

# Elusive closure: a case study of bereaved Brazilian immigrants in Germany



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## Abstract

This article delves into how bereaved Brazilian immigrants in Germany confront their mourning far from their country of upbringing. Introducing the term “elusive closure,” the study captures the unique, unresolved grief that distance can impose on migrants. While the significance of mourning is undeniable, few recent studies have explored immigrant bereavement experiences. Addressing this gap, this research delves into the narratives of three bereaved Brazilians in Germany, emphasizing the complexities of transnational bereavement and the profound strain of geographic distance during central moments of grief. The findings highlight the challenging tapestry of isolation, sadness, guilt, and disconnection from cultural touchstones. Furthermore, the inability to attend a loved one’s funeral magnified their transnational bereavement. This article heralds crucial clinical implications, advocating for healthcare providers to recognize the unique challenges imposed by distance. It further amplifies the call for more research on immigrant bereavement, illuminating the multifaceted grief experiences in the diaspora.

**Keywords** Immigrant · Closure · Grief · Brazilians · Germany

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## 1 Introduction

“When I migrated, I knew I would die alone, and I was prepared for that. But I did not think of the fact that my mother, my sisters, and my brothers would die without me. I was not ready for that.” Julia’s (one of the authors) mother said that when the first family member died after they migrated. The distance, she said, felt insurmountable, and death felt unreal. We wondered what other immigrants felt in this situation, and that is how this research started. The goal of this article is to investigate how Brazilian immigrants living in Germany experienced grief when they lost someone dear to them in Brazil. For that, we interviewed three Brazilians living in Berlin about their bereavement process.

The grief experienced by immigrants who lost loved ones in their home countries is severely under-researched, and the few articles about it are often outdated. The intersections of migration and bereavement remain notably under-researched. The emotional and psychological ramifications of mourning away from one’s homeland, particularly among immigrants, is a dimension that demands exploration. Central to this phenomenon is what we term “elusive closure”—an ongoing, unresolved grief compounded by the physical and emotional distances from familiar mourning practices and cultural touchstones. Furthermore, while there is some literature regarding refugees, the context is not the same, and there is no specific research analyzing the grief of Brazilian immigrants in Germany or even in other European countries. We cannot affirm the data gathered in this research would be transferable to other European countries; however, the results still provide a rich and in-depth exploration of the case being studied and shed light on the subject nonetheless.

Our primary aim is to understand the multifaceted challenges these immigrants face while mourning away from their homeland, especially concerning feelings of isolation, disconnection from cultural traditions, and the experience of transnational bereavement due to physical distance from mourning rituals. This research is poised to fill a significant gap in the literature, offering both academic and clinical communities valuable insights into the profound implications of geographical distance on the grieving process among immigrants.

## 2 Methodology

The purpose of this article is to explore how distance can affect the grief of immigrants. For that goal, we conducted a case study of Brazilian immigrants living in Germany. We adopted qualitative in-depth interviews using case study research methodology, as proposed by Stake (2005). Three Brazilian immigrants were interviewed about their bereavement process, and their interviews were recorded with their consent. Each interview lasted around one hour, and all the names and specific details were changed to ensure that they would remain anonymous. The interviewees were found through online groups specific to Brazilians living in

Germany, and they all volunteered to be part of this study. The full interview cannot be made publicly available in order to protect the participants' privacy, especially as this is a difficult and intimate subject.

To analyze the data, we used the direct interpretation strategy proposed by Stake (2005, 2010). This approach to case study emphasizes a deep exploration of individual cases rather than broad generalizations. The analysis involves directly interpreting specific instances and subsequently identifying recurring themes. Narrative structures help convey the case's chronological flow and dynamics, while participant verification ensures the findings' authenticity. The data was analyzed case by case to find the deeper nuances in the words of each participant and to develop a more in-depth understanding of their stories. Those were later triangulated with the literature review, drawing on multiple data sources to ensure comprehensive understanding, which helped us refine the interpretations and tie them to the scientific body of knowledge on the theme.

## 2.1 Ethical considerations

This study adhered to rigorous ethical guidelines to ensure the well-being and protection of participants. Prior to the commencement of the interviews, all participants were provided with detailed information about the research objectives, procedures, and potential implications. Informed consent was obtained from each participant, ensuring they understood their rights, including the option to withdraw at any point without consequence. All personal identifiers were removed or altered to maintain confidentiality, and data was securely stored.

## 2.2 Research context: "In Brazil, we live differently, and we die differently"

"In Brazil, we live differently, and we die differently." Natalia, one of the interviewees, said this when discussing how mourning rituals in Germany gave her cultural shock. While there might be a translation of the word "grief" in most languages, the experience is not lived the same way by all. Death does not depend on culture, but the meanings (and rituals) attributed to it do.

How should one grieve? When? The DSM (Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders) defines prolonged grief as a disorder and states that if, twelve months after the death of a loved one, a person still experiences intense yearning or preoccupation, in addition to at least three of the eight following symptoms: identity disruption, disbelief, avoidance, emotional pain, difficulties moving on, numbness, a sense that life is meaningless, and loneliness. However, multiple scholars (Silverman et al. 2021; Rosenblatt 2013; 2017; Freitas 2013) have questioned this time limit. Rosenblatt (2013; 2017) argues that notions of time-appropriate grief differ not only among cultures but also among families. Recent approaches to grief in psychology have been slightly less restrictive, defining it as "a multidimensional range of experiences following a loss," as described by Bonanno and Kaltman (2001). In this definition, the only concrete aspects are "emotions" (not citing which) and "after a loss" (also not citing which), leaving it rather open to interpretation.

Anthropological approaches to grief recognize the impact religion, culture, society, and historical context have on shaping this experience (Silverman et al. 2021; Arnason 2007; Breen and O'Connor (2007); Robarchek and Robarchek 2005). Grief, like all social phenomena, “is dirty of world” (Freitas, 2013), meaning that it is embedded in the culture. As such, the two cannot be neatly separated. The influence of culture becomes particularly visible when one's reaction does not match what is deemed acceptable in that society. Their grief then can be regarded as pathological, demonstrating that the forms of grief have cultural components, and those forms are not universal (Silverman et al. 2021).

How we understand life, death, and our relationships with each other deeply impacts how we live—as well as how we die (Klass 1999). Arnason (2007) and Silverman et al. (2021) have demonstrated how grief is shaped by people's world-views and surroundings. One's expression is more or less autonomous, even if the culture still frames the mourning experience as well as its ways of reconstructing relationships and transforming individuals (Neimeyer et al. 2014; Arnason 2007; Walter 2010). Those cultural aspects provide guidelines on how to behave and how to heal. But beyond the rituals of mourning and social expectations, grief emerges as an individual and collective event (Silverman 2021; Rosenblat 2013). Grief is also deeply personal. Individualities and micro-cultures (such as at the family level) emerge as well and play a significant role in the process of bereavement. Even as a deeply personal process, it is always an intersubjective mechanism; mourning is a communal process in which various actors are deployed to create meaning together through actions and storytelling (Klass and Steffen 2017; Walter 2010; Silverman et al. 2021).

Freitas (2013) describes grief as an “emptying of the world” during an abrupt transformation of the “being” in relationship to oneself and others. For him, we become part of each other in our relationships. In this case, the passing of a loved one would also mean a “self-transformation,” as a part of the individual and their self-reference is gone. Both from an anthropological and psychological point of view, mourning is invariably described as an experience that makes meanings (and searches for sense) within a group (Bromberg et al. 1996; Ribeiro 2002; Freitas 2013). So what happens when the person is detached from this group?

### 2.3 Literature review

Thanks to advancements in telecommunication, being physically far away does not have to mean being apart. Immigrants can continue to be caregivers and offer support (be it financial, emotional, or other) and be close to their loved ones in their home country despite the physical absence (Baldassar 2008; Mas Giralt 2018). However, this kind of remote support does not mean that distance has no impact. While connection and daily contact might be possible (and might attenuate it), crisis events make the need for physical proximity evident. Being physically present can become particularly important in the case of illness, end of the life stages, and death. (Baldassar 2014; Mas Giralt 2018). This proximity is crucial because it allows one to not only care for the affected family member but also be there for the rest of the

family constellation. The immigrants themselves also benefit from being close to their families in those cases. Their physical presence there can alleviate guilt and aid in the healing process after their loved ones pass away (Boss 2004; 2009).

Distance and bureaucratic issues pose particular challenges to transnational bereavement. The financial side (especially, but not only at short notice) sometimes makes it impossible for immigrants to travel. Visa issues can also become a significant barrier preventing someone from traveling altogether. Such difficulties and limitations can prevent immigrants from tending to a dying person and from attending funerals, which often disrupts the grieving process (Baldassar 2014; Bravo 2017; Mas Giralt 2018).

Grief is a process and a journey. One does not go through it overnight. Rituals and costumes are structures that can help people, so missing those moments might complicate an already difficult situation. Not participating in mourning rituals can negatively affect the well-being of the immigrant and others around them (Baldassar 2014; Bravo 2017; Mas Giralt; 2018). This absence is oftentimes linked to the development of an “ambiguous loss,” which refers to experiencing a loss without “experiencing the loss” of a person (Perl 2016; Solheim et al. 2016; Mas Giralt 2018). That is rather common when there is no contact with the body due to accidents, disappearances, or distance. For those who cannot attend the funeral, it might be more difficult to truly grasp that that person is now gone.

Losing someone is often felt differently in transnational families: Not only did a loved one pass away, but the person living abroad (often) could not be there in their loved one’s final moments, they could not participate in the funeral, they could not share their grief with others (Perl 2016; Solheim et al. 2016; Mas Giralt 2018). Mourning rituals allow the bereaved to express their pain in a way that is seen as appropriate to that society. It prevents a buildup of emotions, and it is a tool for meaning-making and storytelling, through which people can find what they need at that moment (Klass and Steffen 2017; Neimeyer et al. 2014; Silverman et al. 2021).

As identity is constructed in relation to others, a loss is also a fracture of the self (Freitas, 2013). The healing process when it comes to transnational bereavement is hindered, making it harder to make the adjustments needed. It becomes harder to negotiate one’s identity when there is ambiguity, causing feelings of ambivalence, guilt, anxiety, and paralysis (Boss 2001; 2004).

A combination of personal and scholarly considerations drove the decision to focus on Brazilian immigrants in Germany. Culturally, Brazilians have deeply rooted traditions and rituals surrounding grief and mourning, which are distinctly shaped by societal and familial structures. Exploring how these cultural practices are interrupted or adapted in the context of migration provides a unique lens to study transnational bereavement. Furthermore, as Brazilian researchers with lived experiences of migration, we felt a personal connection to the subject, which enabled us to approach the participants with cultural sensitivity and an insider perspective. This connection also offered us deeper insights into the nuances of their experiences, enriching the study’s findings. Finally, the limited existing literature specifically addressing Brazilian immigrants’ bereavement processes in Germany highlighted a critical gap that this research seeks to fill, contributing valuable knowledge to the fields of migration, culture, and grief studies.

### 3 Results and discussion

#### 3.1 Transnational grieving and the elusiveness of closure

In an increasingly globalized world, a growing number of individuals find themselves distanced from their roots, both metaphorically and geographically. This physical separation from one's homeland carries significant emotional and psychological repercussions, especially when confronted with the loss of a loved one.

The mourning rituals—ceremonies, rites, and communal gatherings—that facilitate the expression of grief, remembrance, and closure—are central to the grieving process across cultures. These traditions, deeply entrenched in the cultural and familial fabric, serve as a tribute to the deceased and a structured pathway to healing for those left behind. They allow for the acknowledgment of loss, communal support, and the commencement of the journey towards acceptance. However, these crucial rites of passage often remain inaccessible for those living abroad. The phenomenon where individuals cannot partake in these traditional mourning rituals due to geographical constraints is profound. This separation from familiar grieving processes can exacerbate feelings of loss, leading to a compounded sense of grief. The bereaved may grapple with a sense of isolation, guilt over not being “there,” and a lingering feeling of incompleteness. The physical distance translates into an emotional chasm, creating a scenario where the individual is left yearning for a closure that remains out of reach.

This distant grieving can manifest elements reminiscent of ambiguous loss. While the fact of the death might be concrete, the inability to engage in customary mourning rituals creates a form of ambiguity. The bereaved might feel as if they're in a liminal space, caught between their current environment and the distant homeland where their traditions and memories reside. This grief also has elements of transnational bereavement due to the physical borders, and while it is influenced by social and cultural elements, it also bears unique psychological effects. For that reason, we felt the need to come up with a new term: elusive closure. Elusive closure differs from traditional closure in highlighting the persistent emotional void left by the inability to participate in meaningful mourning rituals. Closure typically involves reaching a sense of finality or acceptance through rituals, communal support, or personal reflection, all of which help the bereaved process their loss (Caston 2007; Sutton 1987; Toom 2018). In contrast, elusive closure emphasizes the unresolved nature of grief caused by the physical and cultural disconnection from these rituals. It reflects a longing not just for the lost loved one but for the missed opportunity to honor their memory in ways that feel complete and culturally authentic, leaving the bereaved in a state of yearning and incompleteness.

Elusive closure refers to the unresolved grief stemming from one's inability, due to physical distance, to partake in traditional mourning rituals. While ambiguous loss grapples with the uncertainty surrounding the absence or presence of a loved one, and transnational bereavement focuses on the challenges of grieving across international borders, elusive closure emphasizes the specific emotional

void created by the non-participation in cultural rites of passage, leaving bereaved individuals yearning for a sense of completion. Death has occurred, and the person is aware of it, but due to the impossibility of participating in the rituals, there is a lack of materiality to the loved one's death. Their absence is not felt the same way, as they were not geographically close before the occurrence. The bereaved person is left with a feeling that is a mix of denial, confusion, and loss. Loss of the person and of a part of oneself, as being absent, can cause a feeling of misplacement, shame, and even failure. In the interview section, we will discuss this more in-depth to better exemplify the concepts.

The challenges of this phenomenon are many. Beyond the emotional turmoil, there's a pressing need for new coping mechanisms and support structures that recognize the intricacies of transnational grieving. As our world becomes more interconnected and mobility continues to shape our lives, understanding and addressing the profound impact of distant mourning and elusive closure becomes not just relevant but essential.

### 3.2 Mourning rituals in Brazil

Describing each culture's mourning traditions is not the goal of this article. We set our focus on the process of meaning-making that comes from those rituals and what happens when an immigrant is displaced and unable to participate in the process of death, dying, and/or mourning of a loved one. However, due to the nature of this research, it is important to mention certain aspects of the burial process. In Brazil, people are usually buried within the first twenty-four hours after they die. The wake is regulated by ANVISA (Brazilian Health Regulatory Agency) and is limited to a maximum of 24 h. The family members have to deal with a lot of bureaucracy and make many important decisions in a short period of time. This process usually starts within a few hours after having been informed of someone's passing. Typically, there is no formal reception following the funeral. Instead, a *velório* is held—a traditional gathering where relatives and friends come together in the hours after a person's death and before the burial or cremation of the body. The way the ritual is organized might make it harder for those who live abroad to return on time, leaving some without the possibility to participate in those rites.

### 3.3 Brazilian community in Berlin and the connection between the two countries

Germany long resisted identifying itself as a country of immigration despite significant migration flows throughout its history. For decades, German policymakers and society viewed migrants as temporary "guest workers" (*Gastarbeiter*), particularly after the recruitment agreements of the 1950s and 1960s brought millions of workers, primarily from Turkey, Italy, and Yugoslavia. It was not until the early 2000s, and more notably during the 2015 wave of immigration, that Germany began to formally acknowledge its role as a destination for immigrants. By 2020, over 21% of Germany's population had a migration background, reflecting its *de facto* status as an immigration country (Statistisches Bundesamt 2024).



In contrast, Brazil has always embraced its identity as a nation built by immigration. From the violent arrival of Portuguese colonizers in the sixteenth century to the waves of German, Italian, Japanese, and other immigrants in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, immigration has been central to Brazil's cultural and demographic fabric (Costa 2008). Today, Brazil is home to one of the world's most diverse populations, with immigration deeply embedded in its national narrative. While Germany's shift toward recognizing immigration is relatively recent, Brazil's history as a nation founded and shaped by immigration highlights the stark differences in how the two countries perceive their immigrant identities (Costa 2008).

The two countries have a long history of diplomacy, and many migrants from Germany settled in Brazil in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. As a result, there were approximately 7 to 12 million Brazilians of German descent in Brazil in the 2000s (Stelzig 2008). In contrast to Brazil's long history as a nation built by immigration, Brazilian migrants in Germany represent a more recent wave of movement, reflecting the globalized nature of modern migration patterns. At the moment, Brazilians can enter the Schengen Area—a zone comprising 27 European countries that have abolished border controls—for up to 90 days without a visa for tourism. However, they require a visa for stays exceeding 90 days or for purposes such as work or study, so moving to Germany might have certain difficulties if one does not have a European passport, as the visa application can be lengthy and demanding.

Despite Germany not positioning itself as a country of immigration until recently, it has received Brazilian immigrants for decades. The roots of the Brazilian community in Berlin trace back to the 1980s and 1990s, when Brazil faced economic instability and political uncertainty (Lidola 2011). Many Brazilians sought opportunities abroad, and Berlin, with its affordable cost of living and burgeoning arts scene, became an attractive destination. The fall of the Berlin Wall in 1989 and the subsequent reunification of Germany further opened the city to international influences, drawing artists, musicians, and creatives worldwide, including Brazil. Over the years, the community has grown, with waves of migration driven by economic, academic, and artistic pursuits. As of 2024, there are approximately 102,000 Brazilians living in the country (Statistisches Bundesamt 2024). This community includes a mix of professionals working for German companies with ties to Brazil, students pursuing higher education at German universities, Brazilians married to German nationals, and individuals with dual citizenship.

When it comes to Berlin, more specifically, as of 2024, the city is home to 9,358 Brazilians (Statistics Berlin-Brandenburg 2024). The number is still a relatively small immigrant group compared to the Turkish population of 98,940 or the Polish population of 56,573 (Statistics Berlin-Brandenburg 2024). Despite their smaller numbers, the Brazilian diaspora has been building connections within the city and organizing cultural events. Facebook and WhatsApp groups for the community help immigrants to find each other and to navigate the city. Cultural organizations such as Bossa FM, as well as bars and restaurants, create spaces to celebrate Brazilian culture.

Like many immigrant communities, Brazilians in Berlin face challenges in Germany, such as language barriers and navigating the complexities of German bureaucracy. However, the community has established networks and organizations to



support newcomers. The *Associação Cultural Brasil-Berlim*, for example, organizes cultural events and provides resources to help Brazilians adjust to life in Germany.

### 3.4 Interviews

All the interviews were conducted in Portuguese, either online or in person. All the citations are free translations from Portuguese to English.

The interviewees were between approximately 20 and 40 years old and had meaningful relationships with those who passed. Their names were changed, and certain details were omitted to protect the identity of the participants. We asked volunteers from groups of Brazilians living in Germany to find candidates. When we started the interviews, they all told us it would also be cathartic for them. They reported not having a lot of space to talk about their grief, even though they would, in fact, like to do so. Thus, they are open to talking to us.

#### 3.4.1 Interview with Pedro: The search for a “shared mourning”

Pedro lost both his grandmothers in his first year of living in Germany. He had been here for just six months when the first one passed away, and even though he thought it could happen while he was away due to her age and health, he still hoped he would be back on time to see her again. But one night, he got home and saw a message in the WhatsApp family group saying she was not doing well, and maybe that night was the night. When he woke up, she was no longer there. He followed the process through social media and was in close contact with his mother and sister, often asking them for details of how they were doing, how the others were doing, who was there, who was not there, and so on. He wanted to live those moments and this grief through them, but he could not be there due to the distance. This curiosity, even “obsession,” as he called it at some point, resulted from his deep desire to be there, he wish he could have been part of those final moments and rituals.

“My sister said she was in the room, and she could smell my grandmother, even though she wasn’t there anymore, which made her miss her so much. I could not smell those smells.” Besides being absent from the funeral and not having the last moments with her, the minute material, physical things that would have reminded him of her were not around him. Her smell, possessions, and bed all suggest she was missing. Her death lacked materiality. When he searched for more details, one of the things he was searching for was this materiality, as he said himself.

“One of the particularities of my grief had to do with this absence; it had to do with being distant and not living it and somehow trying to compensate for it in a search for more details.”

Pedro’s grandmother was religious and Christian. Even though he is not, he went to a church of her faith to light a candle in her memory, trying to repeat in Germany gestures that held meaning for him in Brazil. He mentioned many times during the interview that it was a *luto pela metade*, “half a mourning.” Part of his mourning

was not present here due to the distance. The rituals that guided him through the process happened but without him.

“And then there was this feeling of helplessness and mourning, which was incomplete. Of a farewell that was cut in half because I wasn’t going to be there—and these little symbolisms, like going to church and lighting a candle, even though I wasn’t religious, but because it meant a rite of passage, a farewell to a relationship.”

Recreating rituals as best he could to say goodbye was his way of bringing a bit of this process to Berlin. It was a way to make meaning and tell a story: the story of who she was and who she was for him.

His second grandmother passed away shortly after. He had not imagined this could happen, as she was younger and in good health, which made his bereavement harder. Once again, he searched to know more about what was happening, how people were feeling, who said what, and when. In his words, he was looking for *uma partilha do luto*, “a way to share the grief.”

“I wasn’t there, I was here, and I felt helpless, and this helplessness [and] vulnerability were some of the feelings that were part of this process along with this quest to know how other people’s grief had been.”

How the distance created this “elusive closure” and transnational bereavement (Perl 2016; Solheim et al. 2016; Mas Giralt 2018) for Pedro becomes very clear in this passage. The lack of clarity and certainty caused by the physical absence hindered the process of healing. Not being “there” can cause feelings of anxiety and guilt, making it harder to grasp that death has really occurred (Boss 2001; 2004). When we met for the interview, he was experiencing “elusive closure,” as not being there caused him to feel as if his grandmother’s death was not real in a way. He did not see her again. He did not participate in the rites, and he reported feeling a mix of guilt and shame and difficulty comprehending it was real.

Pedro continually mentioned the material aspects of it all, the palpable things that announced her departure. Those dishcloths, empty beds, favorite sweaters... They reminded his family she had been here, but she was no more. He did not have that. So, he tried reproducing it in Germany. His sister brought him a dishcloth one of his grandmothers embroidered, and he started making recipes the other one would often make, trying to recreate their presence and, in a way, their absence. “Whether it’s the food, the dishcloth, or other symbolisms that seem also to bring this mourning and this absence to light.”

Mas Giralt (2018) and Dennis Klass (1999) described how, in some communities, people will not try to cut ties with the deceased but will instead continue to take comfort in those relationships and find ways to keep those people “alive.” Pedro reported doing that by cooking one of his grandmother’s recipes and by planning to move to the country of origin of the other grandmother as a way to reconnect with her. Pedro tried to find ways to share his grief from across the ocean and be present as much as possible in the mourning rituals. He also tried making meaning from his own memories and created ways to remain connected to them. Trying to find

meaning in death and looking for comfort in old habits is common when it comes to grief. This search can help one to find closure. But when the materiality needed to do so is an ocean away, it becomes much harder to cope with, often leading to an elusive closure.

### **3.4.2 Interview with Maria: “I’m not the person I was before, but I don’t really know who I am after that”**

When Maria left Brazil, her mom had already fought cancer twice. Even though she still had a tumor, it was under control, and she was undergoing treatment. She had already lived in other cities away from her family, so living far (even though it was never this far) was nothing new. She was the only child and the only grandchild on her mother’s side; her parents were divorced, and she was not very close to her father’s family. Her mother was her connection and her closest family tie.

After Maria had been in Berlin for a few years already, her mom messaged her, saying Maria needed to return to say goodbye to her, as she thought she did not have much time left. So she did. She bought tickets and went back. However, because she does not come from one of the cities that is the “entry to Brazil,” she had to change airplanes at least once and then take a bus, as the main airport in her state is not exactly in her city. During one of the layovers, her uncle (the only one on her mother’s side) suddenly passed away. By the time she made it to her city, her uncle had already been buried. “In Brazil, everything happens so fast.”

During her time in Brazil, Maria and her mom spent a lot of time together:

(...) we talked about a lot of things about our relationship, and I think it was kind of like saying goodbye, but... I don’t know; I left hoping everything would be just fine because I had already seen my mother a lot worse, and she wasn’t so bad, you know. I thought it was just a bad phase...

Shortly after she came back to Berlin, her grandmother passed away. During the same time, her mother started feeling worse and had to get some procedures done. As she had already done those before, Maria was not too worried. But after the last procedure, her mom did not wake up. Her father said she should go back as soon as possible, as the doctors had said, “Today will be the day.”

I remember I had a very strong crying crisis at work, and then that affliction of trying to find a ticket as quickly as possible and leave work and manage to get to the airport and catch the flight and ... and then I was crying a lot on the way on the flight from here to Brazil and I remember talking to her in my head... I just wanted her to wait for me (...)

During the several layovers and transfers, she kept in touch with her father, just hoping she would make it on time. But when she left the bus, she saw her father. “I was on the sidewalk, and I saw my father arriving; I saw him arriving, and he said, ‘*Não deu.*’ ‘I am sorry.’ And that was it.”

She made it to the funeral and spent a few more weeks in Brazil trying to fix all the bureaucratic issues, as she was the only one left on that side of the family.

During that time, she had to repeat over and over again that her mother, her uncle, and her grandmother had all died. The act of putting their deaths into words, coupled with this repetition, helped her to really understand what had happened. During that time, all she wanted was to go back to Berlin, to “go back home.” When she went back to Berlin, the pandemic started.

The isolation from the lockdown, however, came as a relief. She felt like her Brazilian friends in Berlin did not understand what she was going through, as they had never been through that. Her father’s family back in Brazil made things harder instead of offering comfort. So, having alone time without any pressure to do anything (as most could not do anything at that moment anyway) made me feel free.

Months later, when one of her Brazilian friends lost a close relative, she felt like she could talk to someone.

(...) after that happened, my grief changed a little because I felt like there was someone very close to me who exactly understood what had happened, someone I could talk to about these things. And everything that happened with my mother started to make a little more sense... As it happened for her after what happened to me, I had already gone through many things that she was going through, so, like, I could talk about my experience and give this support, exactly knowing what she was feeling.

Maria’s speech clearly explains the importance of having someone to talk to. The search for finding and creating meaning can often only take place when those feelings are shared with one another. As we are in a relationship with others, finding your new place in the puzzle can be hard, especially when done alone (Freitas 2013). “I’m not the person I was before, but I don’t really know who I am after that.”

Maria did what her mom could not: she left. She lived her life away from any toxic family and became her own person. Her mom always encouraged her to do all of that and cheered every time she did it.

She had this pain, and I felt that she wanted me to be able to do what she couldn’t do. She wanted me to leave that very toxic family environment. She made many sacrifices and gave me a lot of encouragement. Because of her, I managed to do that. So there was something inside of me that was hers, that existed thanks to her. To somehow live my life in a different way than what was expected of me is something I owe her, so I need to do it for her and myself, let’s say.

Maria might not know yet who she is without her mom, but she knows that the life she is living is thanks to her mom’s incentive, and that keeps her going. By doing what she is doing, she keeps part of her mom alive with her.

Like Pedro, Maria maintains her bond with her mom in a way that “Continuing bonds emphasize that the bereaved maintain an ongoing inner relationship with the deceased and links are maintained and recreated through memories, objects, and other practices and behaviors” (Mas Giralt 2018). Maria lives her life in a way that connects her to her mother and her mother’s struggles and hopes. Even though she expressed feeling guilt for not being able to make it before her mother’s last minutes, she was able to attend the funeral. She still saw her mother one more time, and when dealing with the bureaucratic procedures, she had to repeatedly verbalize what had happened. All of this made her mother’s death materialize. Maria did not seem to

experience elusive closure the way Pedro did. The geographical distance from her birth country seemed to have meaning for her relationship with her mother. Maria managed to “leave,” and she had her mother’s support.

### 3.4.3 Interview with Nathalia: “Life goes on without you”

Natalia has been living in Berlin for over two decades. She experienced many losses during this time, both in Brazil and Germany. The first ones were among the most shocking, not because it was the first time she had lost someone, but because it was the first time she could not be there. “(...) it was weird to accept that that person had ceased to exist and that I could not participate in that final moment.” The first ones to pass away were some friends and her grandparents. Natalia expected to lose her grandparents while she was in Germany, as they were already older. But she did not expect to lose friends her age. When she first left, she did not think that was the last time she would see some of them. “So when I went back to Brazil, those first few times, it felt like I was going to see these people again, which was very strange because they were gone.”

The first funerals she missed were also deeply uncomfortable and brought a feeling of loneliness.

(...) My mother called: “This person died suddenly, and the funeral is tomorrow,” and I thought, hey, I’m here, I won’t be able to see him, I won’t be able to participate in anything like that. It felt as if I were being excluded from that moment of pain.

During that time, Natalia was still new in Berlin and did not yet have a close-knit circle of friends. Social media was not as ubiquitous as it is today, and she had no one to talk to except for her German husband. She describes the pain of not being present at the passage rituals and feeling like she was being deprived of something. Like Pedro, she lived through transnational bereavement and elusive closure, which adjusted to this absence harder (Perl 2016; Solheim et al. 2016; Mas Giralt 2018). She mentioned that she kept expecting to see them again when she went back to Brazil; missing the funerals and the shared grief made it harder to grasp the reality of it. While many people have a hard time accepting a loved one died, the expectation described by Natalia is very typical among immigrants who could participate in the mourning rituals and did not see their loved ones before they were buried. This absence of materiality often causes the feeling that “they are still there.” Their absence is felt more as a knowledge of what happened and less as a material fact.

Even though those first deaths were painful, nothing compared to when she lost her mother. “(...) when it’s your mom or dad, it becomes closer to you. This person, your story goes with them (...) a part of your past goes away with your father, with your mother.”

Bromberg and others (1996) refer to the reorganization of the family system, which comes to light when with the death of a close family member. There is a need to reorganize those systems and adjust one’s identity. As an important reference is gone, the re-adjusting meaning becomes a challenge (Freitas 2013). She is no longer a daughter, as she no longer has a mother. Natalia talks about part of her story of

dying with her mother. Many stories and moments were lost when she passed away. And so was part of Natalia's identity. She was no longer a daughter then. Renegotiating one's identity after a loss can be particularly hard when it is done without having others as a reference. Without the rest of her family and friends who knew her mother—who knew her as a daughter instead of only as Natalia—the entire process of finding new meanings and renegotiating her identity can be hindered (Bromberg et al. 1996; Freitas 2013).

She knew this could happen, however, as they had previously discussed it. “I had already told them that in the event of one of them ‘leaving,’ I could not be present because of the distance.” But nothing prepared her for the reality of this happening and the impossibility of crossing the ocean in time to be there. “Life goes on without you.” Life goes on (and away) without those who went abroad, even though the ties remain. The cities, the people... Everything changes and keeps on changing. But for those who left, it might come as a surprise (even if they knew in theory) that this change continues. When change happens in front of one's eyes, slowly and constantly, it is not as shocking. However, when immigrants return to their country of origin, it can be quite surprising how much has changed for them, as they did not participate in this process. Those places and people remained frozen in time in their heads, unchanged, untouched. Part of the elusive closure seems to stem from this. Death is an enormous change, and immigrants often cannot participate in the rites; they do not see this “change” happening; they just hear of it, having nothing to truly ground it.

We miss funerals. (...) we miss weddings, births, birthdays, Christmas parties... There is a son of a friend of mine who still doesn't know me. The people get married, they get divorced. Life goes on without you. People go on living without you.

A sense of loss is fairly common among immigrants, even without losing someone. Migrating is also linked to being deprived of certain people, objects, places, and experiences, and this deprivation alone can trigger a feeling of loss and bereavement (Bhugra 2003). Natalia has missed funerals in addition to other major life events, and she expresses her grief towards it. She grieved the people she lost and the weddings, births, and funerals she missed. A lot has changed since she migrated, but she did not see it happening. She did not participate. Life and death went on in Brazil without her, while she went on with her life in Germany. Regardless of her new life abroad, she reported having a hard time finding closure in many of those situations, as she had to accept what she could not see and could not be part of. How can one get closure when the materiality of loss is not there? That elusive closure seems to be so common among bereaved immigrants.

Culture plays a role. The effect becomes evident when Pedro talks about his personal culture shock in Germany when he realizes that individual ways to mourn and to relate to one's family vary greatly between the two countries. But Maria did not seem to think much of it. It could be because Maria is mostly surrounded by Brazilians in Berlin, but it could be due to her personal issues with her hometown and family, showing how individual experiences are also important, and culture cannot cover it all. This importance of individual experiences also goes in the same

direction as Rosenblatt's (2013) study, which mentions different micro-cultures in different families, creating distinct notions of what is appropriate for grief.

An important common point across the interviews was the weight of distance. Neither Pedro nor Natalia could attend the funerals, which heavily impacted them and their grieving process. Maria managed to go back to her mother's funeral but was not fast enough to be there in her final moments. The distance between Berlin and many Brazilian cities varies. Still, it will hardly ever take less than 14 h, and there are no direct flights from Berlin to most places in Brazil, impacting the prices, making it more expensive and often unaffordable, not to mention the amount of time it takes to fly there. This long commute, plus the speed at which funerals take place in Brazil, makes it really hard to be present in the mourning rituals.

The feeling of isolation and the desire to share this was also common. The participants mentioned why they wanted to take part in this project immediately when we first met, and they also talked about it in their interviews. They all looked for ways to share it with others. Pedro tried sharing his grief with his family back home and Maria with her friend here. Natalia also expressed this desire, but she had other obstacles. Natalia was also the only one to mourn the distance and the absence from life events in general. As this was not asked directly, it does not mean the other interviewees did not feel that. Maybe they did not feel it was the moment to talk about it, but it still made sense for Natalia to bring it up in that situation. In the interview, she attributes having lived this experience to how long she has been in Germany and her age. However, some of those events also depend on the age of family and friends and their individual trajectories.

Transnational bereavement was often talked about and seems to have had a great impact, even if they managed to create new meanings and new ways to share their grief. However, the main aspect made clear is how different their processes were here than they would have been in Brazil. The translocality of immigrants and the impact it has on their bereavement process is often overlooked, and with this article, we hope to shed some light on the issue.

Furthermore, for both Pedro and Natalia, the profound sense of elusive closure was palpable. Being physically distanced from their homeland during moments of grief compounded their emotional turmoil. Without the ability to participate in familiar mourning rituals, they grappled with a lingering sense of incompleteness. This sense was further exacerbated by the logistical challenges they faced; the lengthy and often prohibitive travel time to Brazil, combined with the swift nature of funerals in their home country, meant that attending these rites was an impossibility. While culture certainly plays a pivotal role in shaping the contours of grief—as Pedro's experience with cultural dissonance in Germany highlights—not being physically present during crucial mourning milestones emerges as a unique kind of pain. This pain, the elusive closure, demonstrates how grief is not only about the loss of a person but also about the absence of rites that provide solace and meaning. Maria's narrative adds another layer to this complexity. Although she managed to attend her mother's funeral, her inability to be there in her final moments demonstrates that even when one can participate in post-death rituals, the shadow of what was missed lingers.



Natalia's experience in Berlin highlights the profound pain of elusive closure. Spending over two decades away from Brazil, she faced the agony of mourning distant loved ones without the solace of traditional rituals. This distance took an emotional toll, especially evident in the aftermath of her mother's death. Beyond the immediate grief, Natalia grappled with a shifting identity and the perpetual sense of displacement, intensified by missing significant life events. Her story underlines the intricate interweaving of grief, identity, and alienation, offering a poignant insight into the complexities of elusive closure faced by many immigrants.

The shared feeling of isolation amongst the participants and their subsequent longing for communal solace further amplifies the significance of this study. While transnational bereavement is indeed a significant dimension of their experience, the distinctiveness of their grief process in Germany compared to what it would have been in Brazil provides a compelling testament to the intricate tapestry of grieving in the diaspora. Through this investigation, we aim to bring to the fore the often-overlooked nuances of bereavement experienced by immigrants, casting a spotlight on the profound impact of translocality on the grieving process.

## 4 Conclusion

The in-depth interviews with three bereaved Brazilian immigrants living in Germany shed light on the unique challenges faced by this specific population in dealing with their mourning away from their country of origin. The findings highlight the importance of cultural traditions and rituals in the mourning process and the psychological impact of ambiguous loss and physical distance from family during crisis moments.

The results of this study have important implications for the field of loss and trauma among immigrant populations, as it adds to the growing literature on the psychological impact of migration and bereavement and highlights the importance of cultural sensitivity in supporting individuals from diverse cultural backgrounds. Furthermore, the study demonstrates the need for up-to-date research on the experiences of bereaved immigrants, particularly those who are physically distant from their families during crisis moments.

Despite the insights gained from this study, there are limitations to consider. Using case study research and the small sample size of three participants may limit the generalizability of the findings. Furthermore, the study only focuses on Brazilian immigrants living in Germany, which may not be representative of other migrant populations. The age limitation might also influence results, as only young adults were interviewed, and other age groups were not taken into account. As the number of interviews was limited, I did not account for aspects of gender and sexuality when analyzing the participants' answers.

Additionally, the article relied solely on self-report data and did not include data from family members or friends, which could have provided a more comprehensive understanding of the experiences of bereaved Brazilian immigrants living in Germany.

Future directions for research could include larger sample sizes and more diverse immigrant populations to further explore the experiences of bereaved individuals. Future research could also include longitudinal studies examining the long-term effects of migration and bereavement on individuals and families.

In terms of its clinical importance, the findings of this study suggest the weight of distance and transnational bereavement and the need for culturally sensitive support and interventions that acknowledge the unique challenges faced by bereaved immigrants living away from their country of origin. Healthcare professionals working with this population should be aware of the impact of physical distance on the mourning process and provide support that is in accordance with that.

Finally, this study provides valuable insights into the experiences of bereaved Brazilian immigrants living in Germany and their particular journey with loss. We would also like to highlight the importance of having research done, particularly with immigrants, as the process of mourning and bereavement becomes drastically different due to the distance. We hope this article can contribute to furthering the discussion of loss and trauma among immigrants and that more research is done on the theme.

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**Data availability** The dataset supporting the conclusions of this article is available upon reasonable request, ensuring that the anonymity of the participants remains protected. Please contact the corresponding author for data requests.

## Declarations

**Ethics approval and consent to participate** For this research, informed consent was diligently sought from all participants. They were provided with comprehensive details regarding the study's objectives, methodologies, potential benefits and risks, and the handling of their personal data. Participants were assured of their right to withdraw from the study at any stage without any repercussions. All participants willingly provided their consent, understanding the implications of their involvement, and ensuring the integrity and ethical grounding of our research.

**Consent for publication** All participants have provided written consent allowing for the publication of their anonymized responses and narratives in this research. Identifying details have been modified or omitted to ensure confidentiality.

**Competing interests** The authors declare that they have no competing interests.

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## Comments

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