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Interpersonal Acceptance and Rejection across the lifespan: an introduction to the proceedings of 11th international congress on interpersonal acceptance and rejection

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Abstract

This article introduces the special issue of TOPIC dedicated to the Proceedings of the 11th International Congress on Interpersonal Acceptance and Rejection (ICIAR 2026), held in Napoli, Italy, from 17 to 19 June 2026, under the auspices of the International Society for Interpersonal Acceptance-Rejection (ISIPAR). The congress coincided with the 20th anniversary of ISIPAR and brought together 179 authors from 20 countries across five continents, for a total of 88 scientific contributions. After contextualising the congress within the historical development of Interpersonal Acceptance-Rejection Theory (IPARTheory), an overview of the scientific programme was presented, including the two keynote addresses and the main thematic areas covered by the submitted contributions. Particular attention is devoted to the keynotes included in the programme. The introduction concludes with a reflection on the epistemic and ethical dimensions of scientific inclusion, with reference to the barriers experienced by several colleagues in accessing the congress due to visa restrictions and in the hope that the message conveyed by the proceedings of the conference will reach the widest possible audience.

Keywords

IPARTheory; interpersonal acceptance-rejection; ISIPAR; ICIAR 2026; parental acceptance; well-being; cross-cultural research.

Introduction

The International Congress on Interpersonal Acceptance and Rejection (ICIAR) represents the primary forum through which the global community of scholars working within the framework of Interpersonal Acceptance-Rejection Theory (IPARTheory; Rohner 2021; Rohner & Ali, 2025) convenes to present, discuss, and advance scientific knowledge on

one of the most fundamental dimensions of human experience: the quality of interpersonal bonds and, in particular, the distinction between the experience of being accepted or rejected by significant others. First convened under the auspices of the International Society for Interpersonal Acceptance-Rejection (ISIPAR), the congress has established itself over successive editions as a uniquely cohesive yet

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pluralistic scientific gathering, in which theoretical rigour and methodological diversity coexist with a shared commitment to understanding the conditions under which human beings flourish or suffer in their relationships.

The 11th edition of the congress - ICIAR 2026 - was held in Napoli, Italy, from 17 to 19 June 2026, hosted by the Università degli Studi della Campania "Luigi Vanvitelli". This edition carried a particular significance that extended well beyond the ordinary rhythm of the biennial congress cycle. ICIAR 2026 coincided with the 20th anniversary of International Society For Interpersonal Acceptance-Rejection (ISIPAR), an occasion that invited both retrospective reflection on the intellectual journey traversed since the Society's founding and forward-looking consideration of the theoretical and empirical challenges that lie ahead. It also marked a moment of geographic expansion, with contributions arriving from regions of the world (e.g., Latin America, Sub-Saharan Africa, the Middle East, and South Asia) that are increasingly active participants in the international IPARTheory community.

The present article serves as the introduction to this special issue of TOPIC, in which the abstracts of all scientific contributions presented at ICIAR 2026 are collected and made available to the broader scientific and professional community. In the sections that follow, I briefly situate the congress within the historical development of IPARTheory, describe the structure and scope of the scientific programme, present descriptive data on participation, offer an account of the two keynote addresses, summarise the principal thematic areas addressed by the contributed papers, and conclude with a reflection on the broader epistemic and ethical dimensions raised by the congress.

IPARTheory and ISIPAR: A twenty-year trajectory

Interpersonal Acceptance-Rejection Theory is an evidence-based theory of socialisation and lifespan development developed over more than six decades by Ronald P. Rohner of the University of Connecticut (Rohner 2021; Rohner & Ali, 2025). In its contemporary formulation, IPARTheory addresses three interrelated questions: Why do some individuals develop into psychologically adjusted, well-functioning adults while others, seemingly exposed to comparable objective circumstances, do not? What are the psychological, behavioural, and health consequences of perceived acceptance and rejection across different relational contexts and developmental stages? And what are the sociocultural and individual-difference factors that moderate these consequences?

The theory operates at multiple levels of analysis. Its Personality Subtheory posits that the experience of parental, and more broadly, significant-other, rejection is universally associated with a cluster of psychological responses including hostility and aggression, dependency or defensive independence, impaired self-esteem and self-adequacy, emotional unresponsiveness, emotional instability, and a negative worldview. Its Coping sub theory addresses individual differences in the capacity to manage the psychological pain of rejection without developing the maladaptive sequelae described in the personality sub theory. Its Sociocultural Systems sub theory locates these individual-level processes within broader ecological and cultural contexts, accounting for the ways in which macrosocial structures mediate and moderate the experience and effects of acceptance and rejection.

ISIPAR was formally constituted in 2006 at the conclusion of the first International

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Congress on Interpersonal Acceptance and Rejection in Istanbul, Turkey (June 24), under the presidency of Ronald P. Rohner, who has served as its Honorary President since the Society's foundation. Over the two decades that have elapsed since its starting, ISIPAR has grown into a genuinely international scientific community, attracting scholars, researchers, practitioners, and students from psychology, sociology, education, public health, neuroscience, and clinical practice. The biennial ICIAR congresses have been central to this growth, providing a regular point of convergence for a community that is, by its very nature, geographically dispersed. ICIAR 2026, in this respect, is both a milestone and a continuation: a celebration of what has been accomplished and a reaffirmation of the scientific agenda that remains to be pursued.

Structure of the scientific programme

The scientific programme of ICIAR 2026 was structured across three days of proceedings and encompassed five distinct contribution formats, designed to accommodate different modes of scientific communication and to maximise both the depth and the breadth of scholarly exchange.

Two keynote addresses planned in the first and second days of the congress respectively, delivering invited lectures by internationally recognised scholars whose work has been central to the development of the field. Five contributions were presented within a dedicated symposium format entitled “Bridging IPARTheory and Attachment theory: Relational pathways from early care to emotional and relational outcomes across the lifespan”, in which a set of thematically coordinated papers was presented and discussed collectively under the guidance of prof. Nour Zaki the chair and organizer and prof. Ronald P. Rohner as the discussant. The regular oral programme

comprised 51 individual presentations organised into thematic sessions. A dedicated poster session provided the setting for 30 contributions, affording extended informal exchange between authors and attendees. Finally, a structured workshop planned in the last day offered participants an opportunity to engage directly with applied and clinical dimensions of IPARTheory-based practice to couple and family therapy.

All contributions underwent a process of peer review coordinated by the Scientific Committee of the congress. Accepted abstracts, revised in accordance with reviewers' comments where applicable, are collected in this special issue of TOPIC, ensuring that the scientific output of ICIAR 2026 is formally documented and accessible to scholars and practitioners beyond those who attended the congress in person.

Profile of participation

ICIAR 2026 brought together a substantial and geographically diverse scientific community. A total of 85 contributions were accepted and presented at the congress, involving 176 unique authors affiliated with institutions in 20 countries across five continents. Table 1 provides a summary of contributions by format. Table 2 presents the geographic distribution of participating countries. The geographic breadth of ICIAR 2026 is a tangible indicator of the vitality of the IPARTheory research community at the global level.

The presence of contributions from five continents, and in particular the growing participation of scholars from Latin America, the Middle East, and Sub-Saharan Africa, reflects the progressive expansion of IPARTheory-based research into cultural and societal contexts that were, in the early decades of the theory's development, comparatively underrepresented

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Table 1. Distribution of accepted Scientific Contributions by Format

Contribution Format	Number of Contributions	% of Total
Regular oral presentations	51	57.3
Poster presentations	30	33.7
Symposium contributions	5	5.6
Keynote addresses	2	2.3
Workshop	1	1.1
Total	89	100

Note. Total number of unique contributing authors: 179. Total number of countries represented: 20.

Table 2. Geographic Distribution of Participating Countries

Continent / Region	Countries	N. of Countries
Europe	Italy, Greece, Bulgaria, Croatia, Spain, Portugal, France, Germany, United Kingdom, North Macedonia	10
Americas	United States, Chile, Ecuador, Peru, Uruguay	5
Middle East & N. Africa	Egypt, Israel, Turkey	3
South Asia	Pakistan	1
Sub-Saharan Africa	Nigeria	1
Total	5 continents	20

Note. Countries listed alphabetically within each continental grouping.

in the empirical literature. This expansion is both scientifically significant, in that it provides the cross-cultural data necessary to test and refine the theory's universal claims, and ethically important, in that it ensures that the voices of diverse populations are represented in the construction of scientific knowledge about interpersonal relationships.

Keynote addresses

Reflections on the Origin and History of IPARTheory and ISIPAR. The first keynote address was delivered by Ronald P. Rohner, Professor Emeritus of Human Development and Family Studies at the University of Connecticut and Honorary President of ISIPAR. The occasion was particularly charged with meaning: ICIAR 2026 marked the 20th anniversary of the Society that Rohner himself founded, and his lecture offered the scientific community a rare and privileged perspective;

that of the theorist who created IPARTheory, reflecting, after 67 years of active scholarship, on the personal and intellectual journey that gave rise to the theory and to the international community that has grown around it. Rohner's account traced the genesis of the theoretical enterprise from its earliest formulations in the late 1950s and early 1960s, through the successive elaborations that have characterised IPARTheory's development across six decades. He identified landmark conceptual events and methodological turning points, “watershed moments”, to use his own phrasing, that shaped the theory in its present form: the early cross-cultural analyses that revealed the universality of children's responses to parental rejection; the development of the standardised measurement instruments that made comparative research possible; the systematic expansion of the theory's scope from its original focus on parental behaviour to encompass acceptance and

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rejection by any figure perceived as a significant other; and, more recently, the integration of biological, neurological, and lifespan perspectives that have opened new empirical frontiers (Rohner & Ali, 2025). Reflecting on 20 years since ISIPAR's founding, and on the broader arc of a scholarly career spanning two thirds of a century, Rohner's lecture was also an opportunity to consider the cumulative weight of the empirical evidence that has accumulated in support of IPARTheory's core propositions. The research programme he initiated has produced, to date, over 1,300 studies conducted in more than 100 countries and involving populations across the full developmental lifespan. The consistency of the findings across these varied contexts constitutes, he argued, one of the most robust bodies of cross-cultural evidence in the social sciences: the experience of rejection by significant others is, without exception in the empirical record, associated with increased psychological maladjustment, regardless of culture, gender, age, or socioeconomic status. This universality is not a trivial finding, it speaks to something foundational in the architecture of human psychology, to a need for acceptance that is, in Rohner's framework, as fundamental as hunger or thirst. For the many early-career researchers present at ICIAR 2026, Rohner's address offered an invaluable account of the contingencies, the perseverance, and the intellectual courage that a lifetime of scholarship entails.

The Protective Role of Parental Warmth on Adolescent Adjustment: Evidence from Longitudinal and Cross-Cultural Studies. The second keynote address was delivered by Dario Bacchini, Professor of Developmental Psychology at the Università degli Studi di Napoli "Federico II". Bacchini's lecture engaged directly with one of the central empirical questions in the IPARTheory literature: the extent to which

parental acceptance, and in particular, parental warmth, functions as a protective factor for adolescents' psychological adjustment. Drawing on an extensive programme of longitudinal and cross-cultural research, Bacchini presented evidence confirming that parental acceptance-rejection constitutes one of the most robust predictors of adolescents' psychological outcomes identified in the developmental literature. His lecture, however, moved beyond a simple reaffirmation of the main effect to engage with the considerable complexity underlying this relationship. He argued, with reference to empirical findings, that the association between parental acceptance-rejection and adolescent adjustment is not always direct or linear: it is substantially regulated by mediating variables, including attachment representations, peer relationship quality, and the adolescent's own coping capacities, as well as by moderating factors such as sociocultural context, sex, and the source of the acceptance or rejection (i.e., maternal versus paternal acceptance). Particularly noteworthy in Bacchini's presentation was his systematic treatment of the methodological challenges involved in disentangling these complex relationships: the importance of longitudinal designs in establishing developmental trajectories rather than mere correlational associations, and the necessity of cross-cultural replication in distinguishing universal processes from culturally specific ones. His lecture thus served simultaneously as a substantive scientific contribution and as a methodological reflection on the standards of evidence appropriate to a field that aspires to universal theoretical claims.

Thematic overview of contributed papers

The 89 contributed papers collected in this volume (comprising oral presentations, poster

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presentations, symposium contributions, and the workshop) cover a wide range of topics united by their grounding in the IPARTheory framework. Whilst the breadth and diversity of this scholarship resist any simple taxonomy, ten principal thematic clusters can be identified on the basis of content analysis of the abstracts.

Parental acceptance-rejection and child and adolescent development constitute the most extensively represented area in the programme, reflecting the historical core of the IPARTheory research tradition. Studies address the effects of maternal and paternal rejection on emotional development, personality, and behavioural adjustment across childhood and adolescence, with particular attention to the differential effects of the two parental figures and to the mechanisms through which early experiences of rejection become embedded in enduring psychological patterns.

Multiple relational contexts are addressed in a substantial cluster of contributions extending the IPARTheory framework beyond the parent-child relationship. Studies examine the acceptance and rejection experienced from teachers, peers, romantic partners, and siblings, and – crucially – the ways in which experiences across these different relational domains interact. This line of inquiry has important implications for understanding the cumulative and systemic dimensions of rejection, and for identifying configurations of relational experience that are particularly conducive to positive or negative outcomes.

Aggression, violence, and antisocial behaviour feature prominently in the programme, with contributions addressing child-to-parent violence, sibling violence, intimate partner violence, bullying, and cyberbullying. These studies extend the IPARTheory prediction that rejection-induced psychological pain tends to be discharged

through aggressive and destructive behaviour, examining its applicability across different forms of violence and different relational configurations.

Mental health and psychological well-being are addressed from multiple perspectives, with studies examining the associations between perceived rejection and depression, anxiety, stress, self-esteem, empathic capacity, and emotional regulation. Several contributions focus specifically on the role of coping mechanisms, including both adaptive and maladaptive strategies, in mediating the relationship between rejection experiences and psychopathological outcomes.

Digital behaviour and problematic technology use represent an emerging area of inquiry in the IPARTheory literature, with contributions examining the relationships among perceived rejection, fear of intimacy, and problematic use of Internet platforms and social media. This cluster reflects the broader recognition, within developmental and clinical psychology, that digital environments have become a significant arena for the enactment of interpersonal dynamics, including acceptance and rejection processes.

Attachment and adult relationships are the focus of a cluster of contributions examining the intergenerational transmission of rejection, the development of anxious and avoidant attachment styles, relational trust, and psychological violence within romantic partnerships. These studies document the long temporal reach of early rejection experiences, tracing pathways from childhood through adult relational functioning.

Cross-cultural and gender-comparative analyses feature extensively in the programme, with studies conducted in non-Western contexts, including Egypt, Pakistan, Turkey, and various Latin American countries, providing the

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empirical base for cross-cultural replication of IPARTheory's core propositions. Gender as a moderating variable is examined in numerous contributions, reflecting continued interest in understanding whether and how the effects of acceptance and rejection differ by sex.

Biological substrates of acceptance and rejection are addressed in a methodologically innovative cluster of contributions examining the associations between rejection experiences and hormonal markers (testosterone and cortisol), genetic polymorphisms (including the OXTR gene), and neural activation patterns as assessed through functional magnetic resonance imaging. This emerging line of inquiry has the potential to substantially deepen the theoretical account of why rejection has the effects it does, by grounding psychological propositions in neurobiological mechanisms.

Specific and underrepresented populations are the focus of several contributions addressing groups that have received comparatively limited attention in the IPARTheory literature: Syrian refugee children and families, LGB parents and their children, students with special educational needs, survivors of domestic violence, and transgender and non-binary individuals. These studies respond to a growing recognition that the universality of IPARTheory's propositions must be empirically demonstrated – rather than assumed – across the full diversity of human populations.

Intervention and clinical application are addressed in the workshop and in several contributed papers, which examine the application of IPARTheory to therapeutic practice with couples and families, and to resilience-building programmes in educational settings. This cluster reflects the translational dimension of the IPARTheory research programme, and the increasing interest in moving from the description and explanation of

rejection effects to the development of evidence-based strategies for mitigating them.

A note on scientific inclusion

Any honest account of ICIAR 2026 must acknowledge a circumstance that cast a shadow over the congress, even as it unfolded: a number of colleagues who had submitted contributions and been accepted to the scientific programme were unable to attend because they could not obtain the visas required to travel to Italy. Their absence was not a scientific failure, their work is present in this volume, and their intellectual contribution to the field is undiminished. It was, however, a human and institutional failure that this community cannot regard with indifference.

The international scientific community rests on a foundational normative commitment: that the pursuit of knowledge is a collaborative enterprise open to all who are equipped to contribute, irrespective of national origin, citizenship, or geographic location. When administrative and political barriers prevent scholars from participating in the intellectual life of their community, this commitment is violated. The scientific record is impoverished, the affected scholars are excluded from networks and exchanges that matter professionally and personally, and the community as a whole is diminished.

There is a particular and painful irony in the coincidence of this situation with the scientific agenda of the congress itself. The research presented at ICIAR 2026 documents, with methodological rigour and cross-cultural consistency, that the frustration of the fundamental human need for acceptance carries profound and lasting negative consequences for psychological well-being, behavioural functioning, and relational quality. The experience of being excluded, of being told, by whatever mechanism, that one's presence is

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unwelcome or that one's access to shared spaces is subject to conditions not imposed on others, is precisely the kind of experience that IPARTheory identifies as injurious to the individual. The structural barriers that prevented some colleagues from attending this congress are, in their own way, a large-scale instantiation of the interpersonal dynamic that this community has spent decades studying.

It is our collective hope that the work collected in this volume may contribute, however modestly, to a broader recognition of the importance of relational inclusion. The scientific evidence is clear: human beings need to feel accepted. Communities that deny that need, whether in their intimate relationships, their institutions, or their international policies, do so at a cost that is ultimately borne by every member of those communities.

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