collected makes it possible to address the research question/s; adequate rationale for using a mixed methods design to address research question; effective integration of different components of the study to answer the research question; adequate interpretation of the outputs of the integration of the qualitative and quantitative components; divergences and inconsistencies between quantitative and qualitative results adequately addressed; and adherence of the different components of the study to the quality criteria of each tradition of the methods involved (MMAT, 2018).	George et al. (2011) Isaacs et al. (2009) Kruk (2010) Purvis (2010)	4 Mixed Methods Studies	Good Good Good Good

Data extraction

Data was extracted from the findings or results sections of the 10 included studies, as well as from the discussion or conclusion sections of these studies. The data extracted from the 10 included studies are presented in Table 2 below. These were used to conduct the thematic analysis from which the themes and sub-themes emerged. The information captured and presented in Table 2 was cross-checked by a second reviewer to keep data extraction errors to a minimum.

Table 2. Study findings.

Title of Study	Author(s)	Summary of Included Studies' Findings or Results and Discussion or Conclusion Sections
Incorporating Attachment Assessment into Custody Evaluations: The Case of a 2-year-old and her Parents	George et al. (2011)	A comprehensive set of assessments were used (multimethod assessments). Extensive information on parents was generated by means of interviews – individual and joint; discussions with collateral sources; court orders; statements prepared by both parents; and e-mail communication. Psychological testing was conducted through personality measures, specifically the MMPI-2 and the Rorschach. Comprehensive attachment evaluation involved: The Strange Situation (attachment and caregiving behavioral assessment); The Caregiving Interview; and The AAP (Adult Attachment Representation) (caregiving and adult attachment representational assessments). Discrepancies were found between the results of the personality tests and the validated attachment evaluations, as well as between the validated attachment assessments and the caregiving behavioral and representational assessments. It would have been difficult to make custody and visitation recommendations based solely on the personality assessment results. Information concerning personality, as well as mental health, does not necessarily give information about attachment, which is why it was important to do attachment and caregiving assessments to gain a deeper understanding of how the parents' personality issues were not influencing their relationship with their child. After custody evaluation, the results of the comprehensive attachment evaluation were used to inform recommendations/suggestions with regard to custody, such as suggesting joint custody, and visitation rights. The results were also used to suggest ways of resolving any problems or conflicts between parents (parenting coordinator). By combining more traditional personality assessments and attachment assessments, the incremental validity of the complete clinical evaluation was improved. The measures/assessments also gave a deeper understanding of the general results of adult personality measures and assisted the researchers to interpret the collateral interviews and other sources. The ability to compare data from a variety of cases and situations is one of the greatest benefits attachment-based measures offer researchers and evaluators (scientific credibility).
Guest Editor's Introduction to Special Issue on Attachment Theory, Separation, and Divorce: Forging Coherent Understandings for Family Law	McIntosh (2011)	The use of the term "primary parent" is often problematic. This term should not be used to refer to being the better parent or be based solely on gender. The "primary parent" refers to the parent able to provide the more important features of attachment development. "Attachment" is not a shorthand term: it denotes an intricate relationship that fosters a host of developmental aspects in children. After custody evaluation, recommendations can be made using the results of the attachment evaluation to inform custody decision-making such as who should have sole custody or whether limited or no visitation rights should be awarded because of domestic violence, trauma, or extreme conflict between parents. Gender bias does not exist when it comes to infants forming an attachment; both parents are important. Therefore, assessment of attachment should consider both parents. Being a woman is not a perquisite for being a "primary caregiver". Validated measures/assessments should be used, and they should be applied and interpreted in a skillful manner. Multimethod assessments should be applied (comprehensive measures). It is not sufficient to apply only attachment measures as they are not a substitute for clinical evaluations. However, when they are used in collaboration with clinical evaluations, attachment measures can add significant clinical value to parenting assessments in custody cases. They allow mental health professionals to gain a deeper understanding, which makes it possible to either corroborate or challenge their observations. Using attachment theory in custody cases thus provides a robust developmental framework which mental health

		professionals and family law professionals can use to assist them to make the difficult decisions that have to be made. It also helps them to test their personal thoughts, opinions and beliefs.
Divorce and Attachment Relationships: The Longitudinal Journey	Sroufe and McIntosh (2011)	Problematic language of attachment. Misunderstanding: the primary attachment figure is based on care and protection (survival needs) and quality of emotional response, not on the amount of time spent together, no on quantity. The primary attachment figure is not always the mother, who is not necessarily the better parent, and the situation can change. Infants and children can have multiple attachment figures – not just one attachment is formed. Equal time with both parents is not necessary for children to achieve two meaningful relationships (a developmentally ignorant view of attachment displays no understanding of attachment). Decisions based on attachment in custody cases should offer children the best chance possible of overcoming the challenges they will have to face. There is some misunderstanding about the distress an infant exhibits when leaving or returning to the primary parent. Sometimes a mother who is the primary parent will report that an infant becomes upset upon returning to her, instead of understanding that the behavior is normal (an infant being upset upon reunion does not mean anything is wrong).
Parental and Social Institutional Responsibilities to Children's Needs in the Divorce Transition: Fathers' Perspectives	Kruk (2010)	Fathers experienced "gender bias". Mothers were given the role of "primary attachment figure" solely because they were women as the courts have a maternal custody order preference. Fathers felt that they were also important attachment figures in their children's lives (they could also be primary attachment figures). In fact, both parents are important attachment figures. Fathers experienced "parental alienation" and "access denial" and felt unsupported and disregarded by courts and social institutions with regard to their attachment relationships with their children. For the fathers, attachment to their children was based on quality time spent with them; they wanted to be actively involved in their children's lives – not just in a "visiting context" or having "access". They felt a strong need for regular and significant contact away from the constraints of court-ordered "access" and "visiting". Attachment relationships are also based on and formed by fulfilling the child's needs (safety, protection, emotional needs, and physical needs). Fathers experienced "inequality" and "gender bias" in that the courts and social institutions undermined the father–child attachment relationship. The fathers also felt that there was a need for legal protection of paternal attachment relationships; courts disrupt children's lives by removing or disregarding fathers as primary attachment figures (caregivers) by awarding the mother sole custody.
Utilizing Attachment Measures in Child Custody Evaluations: Incremental Validity	Isaacs et al. (2009)	Multimethod (comprehensive) assessments were used to assess the attachment relationships between Thomas and his mother and Thomas and his father. The following assessments were used: Rorschach; MMPI-2; Strange Situation; Caregiving Interview; and AAP (Adult Attachment Projective Picture System). Traditional clinical personality tests were administered (i.e., Rorschach and MMPI-2). These personality tests are used so that psychologists can use the results to deduce how each adult might function as a parent. These tests are usually used in traditional evaluation to develop hypotheses about each parent. Psychologists tested the generated hypotheses by assessing the interaction between parent and child and the parents' attachment–caregiving relationship. This was assessed by means of three attachment instruments: the Strange Situation, the Caregiving Interview, and the Adult Attachment Picture Projective (AAP). Standardized and validated assessments were used. In most traditional child custody evaluations, parent–child observations are not standardized: they lack systematic scientific validation, their reliability has not been tested, and they are informal.

		Inferences drawn from informal evaluations are based on informal clinical judgement and not on scientific validation (precision and empirical testing from standardized tests). The coding of the instruments was conducted by an expert judge and one of the originators of these assessments (Carol George). The use of multiple (multimethod/comprehensive) assessments suggested that the father was the most suitable parent because he would be most able to meet Thomas' needs regarding attachment. There was no gender bias or maternal preference. Although Multiple Attachment assessments complicate the evaluator's recommendations. However, the recommendations are then based on scientific validity, and recommendations can be made with confidence. Validated and standardized measures are important to obtain objective information which enables more objective decision-making and recommendations to be made. The attachment assessments attribute meaning to the general results of adult personality tests and assist in interpreting collateral interviews, as well as the ethics of the people speaking on the behavior of children and their parents. It also allows for researchers and evaluators to compare data. This comparison strengthens the scientific credibility of the measures and offers more insights to evaluators that help them to make more objective recommendations (to be more objective).
Validity of a Child Interview Measure of Attachment as used in Child Custody Evaluations	Marcus and Mirle (1990)	Depending on the gender of the child and the subscale of the measure used, the Parent Attachment Structured Interview (PAS Interview) has proved to be a good predictor of mental health in children. There were statistically significant differences between boys and girls were observed in favor of boys on three criterion variables: i). internalizing; ii). externalizing; and iii). social competence. Thus, the patterns of correlations for girls and boys were fairly different, as were the scores on three criterion variables. For boys, the parent with the higher positive attachment score is preferred, whereas for girls, a higher positive attachment to their fathers is preferred. For girls, higher positive attachment to their mothers may be dysfunctional with regard to development of social competence (further research is needed to verify this). When using the PAS Interview, mental health professionals frequently erroneously measure children's perceptions of verbal and parental punitiveness as hostility or a negative element of attachment. The negative perceptions children have of their parents' response to their behavior should not be understood as evidence of destructive behavior on the part of the parents. Greater preference is erroneously given to parents who sidestep overly harsh punishment and those who use "softer" ways of discipline or whose method of punishment is felt to be reasonable by the child. Great caution should be exercised when basing a decision on a measure of attachment in custody cases. The gender differences identified thus far must be considered when making practical custody decisions.
An Attachment Based Approach to Child Custody Evaluation: A Case Study	Purvis et al. (2010)	Multimethod assessments such as the AAI (Adult Attachment Inventory) were used, and neurotransmitter testing was added to the traditional observation for assessing attachment relationships and to the traditional instruments of measurement. This comprehensive way of assessment offers greater insight into or greater comprehension of the attachment relationship between the child and caregiver. The AAI is a valid and reliable measure to use in child custody cases (its validity and reliability have been established). The majority of court evaluators appropriately assess the best interests of the child, specifically in cases where abuse and neglect are present. However, some mental health professionals and social workers grapple with their own biases. When there is an absence of tangible evidence for or against the existence of abuse and/or neglect, the courts are likely to depend on the judgements (biases) of the same mental health professionals and social workers. Therefore, this study suggested possible new objective assessments to gauge the safety and cognitive/psycho-emotional functioning of children. By measuring the NT levels alongside the other clinical measures

		offered, a completer and more objective picture of the child's level of functioning and the mayhem they may possibly be experiencing (a clearer picture of the case) was provided. The decisions (recommendations) made with regard to placement were based on empirical evidence, not just personal judgements and biases.
Expert Opinions on the Inclusion of Attachment-related Measures in Bilateral Custody Assessments and Parenting Capacity Assessments	LeBlanc (2020)	The majority of the participants expressed a need for or showed an interest in utilizing the KIDS in Divorce protocol in their assessments. They also felt a need to receive adequate training, for the protocol to be easy to apply, for the protocol to be validated, and for it to be culturally sensitive. The majority of the participants/clinicians indicated that they applied their own clinical judgement (own judgement/biases) when attachment was assessed instead of using standardized attachment measures. This could lead to clinical errors. The KIDS in Divorce protocol offers a standardized approach to attachment assessment as part of BCAs and PCAs; it also offers a comprehensive attachment assessment that is child focused and assists in promoting the best interests of children principle in custody cases.
An Examination of the Possible Use of Attachment Assessments for Making Child Custody Decisions	Sager (2015)	Multiple measures of assessment were used (PRQ-P and AQS). They offer a deeper understanding of the attachment relationships and functioning between children and their parents. Attachment patterns (relationships) are not static and can change overtime. Thus, it is important for evaluators and mental health professionals to focus on repairing possible attachment problems that have been identified in custody cases, especially insecure or disorganized attachment. Recommendations should be made such as providing attachment programs to rebuild or repair the attachment relationships (after custody recommendations/support). Many states in the USA use the opinions of experts (evaluators or child custody mediators) to establish a supported opinion (judgement) about the type of parenting plan (visitation plan) that would be in the best interests of the child. The ultimate goal of evaluating attachment in child custody cases should be the best interests of the child. When observers (mental health professionals) have been trained to use the AQS, they may have a more objective understanding of secure base behaviors commonly related to secure attachment.
The Role of Adult Attachment in Child Custody Litigants	Schraegle (2014)	Multiple assessments were used (standardized testing and clinical interviews; standardized administration of the Rorschach Inkblot Test). The Rorschach assessments were administered, and results were coded and interpreted according to the R-PAS (Rorschach Performance Assessment System) administration scoring. The R-PAS is an improved evidence-based Rorschach system. Administrative changes were made to increase reliability, as well as scoring consistency, and to be able to make more normative comparisons, even though many of the procedures and characteristics are to be found in former Rorschach research. One of the significant benefits of employing the Rorschach to measure adult attachment lies in its ability to measure at the representational level rather than through parent-child observation that is staged or self-reported; the Rorschach reaches beyond the hurdle of impression management, which is often used in child custody litigation. As the Rorschach is a commonly used assessment in child custody litigation, forensic evaluators can research this phenomenon without foregoing their professional responsibilities. All factors of attachment relationships within child custody cases should be explored and considered through the lens of the "best interests of the child". Doing so makes more systematic decisions and recommendations on caregiving ability, co-parenting relationships and parental competence possible.

Data analysis

This systematic review was largely integrative (aggregative) as it aimed to collect data across studies and summarize it into themes which were mainly well-defined or specified beforehand (Cherry et al., 2017). However, this review also had an interpretive element. This meant that themes emerged during the course of interpreting the findings or results and the discussion or conclusion sections of the 10 included studies (Table 2). Thematic analysis was used to conduct the data analysis. This focused on identifying, describing, explaining, substantiating and linking themes (Braun & Clarke, 2012; Kampira, 2021).

Main findings

The main findings of this systematic review indicate that attachment theory is inappropriately and appropriately applied by mental health professionals in custody cases. The following two main themes with their subsequent sub-themes emerged: *multimethod assessments* and *understanding attachment theory: scientific meaning.*

Theme 1 – Multimethod assessments

This theme emphasizes that multimethod assessments consist of both traditional personality tests and attachment assessments. Traditional personality tests are used in custody cases as part of clinical evaluation. However, attachment assessments are also needed. They add value to the traditional personality tests, thus improving the incremental validity of the complete clinical evaluation. Multimethod assessments also add value to the custody and visitation recommendations (custody decisions) made by mental health professionals and hold a variety of advantages. The advantages of multimethod assessments include enabling the adherence to the best interests principle; making it possible to compare data from a variety of custody cases;

eliminating potentially biased custody decisions; and increasing the possibility of objective recommendations.

Sub-theme 1: Incremental validity

Four studies reported that many mental health professionals employ traditional personality tests as part of clinical evaluation (George et al., 2011; Isaacs et al., 2009; McIntosh, 2011; Schraegle, 2014). However, Isaacs et al. (2009) have indicated that personality tests do not necessarily provide information on attachment. Therefore, attachment assessments and personality tests should both be applied: the one is not a substitute for the other (George et al., 2011; Isaacs et al., 2009; McIntosh, 2011; Schraegle, 2014). Attachment assessments used together with personality tests also provide a strong developmental framework for custody decision-making for mental health professionals, legal societies and parents (McIntosh, 2011). Thus, combining both personality tests and attachment assessments offers a way to appropriately apply attachment theory in custody cases. When attachment theory is appropriately applied, that is by using the results of attachment assessments and the results of personality tests to inform custody decision-making, a deeper understanding is created of what would be in the best interests of the child (George et al., 2011; Isaacs et al., 2009; McIntosh, 2011; Schraegle, 2014). Combining the results of attachment assessments with the results of personality tests provides a deeper understanding of how the parents' personality issues were/were not influencing their attachment relationship with their child/ren (George et al., 2011). This reveals the complexity of the process, but also creates a way for mental health professionals to appropriately apply attachment theory and to make recommendations for custody and visitation that are not solely based on personality test results (George et al., 2011).

Sub-theme 2: Advantages of multimethod assessments

Multimethod assessments are viewed as a comprehensive assessment that is done during custody cases to ensure that the custody decisions made are based on scientific findings or empirical evidence (Purvis et al., 2010) that would best suit the child (LeBlanc, 2020; Schraegle, 2014). Thus, mental health professionals gain a comprehensive view regarding the child-parent attachment relationship (Purvis et al., 2010), as well as the custody decisions or recommendations that should be in the child's best interests (LeBlanc, 2020; Sager, 2015; Schraegle, 2014). Thus, applying multimethod assessments to custody cases offers the best chance of making custody decisions that make it easier for the children concerned to meet the challenges they face (Sroufe & McIntosh, 2011). Multimethod assessments therefore ensure that the best interests principle is applied (LeBlanc, 2020; Purvis et al., 2010; Sager, 2015; Schraegle, 2014).

Multimethod assessments enable the comparison of data from a variety of custody cases (George et al., 2011; Isaacs et al., 2009). This means that mental health professionals are able to compare different outcomes from various custody cases which strengthens the scientific credibility of the assessments applied, as well as the custody and visitation recommendations made by mental health professionals (George et al., 2011; Isaacs et al., 2009). By comparing the data from a variety of custody cases, mental health professionals gain greater insight into making custody decisions and recommendations and they are able to see how to appropriately incorporate and apply multimethod assessments during their clinical evaluations (George et al., 2011; Isaacs et al., 2009).

Multimethod assessments also eliminate the possibility of biased custody decisions which, in turn, minimizes the possibility of the inappropriate application of attachment theory (Isaacs et al., 2009; McIntosh, 2011). More specifically, applying multimethod assessments eliminate gender bias such as maternal preference solely based on gender. Decisions on the

primary attachment caregiver should be based on empirical evidence, not the personal biases of mental health professionals (Isaacs et al., 2009; Purvis et al., 2010).

Multimethod assessments offer a more complete and objective view or picture of the custody case (Purvis et al., 2010); notably custody decisions are based on the results of these multimethod assessments and not on the personal biases and judgements of the mental health professionals (Isaacs et al., 2009; Purvis et al., 2010). Thus, when custody decisions are based on multimethod assessments, the result is that attachment theory is appropriately applied in custody cases (Isaacs et al., 2009; Purvis et al., 2010).

Theme 2 – Understanding attachment theory: Scientific meaning

This theme expounds on the understanding of attachment theory as a scientific concept with defined constructs and boundaries that mental health professionals must understand before they can apply them appropriately in custody cases.

The study done by Marcus and Mirle (1990) concluded that, in order to apply attachment theory appropriately, mental health professionals have to take account of the gender differences in children, especially when conducting the Parent Attachment Structured Interview (PAS Interview) (Marcus & Mirle, 1990). Marcus and Mirle (1990) also found that in order to apply attachment theory appropriately when conducting the PAS Interview, children's perception of punishment should be carefully considered when making custody decisions. Preference is often mistakenly given to parents who avoid harsh punishment. This common mistake ultimately leads to attachment theory being inappropriately applied in custody cases (Marcus & Mirle, 1990).

Both parents are important. This is because children develop and maintain multiple attachment relationships (Kruk, 2010; McIntosh, 2011; Sroufe & McIntosh, 2011). It is very important to be aware that attachment is not gender based (Kruk, 2010; McIntosh, 2011; Sroufe

& McIntosh, 2011). Primary custody can be given to either the father or the mother (Isaacs et al., 2009) – whoever has the primary attachment. The decision on who the primary caregiver is to be, ought not to be the result of a maternal court preference (Isaacs et al., 2009; Kruk, 2010; McIntosh, 2011; Sroufe & McIntosh, 2011). Thus, a custody decision made in the belief that the mother is necessarily the better primary caregiver may result in an inappropriate application of attachment theory.

It is important for mental health professionals to be aware that attachment relationships, especially regarding insecure or disorganized attachment relationships, can change and are not fixed, so that they can focus on repairing or rebuilding these possible "problematic" attachment relationships (Sager, 2015). They can achieve this by recommending possible attachment programs or interventions and by providing assistance to caregivers to resolve any conflicts that may hamper the attachment relationships (George et al., 2011).

Discussion

During the review of primary studies in the systematic review process, the researchers were unable to find a qualitative systematic review that explored the inappropriate and appropriate application of attachment theory by mental health professionals in custody cases. The systematic review process identified a number of studies which included the appropriate or inappropriate application of attachment theory by mental health professionals in custody cases.

This review of the included studies showed that the majority of these pointed to the inappropriate application of attachment theory in custody cases by mental health professionals. As a result, mental health professionals suggested how attachment theory should be applied. Many of the included studies and past research studies have emphasized the importance of adhering to the best interests principle. However, contemporary research has indicated that

although this is true, the formulation of the best interests principle is too broad and there are a great many factors to consider, which often complicates custody decision (Belmont, 2017; Forslund et al., 2021; Skelton et al., 2010). For this reason, it is suggested that the three attachment theory principles relevant to court practice (the child's need for familiar non-abusive and non-neglecting caregivers; the value of continuity of good-enough care; and a network of attachment relationships as an asset for children) (Forslund et al., 2021) should be used together with the best interests principle. The reason is that many countries have currently accepted the best interests principle as part of their legislation (APA, 2010; Forslund et al., 2021; Skelton et al., 2010; Skivenes & Sørsdal, 2018), making it a necessary and relevant requirement to apply this principle to custody cases. Drawing on Forslund et al. (2021), the researchers recommend that mental health professionals use the three attachment theory principles that are relevant to court practice. These are more focused and specific, so they are a good guide to tailoring custody recommendations (Forslund et al., 2021). In addition, when making use of attachment theory to inform the three attachment theory principles relevant to court practice (Forslund et al., 2021), multimethod assessments should be employed to ensure that the assessment of attachment merely plays a supporting role in understanding the familial dynamics. Mental health professionals must also ensure that they understand the essence as well as the boundaries of attachment theory to avoid applying it inappropriately.

Limitations of the review process

Possible limitations in this systematic review process are: i) the screening and selection process; ii) quality appraisal; iii) data extraction; and iv) data analysis steps (which could have been influenced by our background, academic prowess, and personal beliefs and assumptions). However, the researchers made every attempt to counter this by reporting the whole review process as transparently and objectively as possible. The researchers found it

valuable to i) apply PRISMA guidelines to report the screening and selection process; ii) employ an appropriate and validated tool (MMAT, 2018) to appraise the methodological quality of the 10 included studies; iii) develop a data extraction table specific to this review to conduct the data extraction; and iv) follow Braun and Clarke's (2006) six phases of thematic analysis to conduct the data analysis. It could be argued, as only 10 studies met all inclusion criteria, that these produced too limited an amount of data to answer the review question. However, Fleeman and Dundar (2017) counter this argument by saying that there is no minimum number of studies that should be included in a systematic review; what is important is to ensure that the screening and selection process is sufficiently rigorous. The researchers strove to broaden the base by obtaining more studies applicable to this review topic. Using two search engines, EBSCO Discovery Service (EDS) for the main search and Google Scholar for the complementary search, the researchers are confident that all of the relevant studies were included that could assist to answer the review question.

Conclusion

The findings of this systematic review study reveal that most mental health professionals apply attachment theory appropriately in custody cases. The *best interests principle*, together with the *three attachment theory principles relevant to court practice*, is of paramount importance. The researchers, therefore, suggest that mental health professionals use it as the way forward to ensure that attachment theory is appropriately applied in custody cases. Combining the *best interests principle* and the *three attachment theory principles relevant to court practice* could usefully narrow the formulation and application of the best interests principle. This will also make it possible for mental health professionals to make more effective decisions related to child protection and child custody. This suggested way forward provides more specific and focused principles to mental health professionals that enhance the

safety and well-being of children and families. Furthermore, it could assist mental health professionals to make less complicated custody decisions and also to avoid the possible negative consequences the inappropriate application of attachment theory have on children and their families. It is also recommended that further research should be conducted to tighten the definition of the best interests principle, along with the three attachment theory principles relevant to court practice. In addition, the researchers recommend for the development of context specific models to guide best practice by mental health professionals in custody cases. This is important as the best interests principle must take account of the multiple interrelated factors that form part of each individual country's legislation.

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Summary

Chapter 2 comprises the article written for possible publication in the *Journal of Family Trauma, Child Custody & Child Development*. In the article, the following themes were discussed: *multimethod assessments* and *understanding attachment theory: scientific meaning*. The findings of the systematic review indicated that most mental health professionals were aware of what would constitute inappropriate application of attachment theory. As a result, they appropriately applied attachment theory in custody cases. Chapter 3, the final chapter, is a critical reflection on this systematic review study.

Chapter 3

Critical Reflection

Introduction

The critical reflection in this chapter uses an adaptation of the outline for writing a concluding chapter for a research study proposed by Trafford and Leshem (2008). This chapter describes *why* I decided on the topic, *The in/appropriate application of attachment theory by mental health professionals in custody cases: A systematic review of literature*. I used the *10 Key STEPS* and *sub-steps in the systematic review process* to highlight *what* this qualitative systematic review study aimed at. I also discuss the boundaries that were set for this qualitative systematic review study and provided the reasons *why* these boundaries were chosen. Next, I briefly reflect on the review problem and review question and explain the aim of this systematic review study. I also provide an outline of the previous two chapters of this mini-dissertation and I present the factual conclusions. Lastly, I reflect on my position as a researcher in the context of this systematic review study and also as a student research psychologist at the North-West University.

Why the Topic: The in/appropriate Application of Attachment Theory by Mental Health Professionals in Custody Cases: A Systematic Review of Literature

I have been keenly interested in attachment theory since I began my research journey towards becoming a research psychologist. As mentioned in Chapter 1 (Introduction and Rationale) and Chapter 2 (Article), the steadily rising divorce rate, reflected in national and international research, has become a matter of global concern. In South Africa alone, thousands of children under the age of 18 years are affected by divorce annually. When decisions have to be made in custody cases, mental health professionals use attachment theory to evaluate the family and recommend custody and/or visitation or parenting plans to the court

that are in the best interests of the child. Once I started doing scope searches for my systematic review (see Chapter 1, Key STEP 2), I realised that ample research had been conducted on attachment theory and its relevance to custody cases. There is substantial evidence in the literature that it is important to use attachment theory to arrive at decisions in custody cases. However, attachment theory is not always appropriately applied. The gap that I identified was the inappropriate and appropriately application of attachment theory in custody cases by mental health professionals. This gave rise to this qualitative systematic review study.

What **did the Research Aim at Exploring?**

Taking the review topic, review problem, review question, and the review aim into account, I designed the review and implemented a qualitative systematic review of literature that used the *10 Key STEPS* and *sub-steps in the systematic review process* (Cherry et al., 2017; Dickson et al., 2017; Dundar & Fleeman, 2017). The aim of the systematic review was to explore how attachment theory is applied inappropriately or appropriately by mental health professionals in custody cases, as reported in literature nationally and internationally during 1986–2020.

Boundaries Set for this Systematic Review Study and the Reasons Why

In the case of this systematic review study, research boundaries were established that defined the specific set that would be explored and the exclusion criteria that would be used to distinguish between studies that were relevant to this systematic review topic and those that were not (see Chapter 1, Key STEP 2- Sub-step 4). The inclusion and exclusion criteria identified for this systematic review study, as well as the reasons (justifications) for them, have been fully described in Table 2 (see Chapter 1, Key STEP 2- Sub-step 4).

I also employed **PICo** (**P**opulation (participants) to be investigated; Intervention/phenomenon of **I**nterest (condition); and **Co**ntext) (see Chapter 1, Table 2). This

helped me to select the type of studies that should be included in the systematic review, without risking the possible exclusion of relevant studies. The specific design and methods that were employed also established boundaries for this systematic review study as they comprised the blueprint for the review. All the set boundaries were vital elements that made it possible to obtain all the relevant studies, to best answer the review question, and to construct this high quality, systematic qualitative review.

A Brief Reflection on the Review Problem, Review Question and the Aim of the Systematic Review Study

As reported in the literature, it was evident that attachment theory is directly relevant to child custody cases. In the context of child custody, there are several mental health professionals (e.g. psychologists, psychiatrists, counsellors, and social workers) involved in determining custody decisions. These mental health professionals are required to evaluate the family (apply attachment theory) and make recommendations (compile reports) to the court for custody and/or visitation or parenting arrangements that are in the best interests of the child. However, right from the start of this systematic review study, the literature revealed that attachment theory and its underlying concepts are frequently misunderstood and, consequently, inappropriately applied by members of mental health and legal professions. This can lead to clinical errors and minimise the scientific credibility of the custody and visitation recommendations made, and even retard the development of children. It was, therefore, important to explore how attachment theory is applied (either inappropriately or appropriately) in custody cases.

To be able to address the problem identified (see Chapter 1, Problem Statement), I developed the review question and aim. This review question and aim (see Chapter 1, Review Question and Research Aim) acted as a guide for conducting the systematic review study to

obtain a clearer understanding of the phenomenon (attachment theory in/appropriately applied by mental health professionals), within the specific context (custody cases).

Overview of Chapters in this Mini-Dissertation

Chapter 1

Chapter 1 provided the introduction to and rationale of this qualitative systematic review study. The important and significant keywords of this systematic review were defined and described, and the contextualisation, as well as the problem statement, were discussed in detail. The research methodology with the research design the *10 Key STEPS* and *sub-steps in the systematic review process* was also described and discussed in detail. The trustworthiness and ethical considerations applicable to this systematic review study were highlighted, and a summary of Chapter 1 was provided.

Chapter 2

Chapter 2 of this systematic review study comprised the article for examination purposes. The article titled, *Attachment theory in/appropriately applied by mental health professionals in custody cases: A systematic review*, meets the guidelines for the *Journal of Family Trauma, Child Custody & Child Development*. The article included the following content: abstract and keywords; introduction problem statement conceptual and theoretical framework of the systematic review; research design; inclusion and exclusion criteria (eligibility criteria); search strategy for obtaining databases and keywords; screening and selection process; quality assessment; data extraction; data analysis; main findings consisting of the themes and sub-themes; discussion of the findings; limitations of the review process, and the conclusion. After the article, a summary of Chapter 2 was provided.

Factual Conclusions

The factual conclusions concerning this qualitative systematic review study are the following:

- In custody cases, as part of the clinical evaluation many mental health professionals use traditional personality tests. However, it seems that personality tests do not necessarily provide information on attachment. The appropriate way of applying attachment theory in custody cases is to use attachment assessments together with personality assessments: the one is not a substitute for the other. It is not wise to use traditional personality tests as the only source of information on attachment (inappropriate application). The appropriate way of using attachment assessments in custody cases is to use them along with personality assessments to develop a strong developmental framework for decision-making (see Chapter 2, Theme 1 – Multimethod Assessments: Sub-theme 1: Incremental validity).
    - Multimethod assessments also offer a variety of benefits when making custody and visitation recommendations. These benefits include the ability to ensure that the best interests principle is applied; to compare data from a variety of custody cases; to eliminate potentially biased custody decisions; and to make objective recommendations (see Chapter 2, Theme 1 – Multimethod Assessments: Sub-theme 2: Advantages of multimethod assessments).
    - Attachment theory is a scientific concept with defined constructs and boundaries. The term cannot be used loosely. If it is, attachment theory is likely to be inappropriately applied in custody cases. Once mental health professionals understand the meaning of attachment theory as a scientific concept with defined constructs and boundaries, and the attachment assessments they conduct, it becomes possible to apply them appropriately in custody cases. Depending on the gender of the child and the subscale

of the measure used, the Parent Attachment Structured Interview (PAS Interview) has proved to be a good predictor of mental health in children. Mental health professionals must recognise the need to take account of gender differences in children when the PAS Interview is conducted in order to apply attachment theory appropriately in custody cases. Giving preference to parents who avoid harsh punishment, based on the children's perception of punishment, during the PAS interview is one of the inappropriate ways in which mental health professionals have applied attachment theory in custody cases. The literature makes it clear that attachment is not gender based (no maternal court preference) and consequently the primary attachment caregiver can be either the mother or the father. Attachment relationships are also not static (attachment relationships can change). For that reason, when mental health professionals identify attachment problems (i.e. insecure or disorganized attachment relationships) or conflicts, they should focus on rebuilding or repairing these "problematic" attachment relationships (see Chapter 2, Theme 2 – Understanding attachment theory: scientific meaning). When attachment theory is correctly understood (i.e. the scientific meaning is comprehended), it ensures that mental health professionals appropriately apply attachment theory in custody cases and it also ensures that the recommendations made are in the best interests of the child.

Reflection on My Position as Researcher

As the researcher conducting this systematic review study, I found it deeply enriching to gain more knowledge and insight from the literature on the importance of attachment theory in custody cases. I have gained considerable enjoyment from and appreciation of research especially systematic review research and attachment theory as an area of psychology. Furthermore, while reflecting on my role as the researcher, I gained an

appreciation of how much research had been conducted on the use of attachment theory in custody cases. I also realised what a complex phenomenon it is. It is vital that mental health professionals should not only have a sound grasp of attachment theory, but also apply it appropriately in custody cases. If this is not done, the best interests of children are unlikely to be served.

Reflection on My Position as a Student Research Psychologist

As I reflected on the research process of conducting a systematic review study, I realised what a deeply challenging process it had been. Before engaging in this research, I was not familiar with the theory or the practice of a systematic review. During my honours year and my first year of my master's study I was exposed to and received training in qualitative, quantitative, and mixed methods methodologies. However, little emphasis was placed on methodologies such as systematic reviews. However, as a student research psychologist I have now gained the necessary knowledge and skills to be able to conduct methodologically and ethically sound systematic review studies. This process has expanded my research knowledge and experience.

The process of completing the research necessary to complete this systematic review study was a period of maturation and growth for me on a professional and personal level. I gained new insights and obtained knowledge about psychology and research. I also developed a greater curiosity about and an interest in psychology, and through my involvement in the research process I have gained new insights into and ideas for future research.

Summary

Chapter 3 concludes this qualitative systematic review study. This critical reflection chapter used an adaptation Trafford and Leshem's (2008) framework on how to write the concluding chapter of a research dissertation. In it, I focus particularly on the review process

of this qualitative systematic review study and on my position as a research psychologist in the context of this study.

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Appendix 1: Attachment 1 – List of Total Citations Identified – Key STEP 3: Literature searching

Search platform used for main search:

EBSCO Discovery Service (EDS) NWU: For the main search the researcher made use of the North-West University's online library, more specifically the researcher used EBSCO Discovery Service (EDS) to conduct the main search. This search platform made it possible for the researcher to select the following databases: Academic Search Complete, APA PsycArticles, APA PsycInfo, Medline, Science Direct, Scopus, and SoccINDEX with Full Text. The search was done in conjunction with my supervisor and a subject librarian/information specialist in Psychology, Social Work and Play Therapy (Mr. Nestus Venter) at the North-West University.

EDS is a powerful search platform where users (lecturers and students) can search almost all the resources the university (NWU) subscribes to in one easy process. This advanced search platform allows the researcher to apply the following set inclusion criteria from the beginning when conducting the main search. It is important to be aware that this advanced search option automatically removes all duplicate studies.

Search terms used for main search:

I followed the following process when conducting the **main search**: EDS was searched using the advanced search option and the search terms below were applied;

"attachment" OR "attachment theory" OR "attachment assessments" OR "attachment status" OR "secure attachment" OR "insecure attachment" OR "anxious-ambivalent attachment" OR "anxious-avoidant attachment" OR "disorganised-disoriented attachment" (Abstract)

AND

"mental health professional*" or "mental health expert*" or "mental health practitioner*" or clinician* or "custody evaluator*" or psychologist* or psychiatrist* or therapist* or counsellor* or counselor* or "social worker*" (No Field Selected: Optional; to broaden search)

AND

"child" OR "children" OR "kids" (Abstract)

AND

"custody" OR "divorce" (Abstract)

Inclusion criteria applied:

Date/year of publication: all studies from 1986-2020

Studies published in English and Afrikaans

Full-text journal studies

Peer reviewed studies

During the above main search, 86 citations were identified

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Complementary Search (Google Scholar):

For the purpose of this study, the only complementary searching activity the researcher considered using was citation chaining (snowballing) as it is the most applicable. It entailed searching *Google Scholar*, a search engine (forward searching) (Dundar & Fleeman, 2017b) (see Key step 3, sub-step 6).

During the above complementary search, 49 Citations were Identified

1. Main, M., Hesse, E., & Hesse, S. (2011). Attachment theory and research: Overview with suggested applications to child custody. *Family Court Review*, *49*(3), 426-463.

2. Byrne, J. G., O'Connor, T. G., Marvin, R. S., & Whelan, W. F. (2005). Practitioner review: The contribution of attachment theory to child custody assessments. *Journal of Child Psychology and Psychiatry*, *46*(2), 115-127.

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32. Smith, G., Coffino, B., Lieberman, A., & Van Horn, P. (2012). Attachment and child custody: The importance of available parents. *Parenting plan evaluations: Applied research for the family court*, 5-24.

33. DEFENSE, U. S. O. (2010). SUBJECT: Directive-Type Memorandum (DTM) 09-031,"Videotaping or Otherwise Electronically Recording Strategic Intelligence Interrogations of Persons in the Custody of the Department of Defense" References: See Attachment 1 Purpose. This DTM establishes policy, assigns responsibilities, and provides. *Change*, *1*(09/29), 2.

34. Woolfson, R. (2014). The role of 'attachment' in child custody and contact cases. *Journal of the Law Society of Scotland*, 59-3.

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48. Baude, A., & Rouyer, V. (2016). Joint physical custody parents and coparental relationship: Role of attachment relationship between ex-formers and contextual variables linked to the separation. Psychologie *Francaise*, *61*(3), 219-234.

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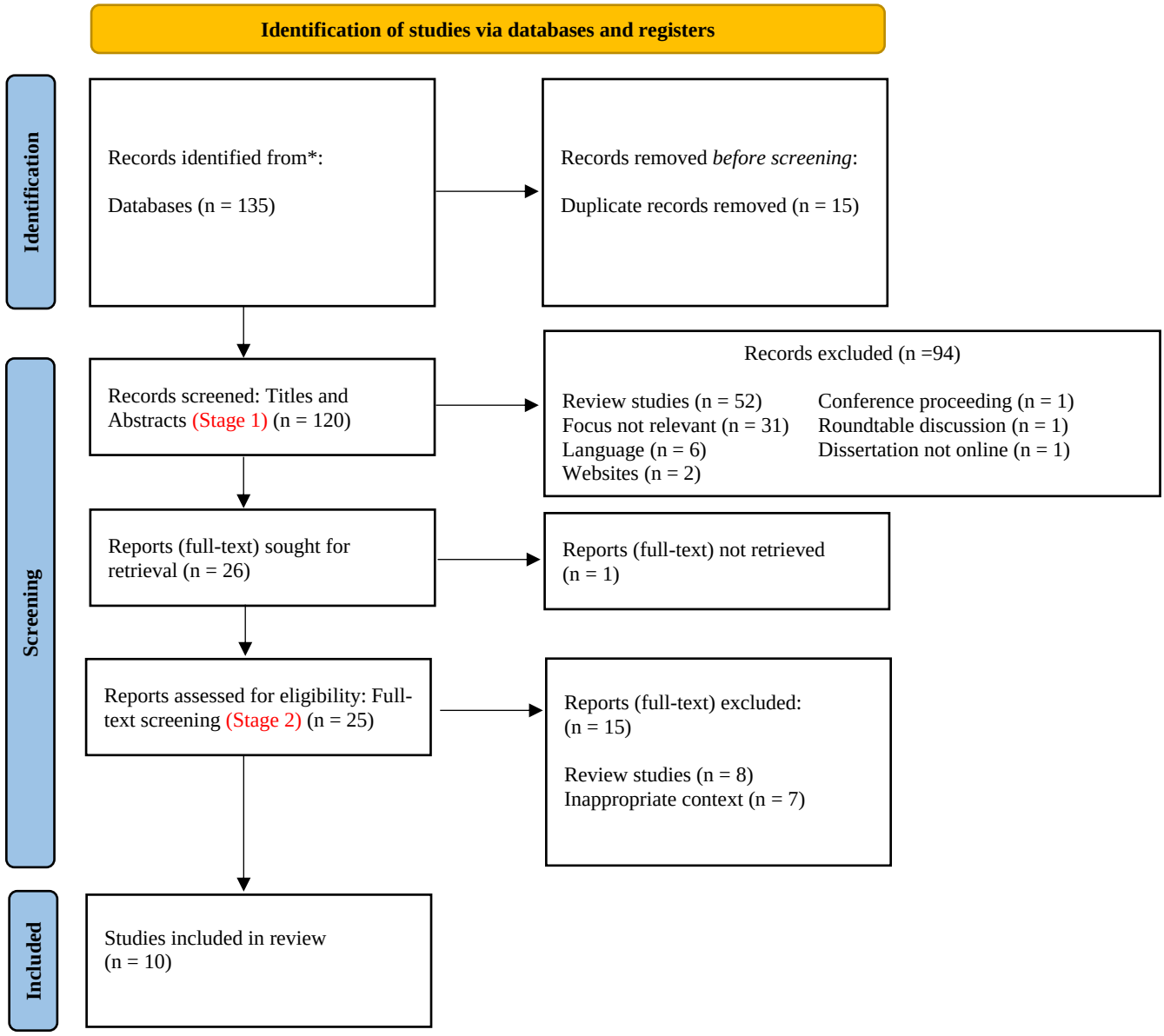
Total citations identified: 135

1: Main search = 86 citations were identified

2: Complementary search = 49 citations were identified

Appendix 1: Attachment 2 – PRISMA Flow Diagram – Key STEP 4: Screening titles and abstracts



Appendix 1: Attachment 3 – List of Duplicate Citations – Key STEP4: Screening titles and abstracts

The following 15 duplicate studies were removed

1. Main, M., Hesse, E., & Hesse, S. (2011). Attachment Theory and Research: Overview with Suggested Applications to Child Custody. *Family Court Review*, *49*(3), 426–463. https://doi-org.nwulib.nwu.ac.za/10.1111/j.1744-1617.2011.01383.x
2. Main, M., Hesse, E., & Hesse, S. (2011). Attachment Theory and Research: Overview with Suggested Applications to Child Custody. *Family Court Review*, *49*(3), 426–463. https://doi-org.nwulib.nwu.ac.za/10.1111/j.1744-1617.2011.01383.x
3. Byrne, J. G., O'Connor, T. G., Marvin, R. S., & Whelan, W. F. (2005). Practitioner review: The contribution of attachment theory to child custody assessments. *Journal of Child Psychology and Psychiatry*, *46*(2), 115-127.
4. George, C., Isaacs, M. B., & Marvin, R. S. (2011). Incorporating attachment assessment into custody evaluations: The case of a 2-year-old and her parents. *Family Court Review*, *49*(3), 483-500.
5. Talley, S. D. (2012). Preserving Relationships: Ways Attachment Theory Can Inform Custody Decisions. *BYU Journal of Public Law*, *26*(2), 245–264.
6. Mercer, J. (2009). Child Custody Evaluations, Attachment Theory, and an Attachment Measure: The Science Remains Limited. *Scientific Review of Mental Health Practice*, *7*(1), 37–54.
7. Tornello, S. L., Emery, R., Rowen, J., Potter, D., Ocker, B., & Xu, Y. (2013). Overnight custody arrangements, attachment, and adjustment among very young children. *Journal of Marriage and Family*, *75*(4), 871-885.

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Appendix 1: Attachment 4 – Screening and Selection Tool – Key STEP 4: Screening titles and abstracts

Screening and Selection Tool: The in/appropriate application of attachment theory by mental health professionals in custody cases: A systematic review of literature

Review Question: *"How is attachment theory inappropriately or appropriately applied by mental health professionals in custody cases as reported in literature?"*

Inclusion Criteria (based on **PICo**):

Population (participants) = *mental health professionals*. (Any age, no specific conditions)

Intervention/ phenomenon of **I**nterest (condition) = *the inappropriate or appropriate application of attachment theory* (The application/use of attachment theory)

Context = *nationally* and *internationally* (Geographic location of studies; Country)

Context = within the context of *custody* cases (Attachment theory applied within the context of custody cases)

Reviewer Name **Date of Review**

Study Title **Year of Publication**

Author/(s) Name/Study ID **Type of Study**

THE SCREENING AND SELECTION TOOL: BASED ON PICo

*Key for EpiData: **1 = Include** and **2 = Exclude**

Population (Participants)	**Include**	**Exclude**
	Mental Health Professionals (Any age, no specific condition) Psychologists Psychiatrists Counsellors	Any Other Professionals

Social Workers

Phenomenon of Interest	**Include**	**Exclude**
	The application/use of attachment theory	N/A
Context (Country)	**Include**	**Exclude**
	All studies (Nationally and internationally)	N/A
Context (within Custody Cases)	**Include**	**Exclude**
	Attachment theory applied within the context of custody cases	Attachment theory applied within a context other than custody cases
Overall Decision	**INCLUDED**	**EXCLUDED**

Notes:

Appendix 1: Attachment 5 – List of Citations without Duplicates – Key STEP 4: Screening titles and abstracts

120 Results Remain After Duplicates Have Been Removed

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89. Suchman, N. E., McMahon, T. J., Zhang, H., Mayes, L. C., & Luthar, S. (2006). Substance-abusing mothers and disruptions in child custody: An attachment perspective. *Journal of substance abuse treatment*, *30*(3), 197-204.

90. Isaacs, M. B., George, C., & Marvin, R. S. (2009). Utilizing attachment measures in child custody evaluations: Incremental validity. *Journal of Child Custody*, *6*(1-2), 139-162.

91. Lee, S. M., Kaufman, R. L., & George, C. (2009). Disorganized attachment in young children: Manifestations, etiology, and implications for child custody. *Journal of Child Custody*, *6*(1-2), 62-90.

92. Riggs, S. A. (2003). RESPONSE TO TROXEL v. GRANVILLE: Implications of Attachment Theory for Judicial Decisions Regarding Custody and Third-Party Visitation. *Family Court Review*, *41*(1), 39-53.

93. Marcus, R. F., & Mirle, J. (1990). Validity of a child interview measure of attachment as used in child custody evaluations. *Perceptual and Motor Skills*, *70*(3), 1043-1054.

94. Rivas, E. M., Handler, L., & Sims, C. R. (2009). Adult attachment measures and their potential utility in custody cases. *Journal of child custody*, *6*(1-2), 25-37.

95. Purvis, K. B., McKenzie, L. B., Kellermann, G., & Cross, D. R. (2010). An attachment based approach to child custody evaluation: A case study. *Journal of Child Custody*, *7*(1), 45-60.

96. Manna, G., Musso, P., Kopala-Sibley, D. C., Cassibba, R., & Falgares, G. (2020). The moderating effect of attachment styles on the relationships between maltreatment experiences and internalizing and externalizing problems among adolescents: Implications for custody issues. *Journal of Family Trauma, Child Custody & Child Development*, *17*(2), 161-188.

97. Stürmer, S., Salewski, C., Meyer, A. K., & Meyer, J. (2015). Methodische Qualität und Bindungsdiagnostik im Kontext familienrechtspsychologischer Gutachten/Methodological quality and assessment of attachment in child custody evaluations for the family court. *Kindesmisshandlung und-vernachlässigung*, *18*(1), 26-43.

98. LeBlanc, M. (2020). *Expert Opinions on the Inclusion of Attachment-related Measures in Bilateral Custody Assessments and Parenting Capacity Assessments* (Doctoral dissertation, Adler University).

99. Li, H. J., & Guo, X. M. (2005). The Attachment Nature of Pretrial Custody. *Journal of Heilongjiang Administrative Cadre Institute of Politics and Law*, 05.

100. Sager, M. N. (2015). *An Examination of the Possible Use of Attachment Assessments for Making Child Custody Decisions* (Doctoral dissertation, California Lutheran University).

101. Schraegle IV, W. A. (2014). *The role of adult attachment in child custody litigants* (Doctoral dissertation).

102. Pennell, A. (2008). *Understanding the Interpersonal Behaviours, Rule Breaking and Violence of Young People in Custody Using an Attachment Framework*. University of Surrey (United Kingdom).

103. Shnypko, O. (2017). Constituent Elements of a Crime Knowingly Illegal Detention, Attachment, House Arrest or Custody (Part 3, Article 371 of the Criminal Code of Ukraine). *Jurid. Sci.*, 138.

104. Duprey, R. M. (2017). *Predicting the Relationship Between Adult Attachment Style, Family Functioning, and Parenting Stress in Parents of Adopted Children from State's Custody*. Trevecca Nazarene University.

105. English, M. (2007). *Father-child attachment in divorce/custody cases: Do mothers' perceptions of their self esteem, father-daughter relationships, and life satisfaction correlate to how supportive they are of the amount of time their children spend with their fathers?*. Seattle Pacific University.

106. Kraus, L., & Pope, K. (2009). The importance of attachment in custody evaluations: toward the best interest of the child. In *The Scientific Basis of Custody Decisions* (pp. 165-187). John Wiley & Sons, Hoboken, NJ.

107. Borelli, J. L., & West, J. L. (2011). *Children's Attachment Relationships: Can Attachment Data be used in Child Custody Evaluations?* S. Margaret Lee Mill Valley, Ca.

108. Smith, G., Coffino, B., Lieberman, A., & Van Horn, P. (2012). Attachment and child custody: The importance of available parents. *Parenting plan evaluations: Applied research for the family court*, 5-24.

109. DEFENSE, U. S. O. (2010). SUBJECT: Directive-Type Memorandum (DTM) 09-031,"Videotaping or Otherwise Electronically Recording Strategic Intelligence Interrogations of Persons in the Custody of the Department of Defense" References: See Attachment 1 Purpose. This DTM establishes policy, assigns responsibilities, and provides. *Change*, *1*(09/29), 2.

110. Woolfson, R. (2014). The role of ‘attachment’ in child custody and contact cases. *Journal of the Law Society of Scotland*, 59-3.

111. Kenny, M. (2013). Divorce study links infant attachment issues with joint custody. Retrieved from https://www.mollybkenny.com/news/divorce-study-links-infant-attachment-issues-with-joint-custody.cfm

112. Solomon, J., & Sagi-Schwartz, A. (2013). Rethinking attachment and divorce: Facts, myths and dilemmas in custody disputes. *A. Sagi-Schwartz (Moderator), Roundtable conducted at the Society for Research in Child Development, Seattle, WA*.

113. Garber, B.D. (n.d.). *In the best interests of the best interests standard: Attachment and the best interests of the child in the context of contested custody litigation*. HealthyParent.com.

114. Pierrehumbert, B. (2014). Joint Custody and Attachment Theory. *Le Carnet PSY*, (6), 32-35.

115. Shustack, B. (1994). Predictors of successful joint custody- An attachment theory perspective. *Canadian Psychology-Psychologie Canadienne*, *35*(2 A), 167-167.

116. Davamony, D. I. (2000). *Adult Attachment Style as a Predictor of Child Custody Negotiation Outcomes*. (Doctoral dissertation, Loma Linda University).

117. Berger, L. M., Brown, P. R., Joung, E., Melli, M. S., & Wimer, L. (2007). The Stability of Shared Child Physical Placements in Recent Cohorts of Divorced Wisconsin Families. *Institute for Research on Poverty Discussion Paper*, (1329-07), 24-25.

118. Nichols A. M. (2014). Toward a child-centered approach to evaluating claims of alienation in high-conflict custody disputes. *Michigan law review*, *112*(4), 663–688.

119. Shnipko, O. (2017). Кваліфікуючі Ознаки Злочину Завідомо Незаконні Затримання, Привід, Домашній Арешт Або Тримання Під Вартою (Частина 3 Статті 371 Кримінального Кодексу України)(Constituent Elements of A Crime Knowingly

Illegal Detention, Attachment, House Arrest or Custody (Part 3, Article 371 of the Criminal Code of Ukraine)). *Juridical Science (Kiev, Ukraine)*, *2*(68), 138-153

120. Vismara, L. (2011). Atypical attachment representation in parents assessed for parenting capacity in child custody evaluations. In *5th biennial International Attachment Conference from: Attachment-the importance of intimate relationships from the cradle to the grave.*

Appendix 1: Attachment 6 – List of Included Studies after Screening and Selecting Titles and Abstracts – Key STEP 4: Screening titles and abstracts

List of Included Studies after Screening and Selecting Titles and Abstracts: 26 results

6. Dolan, M. J., & Hynan, D. J. (2014). Fighting over Bedtime Stories: An Empirical Study of the Risks of Valuing Quantity over Quality in Child Custody Decisions. *Law & Psychology Review, 38,* 45–96.

9. George, C., Isaacs, M. B., & Marvin, R. S. (2011). Incorporating attachment assessment into custody evaluations: The case of a 2-year-old and her parents. *Family Court Review, 49*(3), 483-500.

10. Austin, W. G. (2018). Parental Gatekeeping and Child Custody Evaluation: Part III: Protective Gatekeeping and the Overnights "Conundrum." *Journal of Divorce & Remarriage, 59*(5), 429–451. https://doi-org.nwulib.nwu.ac.za/10.1080/10502556.2018.1454202

11. Talley, S. D. (2012). Preserving Relationships: Ways Attachment Theory Can Inform Custody Decisions. *BYU Journal of Public Law, 26*(2), 245–264.

13. Bantekas, I. (2016). Discrimination against Fathers in Greek Child Custody Proceedings: Failing the Child's Best Interests. *International Journal of Children's Rights, 24*(2), 330–357. https://doi-org.nwulib.nwu.ac.za/10.1163/15718182-02402008

15. McIntosh, J. E. (2011). Guest Editor's Introduction to Special Issue on Attachment Theory, Separation, and Divorce: Forging Coherent Understandings for Family Law. *Family Court Review, 49*(3), 418–425. https://doi-org.nwulib.nwu.ac.za/10.1111/j.1744-1617.2011.01382.x

20. Sroufe, A., & McIntosh, J. (2011). Divorce and Attachment Relationships: The Longitudinal Journey. *Family Court Review, 49*(3), 464–473. https://doi-org.nwulib.nwu.ac.za/10.1111/j.1744-1617.2011.01384.x

28. Kruk, E. (2010). Collateral Damage: The Lived Experiences of Divorced Mothers Without Custody. *Journal of Divorce & Remarriage*, *51*(8), 526–543. https://doi-org.nwulib.nwu.ac.za/10.1080/10502556.2010.504103

29. Kretchmar, M. D., Worsham, N. L., & Swenson, N. (2005). Anna's story: A qualitative analysis of an at-risk mother's experience in an attachment-based foster care program. *Attachment & Human Development*, *7*(1), 31–49. https://doi-org.nwulib.nwu.ac.za/10.1080/14616730500048102

32. Kruk, E. (2010). Parental and Social Institutional Responsibilities to Children's Needs in the Divorce Transition: Fathers' Perspectives. *Journal of Men's Studies*, *18*(2), 159–178. https://doi-org.nwulib.nwu.ac.za/10.3149/jms.1802.159

33. Werner-Lin, A., Biank, N., & Rubenstein, B. (2010). There's No Place Like Home: Preparing Children for Geographical and Relational Attachment Disruptions Following Parental Death to Cancer. *Clinical Social Work Journal*, *38*(1), 132–143. https://doi-org.nwulib.nwu.ac.za/10.1007/s10615-009-0233-1

38. Holtzman, M. (2006). Definitions of the Family as an Impetus for Legal Change in Custody Decision Making: Suggestions from an Empirical Case Study. *Law & Social Inquiry*, *31*(1), 1–37. https://doi-org.nwulib.nwu.ac.za/10.1111/j.1747-4469.2006.00001.x

40. Holtzman, M. (2011). Family Definitions and Children's Rights in Custody Decision Making: The Importance of a Changing Litigant Context. *Family Court Review*, *49*(3), 591–609. https://doi-org.nwulib.nwu.ac.za/10.1111/j.1744-1617.2011.01395.x

58. Faber, A., & Wittenborn, A. (2010). The Role of Attachment in Children's Adjustment to Divorce and Remarriage. *Journal of Family Psychotherapy*, *21*(2), 89–104. https://doi-org.nwulib.nwu.ac.za/10.1080/08975353.2010.483625

72. Wallerstein, J., Lewis, J., & Packer Rosenthal, S. (2013). Mothers and their children after divorce: Report from a 25-year longitudinal study. *Psychoanalytic Psychology*, *30*(2), 167–184. https://doi-org.nwulib.nwu.ac.za/10.1037/a0032511

86. Awad, G. A. (1987). The assessment of custody and access disputes in cases of sexual abuse allegations. Canadian Journal of Psychiatry. *Revue Canadienne de Psychiatrie*, *32*(7), 539–544. https://doi-org.nwulib.nwu.ac.za/10.1177/070674378703200707

87. Lieberman, A. F., & Van Horn, P. (1998). Attachment, trauma, and domestic violence: Implications for child custody. *Child and adolescent psychiatric clinics of North America*.

89. Suchman, N. E., McMahon, T. J., Zhang, H., Mayes, L. C., & Luthar, S. (2006). Substance-abusing mothers and disruptions in child custody: An attachment perspective. *Journal of substance abuse treatment*, *30*(3), 197-204.

90. Isaacs, M. B., George, C., & Marvin, R. S. (2009). Utilizing attachment measures in child custody evaluations: Incremental validity. *Journal of Child Custody*, *6*(1-2), 139-162.

93. Marcus, R. F., & Mirle, J. (1990). Validity of a child interview measure of attachment as used in child custody evaluations. *Perceptual and Motor Skills*, *70*(3), 1043-1054.

95. Purvis, K. B., McKenzie, L. B., Kellermann, G., & Cross, D. R. (2010). An attachment based approach to child custody evaluation: A case study. *Journal of Child Custody*, *7*(1), 45-60.

96. Manna, G., Musso, P., Kopala-Sibley, D. C., Cassibba, R., & Falgares, G. (2020). The moderating effect of attachment styles on the relationships between maltreatment experiences and internalizing and externalizing problems among adolescents:

Implications for custody issues. *Journal of Family Trauma, Child Custody & Child Development*, *17*(2), 161-188.

97. Stürmer, S., Salewski, C., Meyer, A. K., & Meyer, J. (2015). Methodische Qualität und Bindungsdiagnostik im Kontext familienrechtspsychologischer Gutachten/Methodological quality and assessment of attachment in child custody evaluations for the family court. *Kindesmisshandlung und-vernachlässigung*, *18*(1), 26-43.

98. LeBlanc, M. (2020). *Expert Opinions on the Inclusion of Attachment-related Measures in Bilateral Custody Assessments and Parenting Capacity Assessments* (Doctoral dissertation, Adler University).

100. Sager, M. N. (2015). *An Examination of the Possible Use of Attachment Assessments for Making Child Custody Decisions* (Doctoral dissertation, California Lutheran University).

101. Schraegle IV, W. A. (2014). *The role of adult attachment in child custody litigants* (Doctoral dissertation).

Appendix 1: Attachment 7 – List of Excluded Studies after Screening and Selecting Titles and Abstracts: Reasons for Exclusion – Key STEP 4: Screening titles and abstracts

List of Excluded Studies after Screening and Selecting Titles and Abstracts: 94 results

1. Zumbach, J., Wetzels, P., & Koglin, U. (2018). Predictors of psychological recommendations in child protection evaluation. *Child Abuse & Neglect, 84*, 196–204. https://doi-org.nwulib.nwu.ac.za/10.1016/j.chiabu.2018.08.003

Reason for exclusion: This study is a quantitative content review (secondary study). Only primary studies are included in this systematic review.

2. Main, M., Hesse, E., & Hesse, S. (2011). Attachment Theory and Research: Overview with Suggested Applications to Child Custody. *Family Court Review, 49*(3), 426–463. https://doi-org.nwulib.nwu.ac.za/10.1111/j.1744-1617.2011.01383.x

Reason for exclusion: This study is a review (secondary study). Only primary studies are included in this systematic review.

3. Haddad, L., Phillips, K. D., & Bone, J. M. (2016). High-Conflict Divorce: A Review of the Literature. *American Journal of Family Law*, *29*(4), 243–258.

Reason for exclusion: This study is a literature review (secondary study). Only primary studies are included in this systematic review and all the inclusion criteria have not been met.

4. Riggs, S. A., & Cusimano, A. (2014). The Dynamics of Military Deployment in the Family System: What Makes a Parent Fit for Duty? *Family Court Review*, *52*(3), 381–399. https://doi-org.nwulib.nwu.ac.za/10.1111/fcre.12099

Reason for exclusion: This study is a literature review (secondary study). Only primary studies are included in this systematic review and all the inclusion criteria have not been met.

5. Mhizha, S., Chiroro, P., & Muromo, T. (2018). The Rise in Street Children Population in Zimbabwe as a Case of Human Factor Decay. *Review of Human Factor Studies*, *24*(1), 24–45.

Reason for exclusion: This study is a literature review (secondary study). Only primary studies are included in this systematic review and all the inclusion criteria have not been met.

7. Roper, S. W., Fife, S. T., & Seedall, R. B. (2020). The Intergenerational Effects of Parental Divorce on Young Adult Relationships. *Journal of Divorce & Remarriage*, *61*(4), 249–266. https://doi-org.nwulib.nwu.ac.za/10.1080/10502556.2019.1699372

Reason for exclusion: All the inclusion criteria have not been met. The focus is more on the effects of parental divorce (after the divorce) on young adult relationships.

8. Byrne, J. G., O'Connor, T. G., Marvin, R. S., & Whelan, W. F. (2005). Practitioner review: The contribution of attachment theory to child custody assessments. *Journal of Child Psychology and Psychiatry*, *46*(2), 115-127.

Reason for exclusion: This study is a review (secondary study). Only primary studies are included in this systematic review.

12. Hirschfeld, M. R., & Wittenborn, A. K. (2016). Emotionally Focused Family Therapy and Play Therapy for Young Children Whose Parents Are Divorced. *Journal of Divorce & Remarriage*, *57*(2), 133–150. https://doi-org.nwulib.nwu.ac.za/10.1080/10502556.2015.1127878

Reason for exclusion: All the inclusion criteria have not been met. The focus of the study is on treatment development for young children *after* divorce to enhance attachment.

14. Zeanah, C. H., Berlin, L. J., & Boris, N. W. (2011). Practitioner Review: Clinical applications of attachment theory and research for infants and young children. *Journal*

of Child Psychology & Psychiatry, *52*(8), 819–833. https://doi-org.nwulib.nwu.ac.za/10.1111/j.1469-7610.2011.02399.x

Reason for exclusion: This study is a review (secondary study). Only primary studies are included in this systematic review.

16. Garber, B. D. (2012). Security by Association? Mapping Attachment Theory onto Family Law Practice. *Family Court Review*, *50*(3), 467–470. https://doi-org.nwulib.nwu.ac.za/10.1111/j.1744-1617.2012.01461.x

Reason for exclusion: This study is a review (secondary study). Only primary studies are included in this systematic review.

17. Lorandos, D. (2020). Response to Milchman, Geffner, and Meier Ideology and Rhetoric Replace Science and Reason in Some Parental Alienation Literature and Advocacy: A Critique. *Family Court Review*, *58*(2), 371–372. https://doi-org.nwulib.nwu.ac.za/10.1111/fcre.12493

Reason for exclusion: This study is a review (secondary study). Only primary studies are included in this systematic review and all the inclusion criteria have not been met.

18. Hynan, D. J. (2012). Young Children, Attachment Security, and Parenting Schedules. *Family Court Review*, *50*(3), 471–480. https://doi-org.nwulib.nwu.ac.za/10.1111/j.1744-1617.2012.01462.x

Reason for exclusion: This study is a review (secondary study). Only primary studies are included in this systematic review.

19. Chlebowski, S. M. (2013). The Borderline Mother and her Child: A Couple at Risk. *American Journal of Psychotherapy (Association for the Advancement of Psychotherapy)*, *67*(2), 153–164. https://doi-org.nwulib.nwu.ac.za/10.1176/appi.psychotherapy.2013.67.2.153

Reason for exclusion: All the inclusion criteria have not been met. The focus of the study is on Borderline Personality Disorder (BPD) and attachment.

21. Ben-Ami, N., & Baker, A. L. (2012). The Long-Term Correlates of Childhood Exposure to Parental Alienation on Adult Self-Sufficiency and Well-Being. *American Journal of Family Therapy*, *40*(2), 169–183. https://doi-org.nwulib.nwu.ac.za/10.1080/01926187.2011.601206

Reason for exclusion: All the inclusion criteria have not been met. The focus of the study is on parental alienation and the effect it has on adult self-sufficiency and well-being.

22. Page, T., & Bretherton, I. (2003). Gender Differences in Stories of Violence and Caring by Preschool Children in Post-Divorce Families: Implications for Social Competence. *Child & Adolescent Social Work Journal*, *20*(6), 485. https://doi-org.nwulib.nwu.ac.za/10.1023/B:CASW.0000003140.44020.ba

Reason for exclusion: All the inclusion criteria have not been met. The focus of the study is on children post-divorce (social competence).

23. Garber, B. D. (2007). Conceptualizing Visitation Resistance and Refusal in the Context of Parental Conflict, Separation, and Divorce. *Family Court Review*, *45*(4), 588–599. https://doi-org.nwulib.nwu.ac.za/10.1111/j.1744-1617.2007.00173.x

Reason for exclusion: All the inclusion criteria have not been met. The focus of the study is on visitation resistance and refusal (VRR).

24. Shumaker, D. M., Miller, C., Ortiz, C., & Deutsch, R. (2011). The Forgotten Bonds: The Assessment and Contemplation of Sibling Attachment in Divorce and Parental Separation. *Family Court Review*, *49*(1), 46–58. https://doi-org.nwulib.nwu.ac.za/10.1111/j.1744-1617.2010.01352.x

Reason for exclusion: This study is a review (secondary study). Only primary studies are included in this systematic review.

25. Lubit, R. (2019). Valid and invalid ways to assess the reason a child rejects a parent: The continued malignant role of "parental alienation syndrome." *Journal of Child Custody, 16*(1), 42–66. https://doi-org.nwulib.nwu.ac.za/10.1080/15379418.2019.1590284

Reason for exclusion: This study is a retrospective case review (secondary study). Only primary studies are included in this systematic review. The focus is on parental alienation, not relevant to this systematic review study.

26. Mercer, J. (2009). Child Custody Evaluations, Attachment Theory, and an Attachment Measure: The Science Remains Limited. *Scientific Review of Mental Health Practice, 7*(1), 37–54.

Reason for exclusion: This study is a critical review (secondary study). Only primary studies are included in this systematic review. The focus is on more on the concerns about the use of an attachment measure, not relevant to this systematic review study.

27. Shaver, P. R., Mikulincer, M., & Feeney, B. C. (2009). What's Love Got to Do with It? Insecurity and Anger in Attachment Relationships. *Virginia Journal of Social Policy & the Law, 16*(2), 491–513.

Reason for exclusion: This study is a review (secondary study). Only primary studies are included in this systematic review.

30. Riggs, S. A. (2005). Is the Approximation Rule in the Child's Best Interests? *Family Court Review, 43*(3), 481–493. https://doi-org.nwulib.nwu.ac.za/10.1111/j.1744-1617.2005.00048.x

Reason for exclusion: This study is a critical review (secondary study). Only primary studies are included in this systematic review.

31. George, C., Solomon, J., & McIntosh, J. (2011). Divorce in the Nursery: On Infants and Overnight Care. *Family Court Review*, *49*(3), 521–528. https://doi-org.nwulib.nwu.ac.za/10.1111/j.1744-1617.2011.01389.x

Reason for exclusion: This study is a critical review (secondary study). Only primary studies are included in this systematic review. All the inclusion criteria have also not been met. The focus is on post-separation.

34. Cohen, O., & Finzi-Dottan, R. (2005). Parent-child relationships during the divorce process; from attachment theory and intergenerational perspective. *Contemporary Family Therapy: An International Journal*, *27*(1), 81–99. https://doi-org.nwulib.nwu.ac.za/10.1007/s10591-004-1972-3

Reason for exclusion: All the inclusion criteria have not been met. This study examined four possible predictors of parental satisfaction in the first year after divorce, not relevant to this systematic review study.

35. Kiesling, C. (2011). An attachment theory approach to narrating the faith journey of children of parental divorce. *International Journal of Children's Spirituality*, *16*(4), 301–313. https://doi-org.nwulib.nwu.ac.za/10.1080/1364436X.2011.639746

Reason for exclusion: All the inclusion criteria have not been met. This study explored the effects of parental divorce on a child's faith, which is not relevant to this systematic review study.

36. Emery, R. E., & Schepard, A. (2011). Special issue on attachment, separation, and divorce: Forging coherent understandings for family law. *Family Court Review, 49*(3), 415–417. https://doi-org.nwulib.nwu.ac.za/10.1111/j.1744-1617.2011.01381.x

Reason for exclusion: This study is a review (secondary study). Only primary studies are included in this systematic review. All the inclusion criteria have also not been met.

37. Page, T., & Bretherton, I. (2001). Mother– and father–child attachment themes in the story completions of pre-schoolers from post-divorce families: do they predict relationships with peers and teachers? *Attachment & Human Development*, *3*(1), 1–29. https://doi-org.nwulib.nwu.ac.za/10.1080/14616730010024753

Reason for exclusion: All the inclusion criteria is not met. The focus is on attachment representations of pre-schoolers in relation to their peers and teachers, which is not relevant to this systematic review.

39. Page, T. F. (2001). Attachment Themes in the Family Narratives of Preschool Children: A Qualitative Analysis. *Child & Adolescent Social Work Journal*, *18*(5), 353–375. https://doi-org.nwulib.nwu.ac.za/10.1023/A:1012555323631

Reason for exclusion: All the inclusion criteria have not been met. The focus is on the social competence in pre-school children, children from post divorced families, which is not relevant to this systematic review.

41. Yeonok, C., & Emery, R. (2010). Early Adolescents and Divorce in South Korea: Risk, Resilience and Pain. *Journal of Comparative Family Studies*, *41*(5), 855–870. https://doi-org.nwulib.nwu.ac.za/10.3138/jcfs.41.5.855

Reason for exclusion: All the inclusion criteria have not been met. The focus is on the consequences of divorce for children's psychological well-being and parent-child relationships, which are not relevant to this systematic review study.

42. Kuehnle, K., & Ellis, T. (2002). The Importance of Parent-Child Relationships: What Attorneys Need to Know About the Impact of Separation. *Florida Bar Journal*, *76*(9), 67.

Reason for exclusion: This study is a review (secondary study). Only primary studies are included in this systematic review. All the inclusion criteria have also not been met.

43. Hinds, R. W., & Ruth Bradshaw, E. (2005). Gender Bias in Lawyers' Affidavits to the Family Court of Australia. *Family Court Review, 43*(3), 445–453. https://doi-org.nwulib.nwu.ac.za/10.1111/j.1744-1617.2005.00045.x

Reason for exclusion: This study is a review (secondary study). Only primary studies are included in this systematic review. All the inclusion criteria have also not been met, the focus is not on attachment or attachment applied in custody cases.

44. Lowenstein, L. (2010). Attachment Theory and Parental Alienation. *Journal of Divorce & Remarriage, 51*(3), 157–168. https://doi-org.nwulib.nwu.ac.za/10.1080/10502551003597808

Reason for exclusion: This study is a review (secondary study). Only primary studies are included in this systematic review.

45. Tornello, S. L., Emery, R., Rowen, J., Potter, D., Ocker, B., & Xu, Y. (2013). Overnight custody arrangements, attachment, and adjustment among very young children. *Journal of Marriage and Family, 75*(4), 871-885.

Reason for exclusion: This study is a review (secondary study). Only primary studies are included in this systematic review. All the inclusion criteria have also not been met.

46. Reams, R. (1999). Children birth to three entering the state's custody. *Infant Mental Health Journal, 20*(2), 166–174. https://doi-org.nwulib.nwu.ac.za/10.1002/(SICI)1097-0355(199922)20:2<166::AID-IMHJ4>3.0.CO;2-V

Reason for exclusion: All the inclusion criteria are not met. The focus of the study is on assessing the developmental and mental health of children entering the state's legal custody, which is not relevant to this systematic review study.

47. Makariev, D. W., & Shaver, P. (2010). Attachment, parental incarceration and possibilities for intervention: An overview. *Attachment & Human Development*, *12*(4), 311–331. https://doi-org.nwulib.nwu.ac.za/10.1080/14751790903416939

Reason for exclusion: This study is a review (secondary study). Only primary studies will be included in this systematic review. All the inclusion criteria is also not met. The focus is on attachment related interventions for incarcerated mothers, not relevant to this systematic review study.

48. Nair, H., & Murray, A. D. (2005). Predictors of Attachment Security in Preschool Children From Intact and Divorced Families. *Journal of Genetic Psychology*, *166*(3), 245–263. https://doi-org.nwulib.nwu.ac.za/10.3200/GNTP.166.3.245-263

Reason for exclusion: All the inclusion criteria is not met. The focus of the study is on the impact of divorce on preschoolers' attachment security (post-divorce), not relevant to this systematic review study.

49. Millar, P., & Kruk, E. (2014). Maternal Attachment, Paternal Overnight Contact, and Very Young Children's Adjustment: Comment on Tornello et al. (2013). *Journal of Marriage & Family*,*76*(1), 232–236. https://doi-org.nwulib.nwu.ac.za/10.1111/jomf.12071

Reason for exclusion: This study is a critical review; a response to Tornello's research (secondary study). Only primary studies will be included in this systematic review.

50. Alper, G. (2005). Voices from the Unconscious. *Journal of Loss & Trauma*, *10*(1), 73–81. https://doi-org.nwulib.nwu.ac.za/10.1080/15325020490890660

Reason for exclusion: All the inclusion criteria is not met. The focus of the study is on psychotherapy, the aftermath of divorce, not relevant to this systematic review study.

51. Ruschena, E., Prior, M., Sanson, A., & Smart, D. (2005). A longitudinal study of adolescent adjustment following family transitions. *Journal of Child Psychology &*

Psychiatry, *46*(4), 353–363. https://doi-org.nwulib.nwu.ac.za/10.1111/j.1469-7610.2004.00369.x

Reason for exclusion: All the inclusion is not met. The focus is on the impact of family transitions, that is, parental separation, divorce, remarriage and death, not relevant to this systematic review study.

52. Maroney, T. A. (2009). In Family Law, Love's Got a Lot to Do with It: A Response to Phillip Shaver. *Virginia Journal of Social Policy & the Law*, *16*(2), 471–490.

Reason for exclusion: This study is a critical review; a response to Shaver's research (secondary study). Only primary studies will be included in this systematic review.

53. Parke, R. D. (2017). Family psychology: Past and future reflections on the field. *Journal of Family Psychology*, *31*(3), 257–260. https://doi-org.nwulib.nwu.ac.za/10.1037/fam0000318

Reason for exclusion: This study is a review/reflection of previous studies (secondary study). Only primary studies will be included in this systematic review. The focus is also not relevant to this systematic review.

54. Walmsley, C., Strega, S., Brown, L., Dominelli, L., & Callahan, M. (2009). Fathers in the Canadian BSW Curriculum. *Canadian Social Work Review, 26*(1), 73–96.

Reason for exclusion: This study is a review (secondary study). Only primary studies are included in this systematic review. The focus is on fathers within the Canadian BWW curriculum, which is not relevant to this systematic review.

55. Baude, A., & Rouyer, V. (2016). Joint physical custody parents and coparental relationship: Role of attachment relationship between ex-formers and contextual variables linked to the separation. Psychologie *Francaise*, *61*(3), 219-234.

Reason for exclusion: The focus is not relevant to this study and the study is only available in French (only abstract and title were available in English).

56. Brazelton, T. B. (1988). Stress for Families Today. *Infant Mental Health Journal*, *9*(1), 65–71. https://doi-org.nwulib.nwu.ac.za/10.1002/1097-0355(198821)9:1<65::AID-IMHJ2280090109>3.0.CO;2-K

Reason for exclusion: This study is a review (secondary study). Only primary studies are included in this systematic review. The focus is on adjustments to foster parental involvement, not relevant to this systematic review.

57. Hans, J. D. (2002). Stepparenting After Divorce: Stepparents' Legal Positioning Regarding Custody, Access, and Support*. *Family Relations*, *51*(4), 301. https://doi-org.nwulib.nwu.ac.za/10.1111/j.1741-3729.2002.00301.x

Reason for exclusion: This study is a review (secondary study). Only primary studies are included in this systematic review. The focus is on step parenting after divorce, not relevant to this systematic review.

59. Pepiton, M. B., Zelgowski, B., Geffner, R., & Pegolo de Albuquerque, P. (2014). Ethical Violations: What Can and Does Go Wrong in Child Custody Evaluations? *Journal of Child Custody*, *11*(2), 81–100. https://doi-org.nwulib.nwu.ac.za/10.1080/15379418.2014.920245

Reason for exclusion: This study is a review (secondary study). Only primary studies are included in this systematic review. All the inclusion criteria is not met.

60. Morris, M., Halford, W. K., & Petch, J. (2018). A randomized controlled trial comparing family mediation with and without motivational interviewing. *Journal of Family Psychology*, *32*(2), 269–275. https://doi-org.nwulib.nwu.ac.za/10.1037/fam0000367

Reason for exclusion: All the inclusion criteria is not met. The focus is on family mediation and attachment between former partners, not relevant to this systematic review.

61. Woodward, L., Fergusson, D. M., & Belsky, J. (2000). Timing of Parental Separation and Attachment to Parents in Adolescence: Results of a Prospective Study from Birth to Age 16. *Journal of Marriage & Family*, *62*(1), 162. https://doi-org.nwulib.nwu.ac.za/10.1111/j.1741-3737.2000.00162.x

Reason for exclusion: All the inclusion criteria is not met. The focus is on the effects of parental separation on adolescents' attachment (after divorce), not relevant to this systematic review study.

62. Allen, K. R. (2007). Ambiguous Loss After Lesbian Couples With Children Break Up: A Case for Same-Gender Divorce. *Family Relations*, *56*(2), 175–183. https://doi-org.nwulib.nwu.ac.za/10.1111/j.1741-3729.2007.00450.x

Reason for exclusion: All the inclusion criteria is not met. The focus is on ambiguous loss after same-gender divorce, not relevant to this systematic review study.

63. Irhammar, M., & Bengtsson, H. (2004). Attachment in a Group of Adult International Adoptees. *Adoption Quarterly*, *8*(2), 1–25. https://doi-org.nwulib.nwu.ac.za/10.1300/J145v08n02_01

Reason for exclusion: All the inclusion criteria is not met. The focus is on attachment of adult international adoptees, not relevant to this systematic review study.

64. Chapman, S. F. (1991). Attachment and Adolescent Adjustment to Parental Remarriage. *Family Relations*, *40*(2), 232–237. https://doi-org.nwulib.nwu.ac.za/10.2307/585487

Reason for exclusion: This study is a review (secondary study). Only primary studies are included in this systematic review. All the inclusion criteria is not met. The focus is on attachment of adolescent children in parental remarriage, not relevant to this study.

65. Carneiro, R. (2019). My first client: The lioness. *Families, Systems, & Health*, *37*(2), 186. https://doi-org.nwulib.nwu.ac.za/10.1037/fsh0000413

Reason for exclusion: All the inclusion criteria is not met. This is a poem written and used by Carneiro during a therapy session to help a mother who lost custody of her daughter, not relevant to this systematic review.

66. Lee, S. M., Borelli, J., & West, J. (2011). Children's Attachment Relationships: Can Attachment Data Be Used in Child Custody Evaluations? *Journal of Child Custody*, *8*(3), 212–242. https://doi-org.nwulib

Reason for exclusion: This study is a review (secondary study). Only primary studies are included in this systematic review. The focus is more on attachment measures, not completely relevant to this systematic review study.

67. Garber, B. D. (2004). Parental Alienation in Light of Attachment Theory Consideration of the Broader Implications for Child Development, Clinical Practice, and Forensic Process. *Journal of Child Custody*, *1*(4), 49. https://doi-org.nwulib.nwu.ac.za/10.1300

Reason for exclusion: This study is a review (secondary study). Only primary studies are included in this systematic review. All the inclusion criteria is not met. The focus is on parental alienation, not relevant to this systematic review study.

68. Marvin, R., & Schutz, Benjamin, M. (2009). One Component of an Evidence-Based Approach to the Use of Attachment Research in Child Custody Evaluations. *Journal of Child Custody*, *6*(1/2), 113–138. https://doi-org.nwulib.nwu.ac.za/10.1080/15379410902894874

Reason for exclusion: This study is a review (secondary study). Only primary studies are included in this systematic review. All the inclusion criteria is not met.

69. Herman, S. P., & Bernet, W. (1997). AACAP Official Action. Summary of the practice parameters for child custody evaluation. *Journal of the American Academy of Child & Adolescent Psychiatry*, *36*(12), 1784–1787. https://doi-org.nwulib.nwu.ac.za/10.1097/00004583-199712000-00034

Reason for exclusion: This study is a review (secondary study). Only primary studies are included in this systematic review.

70. Herman, S. P. (1997). Practice parameters for child custody evaluation. American Academy of Child and Adolescent Psychiatry. *Journal of the American Academy of Child & Adolescent Psychiatry, 36*(10), 57S–68S. https://doi-org.nwulib.nwu.ac.za/10.1097/00004583-199710001-00005

Reason for exclusion: This study is a review (secondary study). Only primary studies are included in this systematic review.

71. Ludolph, P., & Dale, M. (2012). Attachment in Child Custody: An Additive Factor, Not a Determinative One. *Family Law Quarterly, 46*(1), 1-40.

Reason for exclusion: This study is a review (secondary study). Only primary studies are included in this systematic review.

73. Cole, C. L., & Cole, A. L. (1999). Boundary Ambiguities That Bind Former Spouses Together After the Children Leave Home in Post-Divorce. *Family Relations, 48*(3), 271. https://doi-org.nwulib.nwu.ac.za/10.2307/585636

Reason for exclusion: This study is a review (secondary study). Only primary studies are included in this systematic review. All the inclusion criteria have not been met. The focus is on the attachment between former spouses after children leave the home post-divorce, which not relevant to this systematic review.

74. Pawils, S., Metzner, F., Bech, B., Standke-Erdmann, B., Lorenz, E., & Ballin, A. (2014). Erziehungsfähigkeit in familienrechtlichen Begutachtungen: Bundesweite Befragung von Sachverständigen zu inhalten und methoden = Forensic family assessment of parental competence: Nationwide survey of forensic experts on content and methods. *Forensische Psychiatrie, Psychologie, Kriminologie*, *8*(4), 288–294. https://doi-org.nwulib.nwu.ac.za/10.1007/s11757-014-0285-0

Reason for exclusion: This abstract and article is only available in German; no English version is available.

75. Rusby, J. S. M. (2010). Effect of childhood age in foster care on the incidence of divorce in adulthood. *Journal of Family Psychology*, *24*(1), 101–104. https://doi-org.nwulib.nwu.ac.za/10.1037/a0017940

Reason for exclusion: All the inclusion criteria have not been met. The focus is on the long-term effect of childhood age at which British children were fostered in World War II on their divorce rate in adulthood, which is not relevant to this systematic review study.

76. Riggs, S. A., & Jacobvitz, D. (2002). Expectant parents' representations of early attachment relationships: Associations with mental health and family history. *Journal of Consulting and Clinical Psychology*, *70*(1), 195–204. https://doi-org.nwulib.nwu.ac.za/10.1037/0022-006X.70.1.195

Reason for exclusion: All the inclusion criteria have not been met. The focus, which is on adult representations of attachment in early life, is not relevant to this systematic review.

77. Vila, G., Robert, J., Jos, J., & Mouren-Simeoni, M. (1997). Diabète insulinodépendant de l'enfant et de l'adolescent: intérêt du suivi pédopsychiatrique. *Archives de Pédiatrie*, *4*(7), 615–622. https://doi-org.nwulib.nwu.ac.za/10.1016/S0929-693X(97)83358-1

Reason for exclusion: This abstract and article is only available in French; no English version is available.

78. Allan, R. (2016). The use of emotionally focused therapy with separated or divorced couples. *Canadian Journal of Counselling and Psychotherapy*, *50*(3), 62–79.

Reason for exclusion: All the inclusion criteria have not been met. The focus is on the use of Stage 1 of EFT for couples who are separated or divorced, which is not relevant to this systematic review.

79. Brown, A. C., Green, R.-J., & Druckman, J. (1990). A comparison of stepfamilies with and without child-focused problems. *American Journal of Orthopsychiatry*, *60*(4), 556–566. https://doi-org.nwulib.nwu.ac.za/10.1037/h0079208

Reason for exclusion: All the inclusion criteria have not been met. The focus is on stepfamilies in therapy for child-focused problem compared to those without that problem and not in therapy, which is not relevant to this systematic review.

80. Lopez, F. G., Melendez, M. C., & Rice, K. G. (2000). Parental divorce, parent–child bonds, and adult attachment orientations among college students: A comparison of three racial/ethnic groups. *Journal of Counseling Psychology*, *47*(2), 177–186. https://doi-org.nwulib.nwu.ac.za/10.1037/0022-0167.47.2.177

Reason for exclusion: All the inclusion have not been met. The focus, which is on adult attachment orientations among college students, is not relevant to this systematic review study.

81. Beckwith, L., Cohen, S. E., & Hamilton, C. E. (1999). Maternal sensitivity during infancy and subsequent life events relate to attachment representation at early adulthood. *Developmental Psychology*, *35*(3), 693–700. https://doi-org.nwulib.nwu.ac.za/10.1037/0012-1649.35.3.693

Reason for exclusion: All the inclusion criteria have not been met. The focus is on maternal sensitivity at infancy and attachment at 18 years of age, which is not relevant to this systematic review study.

82. Calloway, G., & Erard, R. E. (2009). Introduction to the special issue on attachment and child custody. *Journal of Child Custody: Research, Issues, and Practices, 6*(1–2), 1–7. https://doi-org.nwulib.nwu.ac.za/10.1080/15379410902894825

Reason for exclusion: This study is a review (secondary study). Only primary studies are included in this systematic review.

83. The Handbook of Juvenile Forensic Psychology. (2003). *Family Therapy: The Journal of the California Graduate School of Family Psychology*, *30*(1), 58–59.

Reason for exclusion: This study is a review (secondary study). Only primary studies are included in this systematic review.

84. Harman, M. J. (2004). Children At-Risk for Borderline Personality Disorder. *Journal of Contemporary Psychotherapy: On the Cutting Edge of Modern Developments in Psychotherapy*, *34*(3), 279–290. https://doi-org.nwulib.nwu.ac.za/10.1023/B:JOCP.0000036635.49985.d0

Reason for exclusion: This study is a review (secondary study). Only primary studies are included in this systematic review. All the inclusion criteria is not met. The focus is on Borderline Personality Disorder (BPD), which is not relevant to this systematic review study.

85. Trepal, H. C. (2006). Review of Mommies, Daddies, Donors, Surrogates: Answering Tough Questions and Building Strong Families. *The Family Journal*, *14*(4), 455. https://doi-org.nwulib.nwu.ac.za/10.1177/1066480706289568

Reason for exclusion: This study is a review (a book review) (secondary study). Only primary studies are included in this systematic review.

88. Garber, B. D. (2009). Attachment methodology in custody evaluation: Four hurdles standing between developmental theory and forensic application. *Journal of Child Custody*, *6*(1-2), 38-61.

Reason for exclusion: This study is a review (secondary study). Only primary studies are included in this systematic review.

91. Lee, S. M., Kaufman, R. L., & George, C. (2009). Disorganized attachment in young children: Manifestations, etiology, and implications for child custody. *Journal of Child Custody*, *6*(1-2), 62-90.

Reason for exclusion: This study is a review (secondary study). Only primary studies are included in this systematic review.

92. Riggs, S. A. (2003). RESPONSE TO TROXEL v. GRANVILLE: Implications of Attachment Theory for Judicial Decisions Regarding Custody and Third-Party Visitation. *Family Court Review*, *41*(1), 39-53.

Reason for exclusion: This study is a review (response to Troxel v. Granville) (secondary study). Only primary studies are included in this systematic review.

94. Rivas, E. M., Handler, L., & Sims, C. R. (2009). Adult attachment measures and their potential utility in custody cases. *Journal of child custody*, *6*(1-2), 25-37.

Reason for exclusion: This study is a review (secondary study). Only primary studies are included in this systematic review.

99. Li, H. J., & Guo, X. M. (2005). The Attachment Nature of Pretrial Custody. *Journal of Heilongjiang Administrative Cadre Institute of Politics and Law*, 05.

Reason for exclusion: This abstract and article is only available in Chinese; no English version is available.

102. Pennell, A. (2008). *Understanding the Interpersonal Behaviours, Rule Breaking and Violence of Young People in Custody Using an Attachment Framework*. University of Surrey (United Kingdom).

Reason for exclusion: This study is a review (secondary study). Only primary studies are included in this systematic review. All the inclusion criteria have not been met. The

focus is on the interpersonal behaviours of young people in custody using an attachment perspective. It is not relevant to this study.

103. Shnypko, O. (2017). Constituent Elements of a Crime Knowingly Illegal Detention, Attachment, House Arrest or Custody (Part 3, Article 371 of the Criminal Code of Ukraine). *Jurid. Sci.*, 138.

Reason for exclusion: This abstract and article is only available in Russian; no English version is available.

104. Duprey, R. M. (2017). *Predicting the Relationship Between Adult Attachment Style, Family Functioning, and Parenting Stress in Parents of Adopted Children from State's Custody*. Trevecca Nazarene University.

Reason for exclusion: All the inclusion criteria have not been met. The focus is on parents of adopted children and their attachment etc. This is not relevant to this systematic review study.

105. English, M. (2007). *Father-child attachment in divorce/custody cases: Do mothers' perceptions of their self-esteem, father-daughter relationships, and life satisfaction correlate to how supportive they are of the amount of time their children spend with their fathers?*. Seattle Pacific University.

Reason for exclusion: All the inclusion criteria have not been met. The focus is on mothers' perceptions and life satisfaction in relation to their support of the time their children spend with their fathers, not relevant to this systematic review study.

106. Kraus, L., & Pope, K. (2009). The importance of attachment in custody evaluations: toward the best interest of the child. In *The Scientific Basis of Custody Decisions* (pp. 165-187). John Wiley & Sons, Hoboken, NJ.

Reason for exclusion: This is a handbook/review (secondary study) about attachment and custody. No books are included in this study.

107. Borelli, J. L., & West, J. L. (2011). *Children's Attachment Relationships: Can Attachment Data be used in Child Custody Evaluations?* S. Margaret Lee Mill Valley, Ca.

Reason for exclusion: This study is a review (secondary study). Only primary studies are included in this systematic review.

108. Smith, G., Coffino, B., Lieberman, A., & Van Horn, P. (2012). Attachment and child custody: The importance of available parents. *Parenting plan evaluations: Applied research for the family court*, 5-24.

Reason for exclusion: This study is a review (chapter in a book) (secondary study). Only primary studies are included in this systematic review.

109. DEFENSE, U. S. O. (2010). SUBJECT: Directive-Type Memorandum (DTM) 09-031,"Videotaping or Otherwise Electronically Recording Strategic Intelligence Interrogations of Persons in the Custody of the Department of Defense" References: See Attachment 1 Purpose. This DTM establishes policy, assigns responsibilities, and provides. *Change*, *1*(09/29), 2.

Reason for exclusion: All inclusion criteria have not been met. The focus is not on attachment or custody cases. This citation was also a memorandum.

110. Woolfson, R. (2014). The role of 'attachment' in child custody and contact cases. *Journal of the Law Society of Scotland*, 59-3.

Reason for exclusion: This study is a review/summary (secondary study). Only primary studies are included in this systematic review.

111. Kenny, M. (2013). Divorce study links infant attachment issues with joint custody. Retrieved from https://www.mollybkenny.com/news/divorce-study-links-infant-attachment-issues-with-joint-custody.cfm

Reason for exclusion: This is an online website article, not an academic primary study.

112. Solomon, J., & Sagi-Schwartz, A. (2013). Rethinking attachment and divorce: Facts, myths and dilemmas in custody disputes. *A. Sagi-Schwartz (Moderator), Roundtable conducted at the Society for Research in Child Development, Seattle, WA*.

Reason for exclusion: This is a citation for a roundtable discussion that was held. It is not an academic primary study.

113. Garber, B.D. (n.d.). *In the best interests of the best interests standard: Attachment and the best interests of the child in the context of contested custody litigation*. HealthyParent.com.

Reason for exclusion: This is a citation on Dr Graber's CV/website; it is not an academic primary study.

114. Pierrehumbert, B. (2014). Joint Custody and Attachment Theory. *Le Carnet PSY*, (6), 32-35.

Reason for exclusion: This abstract and article is only available in French; no English version is available.

115. Shustack, B. (1994). Predictors of successful joint custody – An attachment theory perspective. *Canadian Psychology-Psychologie Canadienne*, *35*(2 A), 167-167.

Reason for exclusion: This study is a review (secondary study). Only primary studies are included in this systematic review.

116. Davamony, D. I. (2000). *Adult Attachment Style as a Predictor of Child Custody Negotiation Outcomes*. (Doctoral dissertation, Loma Linda University).

Reason for exclusion: This dissertation is not available online.

117. Berger, L. M., Brown, P. R., Joung, E., Melli, M. S., & Wimer, L. (2007). The Stability of Shared Child Physical Placements in Recent Cohorts of Divorced Wisconsin Families. *Institute for Research on Poverty Discussion Paper*, (1329-07), 24-25.

Reason for exclusion: All the inclusion criteria have not been met. The focus is on the stability of shared living arrangements, which is not relevant to this systematic review.

118. Nichols A. M. (2014). Toward a child-centered approach to evaluating claims of alienation in high-conflict custody disputes. *Michigan law review*, *112*(4), 663–688.

Reason for exclusion: This study is a review (secondary study). Only primary studies are included in this systematic review. The focus is on alienation in high-conflict custody disputes, which is not relevant to this systematic review.

119. Shnipko, O. (2017). Кваліфікуючі Ознаки Злочину Завідомо Незаконні Затримання, Привід, Домашній Арешт Або Тримання Під Вартою (Частина 3 Статті 371 Кримінального Кодексу України)(Constituent Elements of A Crime Knowingly Illegal Detention, Attachment, House Arrest or Custody (Part 3, Article 371 of the Criminal Code of Ukraine)). *Juridical Science (Kiev, Ukraine)*, *2*(68), 138-153.

Reason for exclusion: This abstract and article is only available in Russian, no English version is available.

120. Vismara, L. (2011). Atypical attachment representation in parents assessed for parenting capacity in child custody evaluations. In *5th biennial International Attachment Conference from: Attachment-the importance of intimate relationships from the cradle to the grave.*

Reason for exclusion: This is a conference proceeding; conference proceedings are not included in this systematic review.

Appendix 1: Attachment 8 – List of Citations of all the Obtained Full-Text Papers to be Screened – Key STEP 5: Obtaining papers

List of Included Full-Text Studies to be Screened: 26 Results

6. Dolan, M. J., & Hynan, D. J. (2014). Fighting over Bedtime Stories: An Empirical Study of the Risks of Valuing Quantity over Quality in Child Custody Decisions. *Law & Psychology Review*, *38*, 45–96.

9. George, C., Isaacs, M. B., & Marvin, R. S. (2011). Incorporating attachment assessment into custody evaluations: The case of a 2-year-old and her parents. *Family Court Review*, *49*(3), 483-500.

10. Austin, W. G. (2018). Parental Gatekeeping and Child Custody Evaluation: Part III: Protective Gatekeeping and the Overnights "Conundrum." *Journal of Divorce & Remarriage, 59*(5), 429–451. https://doi-org.nwulib.nwu.ac.za/10.1080/10502556.2018.1454202

11. Talley, S. D. (2012). Preserving Relationships: Ways Attachment Theory Can Inform Custody Decisions. *BYU Journal of Public Law, 26*(2), 245–264.

13. Bantekas, I. (2016). Discrimination against Fathers in Greek Child Custody Proceedings: Failing the Child's Best Interests. *International Journal of Children's Rights, 24*(2), 330–357. https://doi-org.nwulib.nwu.ac.za/10.1163/15718182-02402008

15. McIntosh, J. E. (2011). Guest Editor's Introduction to Special Issue on Attachment Theory, Separation, and Divorce: Forging Coherent Understandings for Family Law. *Family Court Review, 49*(3), 418–425. https://doi-org.nwulib.nwu.ac.za/10.1111/j.1744-1617.2011.01382.x

20. Sroufe, A., & McIntosh, J. (2011). Divorce and Attachment Relationships: The Longitudinal Journey. *Family Court Review*, *49*(3), 464–473. https://doi-org.nwulib.nwu.ac.za/10.1111/j.1744-1617.2011.01384.x

28. Kruk, E. (2010). Collateral Damage: The Lived Experiences of Divorced Mothers Without Custody. *Journal of Divorce & Remarriage*, *51*(8), 526–543. https://doi-org.nwulib.nwu.ac.za/10.1080/10502556.2010.504103

29. Kretchmar, M. D., Worsham, N. L., & Swenson, N. (2005). Anna's story: A qualitative analysis of an at-risk mother's experience in an attachment-based foster care program. *Attachment & Human Development*, *7*(1), 31–49. https://doi-org.nwulib.nwu.ac.za/10.1080/14616730500048102

32. Kruk, E. (2010). Parental and Social Institutional Responsibilities to Children's Needs in the Divorce Transition: Fathers' Perspectives. *Journal of Men's Studies*, *18*(2), 159–178. https://doi-org.nwulib.nwu.ac.za/10.3149/jms.1802.159

33. Werner-Lin, A., Biank, N., & Rubenstein, B. (2010). There's No Place Like Home: Preparing Children for Geographical and Relational Attachment Disruptions Following Parental Death to Cancer. *Clinical Social Work Journal*, *38*(1), 132–143. https://doi-org.nwulib.nwu.ac.za/10.1007/s10615-009-0233-1

38. Holtzman, M. (2006). Definitions of the Family as an Impetus for Legal Change in Custody Decision Making: Suggestions from an Empirical Case Study. *Law & Social Inquiry*, *31*(1), 1–37. https://doi-org.nwulib.nwu.ac.za/10.1111/j.1747-4469.2006.00001.x

40. Holtzman, M. (2011). Family Definitions and Children's Rights in Custody Decision Making: The Importance of a Changing Litigant Context. *Family Court Review*, *49*(3), 591–609. https://doi-org.nwulib.nwu.ac.za/10.1111/j.1744-1617.2011.01395.x

58. Faber, A., & Wittenborn, A. (2010). The Role of Attachment in Children's Adjustment to Divorce and Remarriage. *Journal of Family Psychotherapy*, *21*(2), 89–104. https://doi-org.nwulib.nwu.ac.za/10.1080/08975353.2010.483625

72. Wallerstein, J., Lewis, J., & Packer Rosenthal, S. (2013). Mothers and their children after divorce: Report from a 25-year longitudinal study. *Psychoanalytic Psychology*, *30*(2), 167–184. https://doi-org.nwulib.nwu.ac.za/10.1037/a0032511

86. Awad, G. A. (1987). The assessment of custody and access disputes in cases of sexual abuse allegations. Canadian Journal of Psychiatry. *Revue Canadienne de Psychiatrie*, *32*(7), 539–544. https://doi-org.nwulib.nwu.ac.za/10.1177/070674378703200707

87. Lieberman, A. F., & Van Horn, P. (1998). Attachment, trauma, and domestic violence: Implications for child custody. *Child and adolescent psychiatric clinics of North America*.

89. Suchman, N. E., McMahon, T. J., Zhang, H., Mayes, L. C., & Luthar, S. (2006). Substance-abusing mothers and disruptions in child custody: An attachment perspective. *Journal of substance abuse treatment*, *30*(3), 197-204.

90. Isaacs, M. B., George, C., & Marvin, R. S. (2009). Utilizing attachment measures in child custody evaluations: Incremental validity. *Journal of Child Custody*, *6*(1-2), 139-162.

93. Marcus, R. F., & Mirle, J. (1990). Validity of a child interview measure of attachment as used in child custody evaluations. *Perceptual and Motor Skills*, *70*(3), 1043-1054.

95. Purvis, K. B., McKenzie, L. B., Kellermann, G., & Cross, D. R. (2010). An attachment based approach to child custody evaluation: A case study. *Journal of Child Custody*, *7*(1), 45-60.

96. Manna, G., Musso, P., Kopala-Sibley, D. C., Cassibba, R., & Falgares, G. (2020). The moderating effect of attachment styles on the relationships between maltreatment experiences and internalizing and externalizing problems among adolescents:

Implications for custody issues. *Journal of Family Trauma, Child Custody & Child Development*, *17*(2), 161-188.

97. Stürmer, S., Salewski, C., Meyer, A. K., & Meyer, J. (2015). Methodische Qualität und Bindungsdiagnostik im Kontext familienrechtspsychologischer Gutachten/Methodological quality and assessment of attachment in child custody evaluations for the family court. *Kindesmisshandlung und-vernachlässigung*, *18*(1), 26-43.

[Full-text was not obtained: report of full-text not retrieved n = 1].

98. LeBlanc, M. (2020). *Expert Opinions on the Inclusion of Attachment-related Measures in Bilateral Custody Assessments and Parenting Capacity Assessments* (Doctoral dissertation, Adler University).

100. Sager, M. N. (2015). *An Examination of the Possible Use of Attachment Assessments for Making Child Custody Decisions* (Doctoral dissertation, California Lutheran University).

101. Schraegle IV, W. A. (2014). *The role of adult attachment in child custody litigants* (Doctoral dissertation).

Appendix 1: Attachment 9 – List of Citations of the Full-Text Papers that could not be Obtained – Key STEP 5: Obtaining papers

List of Full-Text Studies not Obtained: 1 Result

97. Stürmer, S., Salewski, C., Meyer, A. K., & Meyer, J. (2015). Methodische Qualität und Bindungsdiagnostik im Kontext familienrechtspsychologischer Gutachten/Methodological quality and assessment of attachment in child custody evaluations for the family court. *Kindesmisshandlung und-vernachlässigung*, *18*(1), 26-43.

[Full-text was not obtained: report of full-text not retrieved n = 1].

Appendix 1: Attachment 10 – List of Included Studies after Screening and Selecting Full-Text Papers – Key STEP 6: Selecting full-text papers

List of Included Studies after Screening and Selecting Full-Text Papers: 10 results

9. George, C., Isaacs, M. B., & Marvin, R. S. (2011). Incorporating attachment assessment into custody evaluations: The case of a 2-year-old and her parents. *Family Court Review*, *49*(3), 483-500.

15. McIntosh, J. E. (2011). Guest Editor's Introduction to Special Issue on Attachment Theory, Separation, and Divorce: Forging Coherent Understandings for Family Law. *Family Court Review*, *49*(3), 418–425. https://doi-org.nwulib.nwu.ac.za/10.1111/j.1744-1617.2011.01382.x

20. Sroufe, A., & McIntosh, J. (2011). Divorce and Attachment Relationships: The Longitudinal Journey. *Family Court Review*, *49*(3), 464–473. https://doi-org.nwulib.nwu.ac.za/10.1111/j.1744-1617.2011.01384.x

32. Kruk, E. (2010). Parental and Social Institutional Responsibilities to Children's Needs in the Divorce Transition: Fathers' Perspectives. *Journal of Men's Studies*, *18*(2), 159–178. https://doi-org.nwulib.nwu.ac.za/10.3149/jms.1802.159

90. Isaacs, M. B., George, C., & Marvin, R. S. (2009). Utilizing attachment measures in child custody evaluations: Incremental validity. *Journal of Child Custody*, *6*(1-2), 139-162.

93. Marcus, R. F., & Mirle, J. (1990). Validity of a child interview measure of attachment as used in child custody evaluations. *Perceptual and Motor Skills*, *70*(3), 1043-1054.

95. Purvis, K. B., McKenzie, L. B., Kellermann, G., & Cross, D. R. (2010). An attachment based approach to child custody evaluation: A case study. *Journal of Child Custody*, *7*(1), 45-60.

98. LeBlanc, M. (2020). *Expert Opinions on the Inclusion of Attachment-related Measures in Bilateral Custody Assessments and Parenting Capacity Assessments* (Doctoral dissertation, Adler University).

100. Sager, M. N. (2015). *An Examination of the Possible Use of Attachment Assessments for Making Child Custody Decisions* (Doctoral dissertation, California Lutheran University).

101. Schraegle IV, W. A. (2014). *The Role of Adult Attachment in Child Custody Litigants* (Doctoral dissertation).

Appendix 1: Attachment 11 – List of Excluded Studies after Screening and Selecting Full-Text Papers: Reasons for Exclusion – Key STEP 6: Selecting full-text papers

List of Excluded Studies after Screening and Selecting Full-Text Papers: 15 results

6. Dolan, M. J., & Hynan, D. J. (2014). Fighting over Bedtime Stories: An Empirical Study of the Risks of Valuing Quantity over Quality in Child Custody Decisions. *Law & Psychology Review*, *38*, 45–96.

Reason for exclusion: The study is a review study (secondary study), only primary studies are included in this systematic review. Part III of the article summarises two important areas of psychological research: (1) influences which aid in predicting the impact divorce has on children and (2) attachment theory and its lessons for evaluating parent-child relationships.

10. Austin, W. G. (2018). Parental Gatekeeping and Child Custody Evaluation: Part III: Protective Gatekeeping and the Overnights "Conundrum." *Journal of Divorce & Remarriage, 59*(5), 429–451. https://doi-org.nwulib.nwu.ac.za/10.1080/10502556.2018.1454202

Reason for exclusion: The study is a review study (secondary study), only primary studies are included in this systematic review. The article reviews research on overnights and child outcomes and discusses the research on overnights and child outcomes within the context of attachment theory.

11. Talley, S. D. (2012). Preserving Relationships: Ways Attachment Theory Can Inform Custody Decisions. *BYU Journal of Public Law, 26*(2), 245–264.

Reason for exclusion: The study is a review study (secondary study), only primary studies are included in this systematic review. Part of the article provides an overview of

attachment theory and cites some of the research supporting the theory (reviews attachment theory as it relates to custody agreements).

13. Bantekas, I. (2016). Discrimination against Fathers in Greek Child Custody Proceedings: Failing the Child's Best Interests. *International Journal of Children's Rights, 24*(2), 330–357. https://doi-org.nwulib.nwu.ac.za/10.1163/15718182-02402008

Reason for exclusion: The study is a review study (secondary study), only primary studies are included in this systematic review. This article reviews previous data, research, custody proceedings etc. to examine the discrimination fathers face in Greek child custody proceedings with the court ultimately failing the child's best interest.

28. Kruk, E. (2010). Collateral Damage: The Lived Experiences of Divorced Mothers Without Custody. *Journal of Divorce & Remarriage*, *51*(8), 526–543. https://doi-org.nwulib.nwu.ac.za/10.1080/10502556.2010.504103

Reason for exclusion: This qualitative study does not meet all of the set inclusion criteria. The focus is not on how attachment theory is used/applied in custody cases. The focus is on the experience divorced mothers (without custody) had during and after divorce proceedings.

29. Kretchmar, M. D., Worsham, N. L., & Swenson, N. (2005). Anna's story: A qualitative analysis of an at-risk mother's experience in an attachment-based foster care program. *Attachment & Human Development*, *7*(1), 31–49. https://doi-org.nwulib.nwu.ac.za/10.1080/14616730500048102

Reason for exclusion: This qualitative study does not meet all of the set inclusion criteria. The focus is not on how attachment theory is used/applied in custody cases. The focus is on an at-risk mother's experience in an alternative foster care programme (attachment-based intervention programme).

33. Werner-Lin, A., Biank, N., & Rubenstein, B. (2010). There's No Place Like Home: Preparing Children for Geographical and Relational Attachment Disruptions Following Parental Death to Cancer. *Clinical Social Work Journal, 38*(1), 132–143. https://doi-org.nwulib.nwu.ac.za/10.1007/s10615-009-0233-1

Reason for exclusion: This study does not meet all of the set inclusion criteria. The focus is not on how attachment theory is used/applied in custody cases. The article presents two case studies and offers family-, developmental-, and attachment-based interventions to prepare children for family transitions.

38. Holtzman, M. (2006). Definitions of the Family as an Impetus for Legal Change in Custody Decision Making: Suggestions from an Empirical Case Study. *Law & Social Inquiry, 31*(1), 1–37. https://doi-org.nwulib.nwu.ac.za/10.1111/j.1747-4469.2006.00001.x

Reason for exclusion: The study is a review study (secondary study). Only primary studies are included in this systematic review. This article reviews and analyses custody cases and previous research with the focus being on changing the way in which "family" is understood and focusing on children's rights in custody cases.

40. Holtzman, M. (2011). Family Definitions and Children's Rights in Custody Decision Making: The Importance of a Changing Litigant Context. *Family Court Review, 49*(3), 591–609. https://doi-org.nwulib.nwu.ac.za/10.1111/j.1744-1617.2011.01395.x

Reason for exclusion: The study is a review study (secondary study). Only primary studies are included in this systematic review. This article reviews and analyses custody cases and previous research, focusing on competing arguments. Some scholars argue that legal recognition of expansive definitions of the family is the key to protecting children's attachments, while others argue that such protection is contingent upon

legal recognition of children's rights. This article examined the efficacy of these competing arguments.

58. Faber, A., & Wittenborn, A. (2010). The Role of Attachment in Children's Adjustment to Divorce and Remarriage. *Journal of Family Psychotherapy*, *21*(2), 89–104. https://doi-org.nwulib.nwu.ac.za/10.1080/08975353.2010.483625

Reason for exclusion: The study is a review study (secondary study), only primary studies are included in this systematic review. This article examines how attachment theory provides a strong theoretical foundation for clinically assessing and treating children of divorce and remarriage in terms of reducing adjustment problems and fostering resiliency.

72. Wallerstein, J., Lewis, J., & Packer Rosenthal, S. (2013). Mothers and their children after divorce: Report from a 25-year longitudinal study. *Psychoanalytic Psychology*, *30*(2), 167–184. https://doi-org.nwulib.nwu.ac.za/10.1037/a0032511

Reason for exclusion: This qualitative study does not meet all of the set inclusion criteria. The focus is not on how attachment theory is used/applied in custody cases. The focus is more on the mother-child attachment relationship after divorce (25-year longitudinal study).

86. Awad, G. A. (1987). The assessment of custody and access disputes in cases of sexual abuse allegations. Canadian Journal of Psychiatry. *Revue Canadienne de Psychiatrie, 32*(7), 539–544. https://doi-org.nwulib.nwu.ac.za/10.1177/070674378703200707

Reason for exclusion: The study is a review study (secondary study), only primary studies are included in this systematic review. This article examines the assessment (assessments used) of custody and access disputes in cases of sexual abuse allegations.

87. Lieberman, A. F., & Van Horn, P. (1998). Attachment, trauma, and domestic violence: Implications for child custody. *Child and adolescent psychiatric clinics of North America*.

Reason for exclusion: This mixed-method intervention study does not meet all of the set inclusion criteria. The focus is not on how attachment theory is used/applied in custody cases. The article examines how children and parents involved in domestic violence experience family relationships and child custody issues through the lens of traumatised and traumatising patterns of attachment.

89. Suchman, N. E., McMahon, T. J., Zhang, H., Mayes, L. C., & Luthar, S. (2006). Substance-abusing mothers and disruptions in child custody: An attachment perspective. *Journal of substance abuse treatment, 30*(3), 197-204.

Reason for exclusion: This quantitative study does not meet all of the set inclusion criteria. The focus is not on how attachment theory is used/applied in custody cases. The article employed an attachment framework, and examined (1) whether substance-abusing mothers' perceptions of how they were parented were related to the severity of their substance abuse and psychological maladjustment and (2) whether these two factors mediated the association between mothers' perceptions of how they were parented and their children's placement out of home.

96. Manna, G., Musso, P., Kopala-Sibley, D. C., Cassibba, R., & Falgares, G. (2020). The moderating effect of attachment styles on the relationships between maltreatment experiences and internalizing and externalizing problems among adolescents: Implications for custody issues. *Journal of Family Trauma, Child Custody & Child Development, 17*(2), 161-188.

Reason for exclusion: This quantitative study does not meet all of the set inclusion criteria. The focus is not on how attachment theory is used/applied in custody cases. This study explored whether different attachment style profiles are associated with different forms of maltreatment as well as internalizing and externalizing symptoms, and whether attachment

styles may moderate the link between different forms of maltreatment and internalizing and externalizing problems.

Appendix 2: Attachment 1 – Mixed Methods Appraisal Tool (MMAT) (Example) – Key STEP 8: Data extraction, data presentation and quality assessment

Part I: Mixed Methods Appraisal Tool (MMAT), version 2018

Category of study designs	Methodological quality criteria	Responses			
		Yes	No	Can't tell	Comments
Screening questions (for all types)	S1. Are there clear research questions?				
	S2. Do the collected data allow to address the research questions?				
	Further appraisal may not be feasible or appropriate when the answer is 'No' or 'Can't tell' to one or both screening questions.				
1. Qualitative	1.1. Is the qualitative approach appropriate to answer the research question?				
	1.2. Are the qualitative data collection methods adequate to address the research question?				
	1.3. Are the findings adequately derived from the data?				
	1.4. Is the interpretation of results sufficiently substantiated by data?				
	1.5. Is there coherence between qualitative data sources, collection, analysis and interpretation?				
2. Quantitative randomized controlled trials	2.1. Is randomization appropriately performed?				
	2.2. Are the groups comparable at baseline?				
	2.3. Are there complete outcome data?				
	2.4. Are outcome assessors blinded to the intervention provided?				
	2.5 Did the participants adhere to the assigned intervention?				
3. Quantitative non-randomized	3.1. Are the participants representative of the target population?				
	3.2. Are measurements appropriate regarding both the outcome and intervention (or exposure)?				
	3.3. Are there complete outcome data?				
	3.4. Are the confounders accounted for in the design and analysis?				
	3.5. During the study period, is the intervention administered (or exposure occurred) as intended?				
4. Quantitative descriptive	4.1. Is the sampling strategy relevant to address the research question?				
	4.2. Is the sample representative of the target population?				
	4.3. Are the measurements appropriate?				
	4.4. Is the risk of nonresponse bias low?				
	4.5. Is the statistical analysis appropriate to answer the research question?				
5. Mixed methods	5.1. Is there an adequate rationale for using a mixed methods design to address the research question?				
	5.2. Are the different components of the study effectively integrated to answer the research question?				

	5.3. Are the outputs of the integration of qualitative and quantitative components adequately interpreted?				
	5.4. Are divergences and inconsistencies between quantitative and qualitative results adequately addressed?				
	5.5. Do the different components of the study adhere to the quality criteria of each tradition of the methods involved?				

Appendix 2: Attachment 2 – CASP Systematic Review Checklist (Example) – Key STEP 8: Data extraction, data presentation and quality assessment

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Summertown Pavilion, Middle Way Oxford OX2 7LG

CASP Checklist: 10 questions to help you make sense of a Systematic Review

How to use this appraisal tool: Three broad issues need to be considered when appraising a systematic review study:

- Are the results of the study valid? (Section A)
- What are the results? (Section B)
- Will the results help locally? (Section C)

The 10 questions on the following pages are designed to help you think about these issues systematically. The first two questions are screening questions and can be answered quickly. If the answer to both is "yes", it is worth proceeding with the remaining questions. There is some degree of overlap between the questions, you are asked to record a "yes", "no" or "can't tell" to most of the questions. A number of italicised prompts are given after each question. These are designed to remind you why the question is important. Record your reasons for your answers in the spaces provided.

About: These checklists were designed to be used as educational pedagogic tools, as part of a workshop setting, therefore we do not suggest a scoring system. The core CASP checklists (randomised controlled trial & systematic review) were based on JAMA 'Users' guides to the medical literature 1994 (adapted from Guyatt GH, Sackett DL, and Cook DJ), and piloted with health care practitioners.

For each new checklist, a group of experts were assembled to develop and pilot the checklist and the workshop format with which it would be used. Over the years overall adjustments have been made to the format, but a recent survey of checklist users reiterated that the basic format continues to be useful and appropriate.

Referencing: we recommend using the Harvard style citation, i.e.: *Critical Appraisal Skills Programme (2018). CASP (insert name of checklist i.e. Systematic Review) Checklist. [online] Available at: URL. Accessed: Date Accessed.*

CASP
Critical Appraisal Skills Programme

Paper for appraisal and reference:

Section A: Are the results of the review valid?

1. Did the review address a clearly focused question?

Yes ☐
Can't Tell ☐
No ☐

HINT: An issue can be 'focused' In terms of
- the population studied
- the intervention given
- the outcome considered

Comments:

2. Did the authors look for the right type of papers?

Yes ☐
Can't Tell ☐
No ☐

HINT: 'The best sort of studies' would
- address the review's question
- have an appropriate study design (usually RCTs for papers evaluating interventions)

Comments:

Is it worth continuing?

3. Do you think all the important, relevant studies were included?

Yes ☐
Can't Tell ☐
No ☐

HINT: Look for
- which bibliographic databases were used
- follow up from reference lists
- personal contact with experts
- unpublished as well as published studies
- non-English language studies

Comments:

CASP
Critical Appraisal Skills Programme

7. How precise are the results?

HINT: Look at the confidence intervals, if given

Comments:

Section C: Will the results help locally?

8. Can the results be applied to the local population?

Yes ☐
Can't Tell ☐
No ☐

HINT: Consider whether
- the patients covered by the review could be sufficiently different to your population to cause concern
- your local setting is likely to differ much from that of the review

Comments:

9. Were all important outcomes considered?

Yes ☐
Can't Tell ☐
No ☐

HINT: Consider whether
- there is other information you would like to have seen

Comments:

10. Are the benefits worth the harms and costs?

Yes ☐
Can't Tell ☐
No ☐

HINT: Consider
- even if this is not addressed by the review, what do you think?

Comments:

Appendix 2: Attachment 3 – Completed Mixed Methods Appraisal Tool (MMAT) – Key STEP 8: Data extraction, data presentation and quality assessment

Category of study designs	Methodological quality criteria [Study Number 9]	Responses			
		Yes	No	Can't tell	Comments
Screening questions (for all types)	S1. Are there clear research questions?			X	
	S2. Do the collected data allow to address the research questions?	X			
	Further appraisal may not be feasible or appropriate when the answer is 'No' or 'Can't tell' to one or both screening questions.				
1. Qualitative	1.1. Is the qualitative approach appropriate to answer the research question?				
	1.2. Are the qualitative data collection methods adequate to address the research question?				
	1.3. Are the findings adequately derived from the data?				
	1.4. Is the interpretation of results sufficiently substantiated by data?				
	1.5. Is there coherence between qualitative data sources, collection, analysis and interpretation?				
2. Quantitative randomized controlled trials	2.1. Is randomization appropriately performed?				
	2.2. Are the groups comparable at baseline?				
	2.3. Are there complete outcome data?				
	2.4. Are outcome assessors blinded to the intervention provided?				
	2.5 Did the participants adhere to the assigned intervention?				
3. Quantitative non-randomized	3.1. Are the participants representative of the target population?				
	3.2. Are measurements appropriate regarding both the outcome and intervention (or exposure)?				
	3.3. Are there complete outcome data?				
	3.4. Are the confounders accounted for in the design and analysis?				
	3.5. During the study period, is the intervention administered (or exposure occurred) as intended?				
4. Quantitative descriptive	4.1. Is the sampling strategy relevant to address the research question?				
	4.2. Is the sample representative of the target population?				
	4.3. Are the measurements appropriate?				
	4.4. Is the risk of nonresponse bias low?				
	4.5. Is the statistical analysis appropriate to answer the research question?				
5. Mixed methods	5.1. Is there an adequate rationale for using a mixed methods design to address the research question?	X			
	5.2. Are the different components of the study effectively integrated to answer the research question?	X			
	5.3. Are the outputs of the integration of qualitative and quantitative components adequately interpreted?	X			
	5.4. Are divergences and inconsistencies between quantitative and qualitative results adequately addressed?	X			
	5.5. Do the different components of the study adhere to the quality criteria of each tradition of the methods involved?	X			

Appendix 2: Attachment 4 – Completed Mixed Methods Appraisal Tool (MMAT) – Key STEP 8: Data extraction, data presentation and quality assessment

Category of study designs	Methodological quality criteria [Study Number 15]	Responses			
		Yes	No	Can't tell	Comments
Screening questions (for all types)	S1. Are there clear research questions?	X			
	S2. Do the collected data allow to address the research questions?	X			
	Further appraisal may not be feasible or appropriate when the answer is 'No' or 'Can't tell' to one or both screening questions.				
1. Qualitative	1.1. Is the qualitative approach appropriate to answer the research question?	X			
	1.2. Are the qualitative data collection methods adequate to address the research question?	X			
	1.3. Are the findings adequately derived from the data?	X			
	1.4. Is the interpretation of results sufficiently substantiated by data?	X			
	1.5. Is there coherence between qualitative data sources, collection, analysis and interpretation?	X			
2. Quantitative randomized controlled trials	2.1. Is randomization appropriately performed?				
	2.2. Are the groups comparable at baseline?				
	2.3. Are there complete outcome data?				
	2.4. Are outcome assessors blinded to the intervention provided?				
	2.5 Did the participants adhere to the assigned intervention?				
3. Quantitative non-randomized	3.1. Are the participants representative of the target population?				
	3.2. Are measurements appropriate regarding both the outcome and intervention (or exposure)?				
	3.3. Are there complete outcome data?				
	3.4. Are the confounders accounted for in the design and analysis?				
	3.5. During the study period, is the intervention administered (or exposure occurred) as intended?				
4. Quantitative descriptive	4.1. Is the sampling strategy relevant to address the research question?				
	4.2. Is the sample representative of the target population?				
	4.3. Are the measurements appropriate?				
	4.4. Is the risk of nonresponse bias low?				
	4.5. Is the statistical analysis appropriate to answer the research question?				
5. Mixed methods	5.1. Is there an adequate rationale for using a mixed methods design to address the research question?				
	5.2. Are the different components of the study effectively integrated to answer the research question?				
	5.3. Are the outputs of the integration of qualitative and quantitative components adequately interpreted?				
	5.4. Are divergences and inconsistencies between quantitative and qualitative results adequately addressed?				
	5.5. Do the different components of the study adhere to the quality criteria of each tradition of the methods involved?				

Appendix 2: Attachment 5 – Completed Mixed Methods Appraisal Tool (MMAT) – Key STEP 8: Data extraction, data presentation and quality assessment

Category of study designs	Methodological quality criteria [Study Number 20]	Responses			
		Yes	No	Can't tell	Comments
Screening questions (for all types)	S1. Are there clear research questions?	X			
	S2. Do the collected data allow to address the research questions?	X			
	Further appraisal may not be feasible or appropriate when the answer is 'No' or 'Can't tell' to one or both screening questions.				
1. Qualitative	1.1. Is the qualitative approach appropriate to answer the research question?	X			
	1.2. Are the qualitative data collection methods adequate to address the research question?	X			
	1.3. Are the findings adequately derived from the data?	X			
	1.4. Is the interpretation of results sufficiently substantiated by data?	X			
	1.5. Is there coherence between qualitative data sources, collection, analysis and interpretation?	X			
2. Quantitative randomized controlled trials	2.1. Is randomization appropriately performed?				
	2.2. Are the groups comparable at baseline?				
	2.3. Are there complete outcome data?				
	2.4. Are outcome assessors blinded to the intervention provided?				
	2.5 Did the participants adhere to the assigned intervention?				
3. Quantitative non-randomized	3.1. Are the participants representative of the target population?				
	3.2. Are measurements appropriate regarding both the outcome and intervention (or exposure)?				
	3.3. Are there complete outcome data?				
	3.4. Are the confounders accounted for in the design and analysis?				
	3.5. During the study period, is the intervention administered (or exposure occurred) as intended?				
4. Quantitative descriptive	4.1. Is the sampling strategy relevant to address the research question?				
	4.2. Is the sample representative of the target population?				
	4.3. Are the measurements appropriate?				
	4.4. Is the risk of nonresponse bias low?				
	4.5. Is the statistical analysis appropriate to answer the research question?				
5. Mixed methods	5.1. Is there an adequate rationale for using a mixed methods design to address the research question?				
	5.2. Are the different components of the study effectively integrated to answer the research question?				
	5.3. Are the outputs of the integration of qualitative and quantitative components adequately interpreted?				
	5.4. Are divergences and inconsistencies between quantitative and qualitative results adequately addressed?				
	5.5. Do the different components of the study adhere to the quality criteria of each tradition of the methods involved?				

Appendix 2: Attachment 6 – Completed Mixed Methods Appraisal Tool (MMAT) – Key STEP 8: Data extraction, data presentation and quality assessment

Category of study designs	Methodological quality criteria [Study Number 32]	Responses			
		Yes	No	Can't tell	Comments
Screening questions (for all types)	S1. Are there clear research questions?	X			
	S2. Do the collected data allow to address the research questions?	X			
	Further appraisal may not be feasible or appropriate when the answer is 'No' or 'Can't tell' to one or both screening questions.				
1. Qualitative	1.1. Is the qualitative approach appropriate to answer the research question?				
	1.2. Are the qualitative data collection methods adequate to address the research question?				
	1.3. Are the findings adequately derived from the data?				
	1.4. Is the interpretation of results sufficiently substantiated by data?				
	1.5. Is there coherence between qualitative data sources, collection, analysis and interpretation?				
2. Quantitative randomized controlled trials	2.1. Is randomization appropriately performed?				
	2.2. Are the groups comparable at baseline?				
	2.3. Are there complete outcome data?				
	2.4. Are outcome assessors blinded to the intervention provided?				
	2.5 Did the participants adhere to the assigned intervention?				
3. Quantitative non-randomized	3.1. Are the participants representative of the target population?				
	3.2. Are measurements appropriate regarding both the outcome and intervention (or exposure)?				
	3.3. Are there complete outcome data?				
	3.4. Are the confounders accounted for in the design and analysis?				
	3.5. During the study period, is the intervention administered (or exposure occurred) as intended?				
4. Quantitative descriptive	4.1. Is the sampling strategy relevant to address the research question?				
	4.2. Is the sample representative of the target population?				
	4.3. Are the measurements appropriate?				
	4.4. Is the risk of nonresponse bias low?				
	4.5. Is the statistical analysis appropriate to answer the research question?				
5. Mixed methods	5.1. Is there an adequate rationale for using a mixed methods design to address the research question?	X			
	5.2. Are the different components of the study effectively integrated to answer the research question?	X			
	5.3. Are the outputs of the integration of qualitative and quantitative components adequately interpreted?	X			
	5.4. Are divergences and inconsistencies between quantitative and qualitative results adequately addressed?	X			
	5.5. Do the different components of the study adhere to the quality criteria of each tradition of the methods involved?	X			

Appendix 2: Attachment 7 – Completed Mixed Methods Appraisal Tool (MMAT) – Key STEP 8: Data extraction, data presentation and quality assessment

Category of study designs	Methodological quality criteria [Study Number 90]	Responses			
		Yes	No	Can't tell	Comments
Screening questions (for all types)	S1. Are there clear research questions?	X			
	S2. Do the collected data allow to address the research questions?	X			
	Further appraisal may not be feasible or appropriate when the answer is 'No' or 'Can't tell' to one or both screening questions.				
1. Qualitative	1.1. Is the qualitative approach appropriate to answer the research question?				
	1.2. Are the qualitative data collection methods adequate to address the research question?				
	1.3. Are the findings adequately derived from the data?				
	1.4. Is the interpretation of results sufficiently substantiated by data?				
	1.5. Is there coherence between qualitative data sources, collection, analysis and interpretation?				
2. Quantitative randomized controlled trials	2.1. Is randomization appropriately performed?				
	2.2. Are the groups comparable at baseline?				
	2.3. Are there complete outcome data?				
	2.4. Are outcome assessors blinded to the intervention provided?				
	2.5 Did the participants adhere to the assigned intervention?				
3. Quantitative non-randomized	3.1. Are the participants representative of the target population?				
	3.2. Are measurements appropriate regarding both the outcome and intervention (or exposure)?				
	3.3. Are there complete outcome data?				
	3.4. Are the confounders accounted for in the design and analysis?				
	3.5. During the study period, is the intervention administered (or exposure occurred) as intended?				
4. Quantitative descriptive	4.1. Is the sampling strategy relevant to address the research question?				
	4.2. Is the sample representative of the target population?				
	4.3. Are the measurements appropriate?				
	4.4. Is the risk of nonresponse bias low?				
	4.5. Is the statistical analysis appropriate to answer the research question?				
5. Mixed methods	5.1. Is there an adequate rationale for using a mixed methods design to address the research question?	X			
	5.2. Are the different components of the study effectively integrated to answer the research question?	X			
	5.3. Are the outputs of the integration of qualitative and quantitative components adequately interpreted?	X			
	5.4. Are divergences and inconsistencies between quantitative and qualitative results adequately addressed?	X			
	5.5. Do the different components of the study adhere to the quality criteria of each tradition of the methods involved?	X			

Appendix 2: Attachment 8 – Completed Mixed Methods Appraisal Tool (MMAT) – Key STEP 8: Data extraction, data presentation and quality assessment

Category of study designs	Methodological quality criteria [Study Number 93]	Responses			
		Yes	No	Can't tell	Comments
Screening questions (for all types)	S1. Are there clear research questions?			X	
	S2. Do the collected data allow to address the research questions?	X			
	Further appraisal may not be feasible or appropriate when the answer is 'No' or 'Can't tell' to one or both screening questions.				
1. Qualitative	1.1. Is the qualitative approach appropriate to answer the research question?				
	1.2. Are the qualitative data collection methods adequate to address the research question?				
	1.3. Are the findings adequately derived from the data?				
	1.4. Is the interpretation of results sufficiently substantiated by data?				
	1.5. Is there coherence between qualitative data sources, collection, analysis and interpretation?				
2. Quantitative randomized controlled trials	2.1. Is randomization appropriately performed?				
	2.2. Are the groups comparable at baseline?				
	2.3. Are there complete outcome data?				
	2.4. Are outcome assessors blinded to the intervention provided?				
	2.5 Did the participants adhere to the assigned intervention?				
3. Quantitative non-randomized	3.1. Are the participants representative of the target population?				
	3.2. Are measurements appropriate regarding both the outcome and intervention (or exposure)?				
	3.3. Are there complete outcome data?				
	3.4. Are the confounders accounted for in the design and analysis?				
	3.5. During the study period, is the intervention administered (or exposure occurred) as intended?				
4. Quantitative descriptive	4.1. Is the sampling strategy relevant to address the research question?			X	
	4.2. Is the sample representative of the target population?		X		
	4.3. Are the measurements appropriate?	X			
	4.4. Is the risk of nonresponse bias low?			X	
	4.5. Is the statistical analysis appropriate to answer the research question?	X			
5. Mixed methods	5.1. Is there an adequate rationale for using a mixed methods design to address the research question?				
	5.2. Are the different components of the study effectively integrated to answer the research question?				
	5.3. Are the outputs of the integration of qualitative and quantitative components adequately interpreted?				
	5.4. Are divergences and inconsistencies between quantitative and qualitative results adequately addressed?				
	5.5. Do the different components of the study adhere to the quality criteria of each tradition of the methods involved?				

Appendix 2: Attachment 9 – Completed: Mixed Methods Appraisal Tool (MMAT) – Key STEP 8: Data extraction, data presentation and quality assessment

Category of study designs	Methodological quality criteria [Study Number 95]	Responses			
		Yes	No	Can't tell	Comments
Screening questions (for all types)	S1. Are there clear research questions?			X	
	S2. Do the collected data allow to address the research questions?	X			
	Further appraisal may not be feasible or appropriate when the answer is 'No' or 'Can't tell' to one or both screening questions.				
1. Qualitative	1.1. Is the qualitative approach appropriate to answer the research question?				
	1.2. Are the qualitative data collection methods adequate to address the research question?				
	1.3. Are the findings adequately derived from the data?				
	1.4. Is the interpretation of results sufficiently substantiated by data?				
	1.5. Is there coherence between qualitative data sources, collection, analysis and interpretation?				
2. Quantitative randomized controlled trials	2.1. Is randomization appropriately performed?				
	2.2. Are the groups comparable at baseline?				
	2.3. Are there complete outcome data?				
	2.4. Are outcome assessors blinded to the intervention provided?				
	2.5 Did the participants adhere to the assigned intervention?				
3. Quantitative non-randomized	3.1. Are the participants representative of the target population?				
	3.2. Are measurements appropriate regarding both the outcome and intervention (or exposure)?				
	3.3. Are there complete outcome data?				
	3.4. Are the confounders accounted for in the design and analysis?				
	3.5. During the study period, is the intervention administered (or exposure occurred) as intended?				
4. Quantitative descriptive	4.1. Is the sampling strategy relevant to address the research question?				
	4.2. Is the sample representative of the target population?				
	4.3. Are the measurements appropriate?				
	4.4. Is the risk of nonresponse bias low?				
	4.5. Is the statistical analysis appropriate to answer the research question?				
5. Mixed methods	5.1. Is there an adequate rationale for using a mixed methods design to address the research question?	X			
	5.2. Are the different components of the study effectively integrated to answer the research question?	X			
	5.3. Are the outputs of the integration of qualitative and quantitative components adequately interpreted?	X			
	5.4. Are divergences and inconsistencies between quantitative and qualitative results adequately addressed?	X			
	5.5. Do the different components of the study adhere to the quality criteria of each tradition of the methods involved?	X			

Appendix 2: Attachment 10 – Completed: Mixed Methods Appraisal Tool (MMAT) – Key STEP 8: Data extraction, data presentation and quality assessment

Category of study designs	Methodological quality criteria [Study Number 98]	Responses			
		Yes	No	Can't tell	Comments
Screening questions (for all types)	S1. Are there clear research questions?			X	
	S2. Do the collected data allow to address the research questions?	X			
	Further appraisal may not be feasible or appropriate when the answer is 'No' or 'Can't tell' to one or both screening questions.				
1. Qualitative	1.1. Is the qualitative approach appropriate to answer the research question?	X			
	1.2. Are the qualitative data collection methods adequate to address the research question?	X			
	1.3. Are the findings adequately derived from the data?	X			
	1.4. Is the interpretation of results sufficiently substantiated by data?	X			
	1.5. Is there coherence between qualitative data sources, collection, analysis and interpretation?	X			
2. Quantitative randomized controlled trials	2.1. Is randomization appropriately performed?				
	2.2. Are the groups comparable at baseline?				
	2.3. Are there complete outcome data?				
	2.4. Are outcome assessors blinded to the intervention provided?				
	2.5 Did the participants adhere to the assigned intervention?				
3. Quantitative non-randomized	3.1. Are the participants representative of the target population?				
	3.2. Are measurements appropriate regarding both the outcome and intervention (or exposure)?				
	3.3. Are there complete outcome data?				
	3.4. Are the confounders accounted for in the design and analysis?				
	3.5. During the study period, is the intervention administered (or exposure occurred) as intended?				
4. Quantitative descriptive	4.1. Is the sampling strategy relevant to address the research question?				
	4.2. Is the sample representative of the target population?				
	4.3. Are the measurements appropriate?				
	4.4. Is the risk of nonresponse bias low?				
	4.5. Is the statistical analysis appropriate to answer the research question?				
5. Mixed methods	5.1. Is there an adequate rationale for using a mixed methods design to address the research question?				
	5.2. Are the different components of the study effectively integrated to answer the research question?				
	5.3. Are the outputs of the integration of qualitative and quantitative components adequately interpreted?				
	5.4. Are divergences and inconsistencies between quantitative and qualitative results adequately addressed?				
	5.5. Do the different components of the study adhere to the quality criteria of each tradition of the methods involved?				

Appendix 2: Attachment 11 – Completed: Mixed Methods Appraisal Tool (MMAT) – Key STEP 8: Data extraction, data presentation and quality assessment

Category of study designs	Methodological quality criteria [Study Number 100]	Responses			
		Yes	No	Can't tell	Comments
Screening questions (for all types)	S1. Are there clear research questions?			X	
	S2. Do the collected data allow to address the research questions?	X			
	Further appraisal may not be feasible or appropriate when the answer is 'No' or 'Can't tell' to one or both screening questions.				
1. Qualitative	1.1. Is the qualitative approach appropriate to answer the research question?				
	1.2. Are the qualitative data collection methods adequate to address the research question?				
	1.3. Are the findings adequately derived from the data?				
	1.4. Is the interpretation of results sufficiently substantiated by data?				
	1.5. Is there coherence between qualitative data sources, collection, analysis and interpretation?				
2. Quantitative randomized controlled trials	2.1. Is randomization appropriately performed?				
	2.2. Are the groups comparable at baseline?				
	2.3. Are there complete outcome data?				
	2.4. Are outcome assessors blinded to the intervention provided?				
	2.5 Did the participants adhere to the assigned intervention?				
3. Quantitative non-randomized	3.1. Are the participants representative of the target population?				
	3.2. Are measurements appropriate regarding both the outcome and intervention (or exposure)?				
	3.3. Are there complete outcome data?				
	3.4. Are the confounders accounted for in the design and analysis?				
	3.5. During the study period, is the intervention administered (or exposure occurred) as intended?				
4. Quantitative descriptive	4.1. Is the sampling strategy relevant to address the research question?	X			
	4.2. Is the sample representative of the target population?		X		
	4.3. Are the measurements appropriate?	X			
	4.4. Is the risk of nonresponse bias low?	X			
	4.5. Is the statistical analysis appropriate to answer the research question?	X			
5. Mixed methods	5.1. Is there an adequate rationale for using a mixed methods design to address the research question?				
	5.2. Are the different components of the study effectively integrated to answer the research question?				
	5.3. Are the outputs of the integration of qualitative and quantitative components adequately interpreted?				
	5.4. Are divergences and inconsistencies between quantitative and qualitative results adequately addressed?				
	5.5. Do the different components of the study adhere to the quality criteria of each tradition of the methods involved?				

Appendix 2: Attachment 12 – Completed Mixed Methods Appraisal Tool (MMAT) – Key STEP 8: Data extraction, data presentation and quality assessment

Category of study designs	Methodological quality criteria [Study Number 101]	Responses			
		Yes	No	Can't tell	Comments
Screening questions (for all types)	S1. Are there clear research questions?	X			
	S2. Do the collected data allow to address the research questions?	X			
	Further appraisal may not be feasible or appropriate when the answer is 'No' or 'Can't tell' to one or both screening questions.				
1. Qualitative	1.1. Is the qualitative approach appropriate to answer the research question?				
	1.2. Are the qualitative data collection methods adequate to address the research question?				
	1.3. Are the findings adequately derived from the data?				
	1.4. Is the interpretation of results sufficiently substantiated by data?				
	1.5. Is there coherence between qualitative data sources, collection, analysis and interpretation?				
2. Quantitative randomized controlled trials	2.1. Is randomization appropriately performed?				
	2.2. Are the groups comparable at baseline?				
	2.3. Are there complete outcome data?				
	2.4. Are outcome assessors blinded to the intervention provided?				
	2.5 Did the participants adhere to the assigned intervention?				
3. Quantitative non-randomized	3.1. Are the participants representative of the target population?		X		
	3.2. Are measurements appropriate regarding both the outcome and intervention (or exposure)?	X			
	3.3. Are there complete outcome data?	X			
	3.4. Are the confounders accounted for in the design and analysis?	X			
	3.5. During the study period, is the intervention administered (or exposure occurred) as intended?	X			
4. Quantitative descriptive	4.1. Is the sampling strategy relevant to address the research question?				
	4.2. Is the sample representative of the target population?				
	4.3. Are the measurements appropriate?				
	4.4. Is the risk of nonresponse bias low?				
	4.5. Is the statistical analysis appropriate to answer the research question?				
5. Mixed methods	5.1. Is there an adequate rationale for using a mixed methods design to address the research question?				
	5.2. Are the different components of the study effectively integrated to answer the research question?				
	5.3. Are the outputs of the integration of qualitative and quantitative components adequately interpreted?				
	5.4. Are divergences and inconsistencies between quantitative and qualitative results adequately addressed?				
	5.5. Do the different components of the study adhere to the quality criteria of each tradition of the methods involved?				

Appendix 2: Attachment 13 – Completed CASP Systematic Review Checklist – Key

STEP 8: Data extraction, data presentation and quality assessment

Paper for appraisal and reference:

Section A: Are the results of the review valid?

1. Did the review address a clearly focused question?

Yes	✓
Can't Tell	
No	

HINT: An issue can be 'focused' In terms of
- the population studied
- the intervention given
- the outcome considered

Comments: STEP 1: Planning the review. STEP 2: Performing scoping searches, identifying the review question and writing the protocol. Employing the ten key steps (Key STEP 1 and 2) not only allowed me to use a more flexible approach, but also assisted me in developing an appropriately focused review question; "How is attachment theory inappropriately or appropriately applied by mental health professionals in custody cases as reported in literature?"

2. Did the authors look for the right type of papers?

Yes	✓
Can't Tell	
No	

HINT: 'The best sort of studies' would
- address the review's question
- have an appropriate study design (usually RCTs for papers evaluating interventions)

Comments: STEP 3: Literature searching. Key STEP 3 in the systematic review process that aims at identifying data (published and unpublished), utilising databases and additional data resources which can be employed to BEST answer the review question (Dickson et al., 2017). 6 sub-steps: Determine the comprehensiveness of the search. Consider different types of evidence available. Identify specific bibliographic databases to be searched for evidence. Identify and refine key search terms. Search bibliographic databases – Employ final search strategies and collate citations. Consider complementary searching activities.

Is it worth continuing?

3. Do you think all the important, relevant studies were included?

Yes	✓
Can't Tell	
No	

HINT: Look for
- which bibliographic databases were used
- follow up from reference lists
- personal contact with experts
- unpublished as well as published studies
- non-English language studies

Comments: EBSCO Discovery Service (EDS) was used to conduct the main search and Google Scholar was used as the complementary searching activity. PICo (JBI, 2014) allowed me to select the type of studies that should be included in the systematic review, without risking excluding relevant studies (Cherry et al., 2017). The following types of grey literature were included in this systematic review study: PhD theses and Master's dissertations/mini-dissertations (published online). Including both English and Afrikaans studies reduced language bias (Stern & Kleijnen, 2020).

4. Did the review's authors do enough to assess quality of the included studies?

Yes ☑
Can't Tell ☐
No ☐

HINT: The authors need to consider the rigour of the studies they have identified. Lack of rigour may affect the studies' results ("All that glisters is not gold" Merchant of Venice – Act II Scene 7)

Comments: The Mixed Methods Appraisal Tool (MMAT) is a tool that granted us the opportunity to appraise the methodological quality of all 10 the included studies. It is important to take note that although the quality assessment did not aim at answering the review question, it was a key step (Key STEP 8) in the systematic review process (Cherry et al., 2017; Greenhalgh & Brown, 2017).

5. If the results of the review have been combined, was it reasonable to do so?

Yes ☑
Can't Tell ☐
No ☐

HINT: Consider whether
- results were similar from study to study
- results of all the included studies are clearly displayed
- results of different studies are similar
- reasons for any variations in results are discussed

Comments: Yes, it was reasonable to do so. See Chapter 2: Main findings, Discussion and Conclusion.

Section B: What are the results?

6. What are the overall results of the review?

HINT: Consider
- If you are clear about the review's 'bottom line' results
- what these are (numerically if appropriate)
- how were the results expressed (NNT, odds ratio etc.)

Comments: Theme 1 - Multimethod assessments
Sub-theme 1: Incremental validity
Sub-theme 2: Advantages of multimethod assessments
Theme 2 - Understanding attachment theory: scientific meaning

7. How precise are the results?

HINT: Look at the confidence intervals, if given

Comments: N/A

Section C: Will the results help locally?

8. Can the results be applied to the local population?

Yes ☑
Can't Tell ☐
No ☐

HINT: Consider whether
- the patients covered by the review could be sufficiently different to your population to cause concern
- your local setting is likely to differ much from that of the review

Comments:

9. Were all important outcomes considered?

Yes ☑
Can't Tell ☐
No ☐

HINT: Consider whether
- there is other information you would like to have seen

Comments:

10. Are the benefits worth the harms and costs?

Yes ☑
Can't Tell ☐
No ☐

HINT: Consider
- even if this is not addressed by the review, what do **you** think?

Comments: N/A
No harms or costs involved in this systematic review study.

Appendix 3: Attachment 1 – Study Characteristics Table (Example) – Key STEP 8: Data extraction, data presentation and quality assessment

Study Characteristics Table

Included study No.
Title of Study
Author(s)
Year/Date of Publication
Geographic Location of Study (Country)
General Study Focus
Study Setting
Sampling Method/Approach
Data Collection Method(s)
Ethics

Appendix 3: Attachment 2 – Study Findings Table (Example) – Key STEP 8: Data extraction, data presentation and quality assessment

Study Findings Table

No.	Title of Study	Author(s)	Year/Date of Publication	Summary of Findings or Results and Discussion or Conclusion Sections of Included Studies

Appendix 3: Attachment 3 – Completed Studies Characteristics Table – Key STEP 8: Data extraction, data presentation and quality assessment

Study Characteristics Table

Included study No.	**9**
Title of Study	Incorporating Attachment Assessment into Custody Evaluations: The Case of a 2-year-old and her Parents.
Author(s)	George, C., Isaacs, M. B., & Marvin, R. S.
Year/Date of Publication	2011
Geographic Location of Study (Country)	USA
General Study Focus	Incorporating comprehensive attachment assessments in custody evaluations

Study Setting	Attachment-based assessments applied in a custody case of a 2-year-old and her parents
Sampling Method/Approach	Sampling method/approach was not indicated
Data Collection Method(s)	Extensive parent information was collected through individual and joint interviews, conversations with collateral sources, court orders, prepared statements by both parents, and email correspondence. Psychological testing: personality measures (MMPI-2 and the Rorschach). Comprehensive attachment evaluation: The Strange Situation, The Caregiving Interview, and The AAP (Adult Attachment Representation).
Ethics	Ethics were not indicated.
Included study No.	**15**
Title of Study	Guest Editor's Introduction to Special Issue on Attachment Theory, Separation, and Divorce: Forging Coherent Understandings for Family Law.
Author(s)	McIntosh, J. E.
Year/Date of Publication	2011

Geographic Location of Study (Country)	International
General Study Focus	Obtaining a shared meaning (view) of attachment theory and its place in family law.
Study Setting	Attachment theory and its place in family law (custody cases).
Sampling Method/Approach	Purposive sampling (selected experts in the field of attachment who had exposure to divorce-related issues, but divorce was not their main line of publication).
Data Collection Method(s)	Interviews were conducted with the experts.
Ethics	Ethics were not indicated.
Included study No.	**20**
Title of Study	Divorce and Attachment Relationships: The Longitudinal Journey.

Author(s)	Sroufe, A., & McIntosh, J.
Year/Date of Publication	2011
Geographic Location of Study (Country)	USA
General Study Focus	The longitudinal consequences of disrupted attachment relationships and how they shape the thinking about divorce custody matters.
Study Setting	Attachment in custody cases (family law).
Sampling Method/Approach	Purposive sampling (wanted to obtain Alan Sroufe's views and understanding from his longitudinal research).
Data Collection Method(s)	Individual in-depth interview was conducted.
Ethics	Ethics were not indicated.

Included study No.	**32**
Title of Study	Parental and Social Institutional Responsibilities to Children's Needs in the Divorce Transition: Fathers' Perspectives.
Author(s)	Kruk, E.
Year/Date of Publication	2010
Geographic Location of Study (Country)	Canada
General Study Focus	Paternal involvement and quality of father–child attachment during and after parental divorce (fathers' perspectives; their views of the needs of their children, responsibilities as parents, and the responsibilities of social institutions during the divorce transition).
Study Setting	Attachment theory in custody cases (father–child attachment during and after divorce proceedings).
Sampling Method/Approach	The first 18 respondents were yielded via the Fatherhood Involvement Network of British Columbia – an association of professional service providers and father associations. Snowball sampling was also used. The sampling approach produced 150 respondents met the study criteria, and the first 82 respondents who contacted the researcher were included in the study.

Data Collection Method(s)	A three-part questionnaire was used to gather both quantitative and qualitative data. Qualitative data were collected via interviews (1. their divorce story, their children's needs, and responsibilities of the parents and social institutions with regard to the support fathers need; 2. Open-ended questions about the father and family and the father–child relationship [attachment] pre- and post-divorce). Quantitative data were collected via a demographic questionnaire (3. Demographic information about the father and family and the father–child relationship [attachment] before and after the divorce).
Ethics	Ethics were not indicated.
Included study No.	**90**
Title of Study	Utilizing Attachment Measures in Child Custody Evaluations: Incremental Validity.
Author(s)	Isaacs, M. B., George, C., & Marvin, R. S.
Year/Date of Publication	2009
Geographic Location of Study (Country)	USA

General Study Focus	Using research-based standardised attachment assessments in child custody cases and how they add to the validity of standardised psychological test batteries used in making custody recommendations.
Study Setting	Attachment assessments (measures) used in child custody evaluations. A case study: A 3-year-old boy, Thomas, and his unmarried parents.
Sampling Method/Approach	Sampling method/approach was not indicated.
Data Collection Method(s)	The evaluation (data collection) entailed traditional clinical assessments (personality testing of each parent; the MMPI-2 and the Rorschach. Individual and joint interviews with the parents and conversations with collateral sources. Court orders, prepared statements by each parent and email correspondence between them were also reviewed) and attachment and caregiving assessments (the Strange Situation, the Caregiving Interview, and the Adult Attachment Projective Picture System [AAP]).
Ethics	Ethics were not indicated.
Included study No.	**93**
Title of Study	Validity of a Child Interview Measure of Attachment as Used in Child Custody Evaluations.
Author(s)	Marcus, R. F., & Mirle, J.

Year/Date of Publication	1990
Geographic Location of Study (Country)	USA
General Study Focus	Validating an interview measure of children's attachment to their parents; the "Parent Attachment Structured Interview" (PAS Interview).
Study Setting	The use of a child interview measure of attachment (PAS Interview) in child custody evaluations.
Sampling Method/Approach	21 girls and 23 boys were selected from three pre-school classrooms. Specific sampling approach/method was not indicated.
Data Collection Method(s)	The Parent Attachment Structured Interview (PAS Interview) was conducted with the 44 participants.
Ethics	Ethics were not indicated.
Included study No.	**95**

Title of Study	An Attachment Based Approach to Child Custody Evaluation: A Case Study.
Author(s)	Purvis, K. B., McKenzie, L. B., Kellermann, G., & Cross, D. R.
Year/Date of Publication	2010
Geographic Location of Study (Country)	USA
General Study Focus	An attachment-based approach to child custody evaluation: A case study. Determining the immediate needs of a 5-year-old female, Jamie.
Study Setting	Attachment used in child custody evaluations. A case study: A 5-year-old female, Jamie, her biological mother and her mother's live-in boyfriend.
Sampling Method/Approach	A developmental psychologist/ researcher was approached to assist with the custody evaluation of a 5-year-old child, Jamie (a pseudonym).
Data Collection Method(s)	Observations (multiple observed visitations between child and biological mother). The Adult Attachment Interview (AAI) was conducted with both the biological mother and her live-in boyfriend. Additional measures: urine assay test kits to determine neurotransmitter levels (NT tests).

Ethics	Ethics were not indicated.
Included study No.	**98**
Title of Study	Expert Opinions on the Inclusion of Attachment-related Measures in Bilateral Custody Assessments (BCAs) and Parenting Capacity Assessments (PCAs).
Author(s)	LeBlanc, M.
Year/Date of Publication	2020
Geographic Location of Study (Country)	USA
General Study Focus	Examining the need for and usefulness, benefits, and risks of using attachment measures (the KIDS in Divorce protocol, to be used in BCAs and PCAs as developed by the co-researchers on this project) in child custody cases.
Study Setting	Attachment measures used in custody assessments (BCAs and PCAs).

Sampling Method/Approach	Purposive sampling was used to identify 10 experts who specialise in the field of BCAs and PCAs.
Data Collection Method(s)	Semi-structured interviews with 10 experts in the field of BCAs and PCAs were conducted.
Ethics	Ethical approval as well as informed consent was obtained.
Included study No.	**100**
Title of Study	An Examination of the Possible Use of Attachment Assessments for Making Child Custody Decisions
Author(s)	Sager, M. N.
Year/Date of Publication	2015
Geographic Location of Study (Country)	USA

General Study Focus	Assessing the utility of using attachment measures for the purpose of assisting the process of child custody determinations.
Study Setting	Attachment measures used in child custody determinations.
Sampling Method/Approach	Participants were identified through mutual contacts, and they were contacted via phone if they met the inclusion criteria.
Data Collection Method(s)	The Parent Relationship Questionnaire-Preschool (PRQ-P): a self-report measure was administered, observations were conducted and attachment security and dependency were assessed at home with each primary caregiver using version 3.0 of the Attachment Q-set (AQS).
Ethics	Ethical approval as well as informed consent was obtained.
Included study No.	**101**
Title of Study	The Role of Adult Attachment in Child Custody Litigants
Author(s)	Schraegle IV, W. A.

Year/Date of Publication	2014
Geographic Location of Study (Country)	USA
General Study Focus	The use of an attachment framework to explore group differences between child custody litigants and satisfied married couples by using the Rorschach Inkblot Test.
Study Setting	Attachment theory (adult attachment) in child custody (child custody litigants).
Sampling Method/Approach	Fifty of the participants were heterosexual dyads undergoing child custody in central Texas. The comparison group consisted of 50 volunteer Italian married couple dyads not in or seeking therapy. Specific sampling approach/method was not indicated.
Data Collection Method(s)	Data for the first group (couples undergoing child custody evaluation) were collected as part of the court-mandated procedure (standardised testing; the Rorschach Inkblot Test, and clinical interviews). Dyads who were undergoing child custody litigation also completed a more extensive background survey and interview. The data of the comparison group (satisfied married couples not in or seeking couples' therapy) were collected by administering the Rorschach Inkblot Test as well as a demographic questionnaire.
Ethics	Ethical approval was obtained.

Appendix 3: Attachment 4 – Completed Study Findings Table – Key STEP 8: Data extraction, data presentation and quality assessment

Study Findings Table

No.	Title of Study	Author(s)	Year/Date of Publication	Summary of Included Studies' Findings or Results; and Discussion or Conclusion Sections of Included Studies
9	Incorporating Attachment Assessment into Custody Evaluations: The Case of a 2-year-old and her Parents.	George, C., Isaacs, M. B., & Marvin, R. S.	2011	A comprehensive set of assessments was used (multimethod assessments). Extensive parent information was collected by means of individual and joint interviews; discussions with collateral sources; court orders; statements prepared by both parents; and e-mail communication. Psychological testing was conducted through personality measures, specifically the MMPI-2 and the Rorschach. Comprehensive attachment evaluation involved the following: The Strange Situation (attachment and caregiving behavioural assessment); The Caregiving Interview; and The AAP (Adult Attachment Representation) (caregiving and adult attachment representational assessments). Discrepancies were found between the results of the personality tests and the attachment evaluations, and also between the attachment assessments and the caregiving behavioural and representational assessments. Recommendations for custody and visitation would have been difficult to make custody and visitation recommendations based solely on the personality assessment results. Information related to personality as well as mental health does not inevitably provide information on attachment, which is why the attachment and caregiving assessments were necessary to gain a deeper understanding of how the parents' personality issues were/were not influencing their relationship with their child. After

				custody evaluation, the results of the comprehensive attachment evaluation were drawn on to make recommendations/suggestions with regard to custody and visitation rights, and resolving any problems or conflicts between parents (parenting coordinator). Validated assessments were used. By combining more traditional personality assessments and attachment assessments, the incremental validity of the complete clinical evaluation was improved. The measures/assessments also gave a deeper understanding of the general results of adult personality measures and assisted the researchers to interpret the collateral interviews and other sources. Being able to compare data from a variety of cases and situations is one of the greatest benefits attachment-based measures offer researchers and evaluators (scientific credibility).
15	Guest Editor's Introduction to Special Issue on Attachment Theory, Separation, and Divorce: Forging Coherent Understandings for Family Law.	McIntosh, J. E.	2011	The use of language of attachment terms is often problematic: "primary parent" should not be used to denote the better parent or be based solely on being a woman. The "primary parent" refers to the parent able to provide the important features of attachment development. "Attachment" is not a shorthand term: it denotes an intricate relationship that fosters a host of developmental tasks in children. After custody evaluation, recommendations can be made using the results of the attachment evaluation to inform custody decision-making such as who should be awarded sole custody or whether there should be limited or no visitation rights because of domestic violence, trauma, or extreme conflict between parents. Gender bias does not exist when it comes to infants forming an attachment; both parents are important. Therefore, attachment assessments should consider both parents. Being a woman is not a perquisite for being

				a "primary caregiver". Validated measures/assessments should be used, and they should be applied and interpreted in a skilful manner. Multimethod assessments should be applied (comprehensive measures). Solely applying attachment measures is not sufficient as they are not a substitute for clinical evaluations. However, when used in collaboration with clinical evaluations, attachment measures can add significant clinical value to custody cases and parenting assessments. They allow mental health professionals to gain a deeper understanding which makes it possible to corroborate or challenge their observations. Using attachment theory in custody cases thus provides a robust developmental framework which mental health professionals and family law professionals can use to assist them to make the difficult decisions that have to be made. It also helps them to test their personal thoughts, opinions and beliefs.
20	Divorce and Attachment Relationships: The Longitudinal Journey.	Sroufe, A., & McIntosh, J.	2011	Problematic use of language of attachment through misunderstanding. The primary attachment figure is based on care and protection (survival needs) and quality of emotional response, not on the amount of time spent together (not about a fixed quantity of time). The primary attachment figure is not always the mother, who is not necessarily the better parent, and the situation can change. Infants and children can have multiple attachment figures – not just one attachment is formed. Equal time with both parents is not necessary for children to achieve two meaningful relationships (a developmentally ignorant view of attachment displays no understanding of attachment). Attachment in custody cases should offer children the best chance possible, and the custody decision should make their challenges easier. There is some misunderstanding

				about infant distress when leaving and returning to primary parent. Sometimes a mother who is the primary parent will report that an infant becomes upset upon returning to her, instead of understanding that the behaviour is normal once united again (an infant being upset upon reunion does not mean anything is wrong).
32	Parental and Social Institutional Responsibilities to Children's Needs in the Divorce Transition: Fathers' Perspectives.	Kruk, E.	2010	Fathers experienced "gender bias". Mothers were given the role of "primary attachment figure" solely because they were women as the courts have a maternal custody order preference. Fathers felt that they were also important attachment figures in their children's lives (they could also be primary attachment figures). In fact, both parents are important attachment figures. Fathers experienced "parental alienation" and "access denial" and felt unsupported and disregarded by courts and social institutions with regard to their attachment relationships with their children. For the fathers, attachment to their children was based on quality time spent with them; they wanted to be actively involved in their children's lives – not just in a "visiting context" or having "access". They felt a strong need for regular and significant contact away from the constraints of court-ordered "access" and "visiting". Attachment relationships are also based and formed by fulfilling the child's needs (safety, protection, emotional needs, and physical needs). Fathers experienced "inequality" and "gender bias" in that the courts and social institutions undermined the father–child attachment relationship. The fathers also felt that there was a need for legal protection of paternal attachment relationships; courts disrupt children's lives by removing or disregarding fathers as primary attachment figures (caregivers) by awarding the mother sole custody.

90	Utilizing Attachment Measures in Child Custody Evaluations: Incremental Validity.	Isaacs, M. B., George, C., & Marvin, R. S.	2009	Multimethod (comprehensive) assessments were used to assess the attachment relationships between Thomas and his mother and Thomas and his father. The following assessments were used: Rorschach; MMPI-2; Strange Situation; Caregiving Interview; and AAP (Adult Attachment Projective Picture System). Traditional clinical personality tests were administered (i.e., Rorschach and MMPI-2). These personality tests are used so that psychologists can use the results to deduce how each adult might function as a parent. These tests are usually used in traditional evaluation to develop hypotheses about each parent. Psychologists tested the generated hypotheses by assessing the interaction between parent and child and the parents' attachment–caregiving relationship. This was assessed by means of three attachment instruments: the Strange Situation, the Caregiving Interview, and the Adult Attachment Picture Projective (AAP). Standardised and validated assessments were used. In most traditional child custody evaluations, parent–child observations are not standardised: they lack systematic scientific validation, their reliability has not been tested, and they are informal. Inferences drawn from informal evaluations are based on informal clinical judgement and not on scientific validation (precision and empirical testing from standardised tests). The coding of the instruments was conducted by an expert judge and one of the originators of these assessments (Carol George). The use of multiple (multimethod/comprehensive) assessments suggested that the father was the most suitable parent because he would be most able to meet Thomas' needs regarding attachment. There was no gender bias or maternal preference. Although Multiple attachment assessments complicate the

				evaluator's recommendations. However, the recommendations are then based on scientific validity, and recommendations can be made with confidence. Validated and standardised measures are important to obtain objective information which enables more objective decision-making and recommendations to be made. The attachment assessments attribute meaning to general results of adult personality tests and assist in interpreting collateral interviews as well as the morals of the people speaking on the behaviour of children and their parents. It also allows for researchers and evaluators to compare data. This comparison deepens the scientific credibility of the measures and offers more insights to evaluators to make objective recommendations (to be more objective).
93	Validity of a Child Interview Measure of Attachment as used in Child Custody Evaluations.	Marcus, R. F., & Mirle, J.	1990	Depending on the gender of the child and the subscale of the measure used, the Parent Attachment Structured Interview (PAS Interview) has proved to be a good predictor of mental health in children. There were statistically significant differences between boys and girls were observed in favor of boys on three criterion variables: i). internalizing; ii). externalizing; and iii). social competence. Thus, the patterns of correlations for girls and boys were fairly different, as were the scores on three criterion variables. For boys, the parent with the higher positive attachment score is preferred, whereas for girls, a higher positive attachment to their fathers is preferred. For girls, higher positive attachment to their mothers may be dysfunctional with regard to development of social competence (further research is needed to verify this). A common mistake mental health professionals make when using the PAS Interview concerns the measuring of children's perceptions of verbal and parental punitiveness as hostility or a negative

				element of attachment. The negative perceptions children have of their parents' response to their behavior should not be understood as evidence of destructive behavior on the part of the parents. Greater preference is erroneously given to parents who sidestep overly harsh punishment and those who use "softer" ways of discipline or whose method of punishment is felt to be reasonable by the child. Great caution should be made before a measure of attachment is used for decision making in custody cases. The gender differences identified thus far must be considered when making practical custody decisions.
95	An Attachment Based Approach to Child Custody Evaluation: A Case Study.	Purvis, K. B., McKenzie, L. B., Kellermann, G., & Cross, D. R.	2010	Multimethod assessments such as the AAI (Adult Attachment Inventory) were used, and neurotransmitter testing was added to the traditional observation for assessing attachment relationships and to the traditional instruments of measurement. This comprehensive way of assessment offers more insight into or greater comprehension of the attachment relationship between the child and caregiver. The AAI is a valid and reliable measure to use in child custody cases (its validity and reliability have been established). The majority of court evaluators appropriately assess the best interests of the child, specifically in cases where abuse and neglect are present. However, some mental health professionals and social workers grapple with their own biases. When there is an absence of tangible evidence for or against the existence of abuse and/or neglect, the courts are likely to depend on the judgements (biases) of the same mental health professionals and social workers. Therefore, this study suggested possible new objective assessments to gauge the safety and cognitive/psycho-emotional functioning of children. By measuring the NT

				levels alongside the other clinical measures offered, a completer and more objective picture of the child's level of functioning and the mayhem they may possibly be undergoing (a clearer picture of the case) was provided. The decisions (recommendations) made with regard to placement were based on empirical evidence, not just personal judgements and biases.
98	Expert Opinions on the Inclusion of Attachment-related Measures in Bilateral Custody Assessments and Parenting Capacity Assessments	LeBlanc, M.	2020	The majority of the participants expressed a need for or showed an interest in utilising the KIDS in Divorce protocol in their assessments. They also felt a need to receive adequate training, for the protocol to be easy to apply, for the protocol to be validated, and for it to be culturally sensitive. The majority of the participants/clinicians indicated that they applied their own clinical judgement (own judgement/biases) when attachment was assessed instead of using standardised attachment measures. This could lead to clinical errors. The KIDS in Divorce protocol offers a standardised approach to attachment assessment as part of BCAs and PCAs; it also offers a comprehensive attachment assessment that is child focused and assists in promoting the best interests principle of children in custody cases.
100	An Examination of the Possible Use of Attachment Assessments for Making Child Custody Decisions	Sager, M. N.	2015	Multiple measures of assessment were used (PRQ-P and AQS). They offer a deeper understanding of the attachment relationships and functioning between children and their parents. Attachment patterns (relationships) are not statistic and can change overtime. Thus, it is important for evaluators and mental health professionals to focus on repairing possible attachment problems that have been identified in custody cases, especially insecure or disorganized attachment. Recommendations should be made such as

			providing attachment programs to rebuild or repair the attachment relationships (after custody recommendations/support). Many states in the US use the opinions of experts (evaluators or child custody mediators) to establish a supported opinion (judgement) about the type of parenting plan (visitation plan) that would be in the best interests of the child. The ultimate goal of evaluating attachment in child custody cases should be the best interests of the child. When observers (mental health professionals) have been trained to use the AQS, they may have a more objective understanding of secure base behaviors commonly related to secure attachment.
101	The Role of Adult Attachment in Child Custody Litigants	Schraegle IV, W. A. 2014	Multiple assessments were used (standardised testing and clinical interviews; standardised administration of the Rorschach Inkblot Test). The Rorschach assessments were administered, and results were coded and interpreted according to the R-PAS (Rorschach Performance Assessment System) administration scoring. The R-PAS is an improved evidence-based Rorschach system. Administrative changes were made to increase reliability as well as scoring consistency. More normative comparisons can be made even though many of the procedures and characteristics have been found in former Rorschach research. One of the significant benefits of employing the Rorschach test to measure adult attachment lies in its ability to measure at the representational level rather than through parent-child observation that is staged or self-report; the Rorschach test reaches beyond the hurdle of impression management, which is often used in child custody litigation. As the Rorschach test is a commonly used assessment in child custody litigation, forensic evaluators can research this phenomenon

		without foregoing their professional responsibilities. All factors of attachment relationships within child custody cases should be explored and considered under the “best interests of the child”. Doing so, makes more systematic decisions and recommendations on caregiving ability, co-parenting relationships and parental competence possible.

Appendix 4 – Journal Guidelines – Key STEP 10: Writing up, editing and disseminating

Journal: Journal of Family Trauma, Child Custody & Child Development

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- Data Sharing Policy
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Word Limits

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South Africa 2520

Tel: 086 016 9698
Web: http://www.nwu.ac.za/

North-West University Health Research Ethics Committee (NWU-HREC)

Tel: 018 299-1206
Email: Ethics-HRECApply@nwu.ac.za (for human studies)

17 February 2021

ETHICS APPROVAL LETTER OF STUDY

Based on approval by the North-West University Health Research Ethics Committee (NWU-HREC) on 17/02/2021, the NWU-HREC hereby approves your study as indicated below. This implies that the NWU-HREC grants its permission that, provided the general conditions specified below are met and pending any other authorisation that may be necessary, the study may be initiated, using the ethics number below.

Study title: The in/appropriate application of attachment theory by mental health professionals in custody cases: A systematic review of literature
Principal Investigator/Study Supervisor/Researcher: Dr R Spies
Student: T Botha - 25015826

Ethics number:

N	W	U	-	0	0	4	7	2	-	2	0	-	A	1
Institution				Study Number						Year			Status	

Status: S = Submission; R = Re-Submission; P = Provisional Authorisation; A = Authorisation

Application Type: Systematic review
Commencement date: 17/02/2021
Expiry date: 28/02/2022

Risk: **Minimal**

Approval of the study is provided for a year, after which continuation of the study is dependent on receipt and review of an annual monitoring report and the concomitant issuing of a letter of continuation. A monitoring report is due at the end of February annually until completion.

General conditions:

While this ethics approval is subject to all declarations, undertakings and agreements incorporated and signed in the application form, the following general terms and conditions will apply:

- *The principal investigator/study supervisor/researcher must report in the prescribed format to the NWU-HREC:*
  - *Annually on the monitoring of the study, whereby a letter of continuation will be provided annually, and upon completion of the study; and*
  - *without any delay in case of any adverse event or incident (or any matter that interrupts sound ethical principles) during the course of the study.*
- *The approval applies strictly to the proposal as stipulated in the application form. Should any amendments to the proposal be deemed necessary during the course of the study, the principal investigator/study supervisor/researcher must apply for approval of these amendments at the NWU-HREC, prior to implementation. Should there be any deviations from the study proposal without the necessary approval of such amendments, the ethics approval is immediately and automatically forfeited.*
- *Annually a number of studies may be randomly selected for active monitoring.*
- *The date of approval indicates the first date that the study may be started.*
- *In the interest of ethical responsibility, the NWU-HREC reserves the right to:*
  - *request access to any information or data at any time during the course or after completion of the study;*
  - *to ask further questions, seek additional information, require further modification or monitor the conduct of your research or the informed consent process;*

- *withdraw or postpone approval if:*
  - *any unethical principles or practices of the study are revealed or suspected;*
  - *it becomes apparent that any relevant information was withheld from the NWU-HREC or that information has been false or misrepresented;*
  - *submission of the annual monitoring report, the required amendments, or reporting of adverse events or incidents was not done in a timely manner and accurately; and/or*
  - *new institutional rules, national legislation or international conventions deem it necessary.*
- *NWU-HREC can be contacted for further information via Ethics-HRECApply@nwu.ac.za or 018 299 1206*

Special conditions of the research approval due to the COVID-19 pandemic:

Please note: Due to the nature of the study i.e. (systematic review of published manuscripts), this study will be able to proceed during the current alert level, following receipt of the approval letter. No additional COVID-19 restrictions have been placed on the study except that the researcher must ensure that before proceeding with the study that all research team members have reviewed the North-West University COVID-19 Occupational Health and Safety Standard Operating Procedure.

The NWU-HREC would like to remain at your service and wishes you well with your study. Please do not hesitate to contact the NWU-HREC for any further enquiries or requests for assistance.

Yours sincerely,

Digitally signed by
Prof Petra Bester
Date: 2021.02.18
10:02:44 +02'00'

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20 August 2019
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Appendix 6: Proof of Language Editing

LANGUAGE EDITING CERTIFICATE

Dr Elaine Ridge
Free Lance Editor and Translator
Elaineridge42@gmail.com
Cell: 083 564 1553
Landline: 021 8871554

TO WHOM IT MAY CONCERN

This is to attest that I have edited the language of Tenisha Botha's Mini-Dissertation:

'The in/appropriate application of attachment theory by mental health professionals in custody cases: A systematic review of literature').

(Dr) Elaine Ridge

BA UED (Natal) DEd (Stellenbosch)

Free Lance Editor and Translator

2 December 2021

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