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## Experiences of Loneliness and Belonging among U.S.-Born Women during the COVID-19 Pandemic in Germany

Anna Sizorina  
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# Walden University

College of Allied Health

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Anna Sizorina

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the review committee have been made.

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Walden University  
2026

Abstract

Experiences of Loneliness and Belonging among U.S.-Born Women during the COVID-

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by

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MBA, CSU East Bay, 1998

Diploma of Higher Education with Honors, MPGU (RF), 1993

Dissertation Submitted in Partial Fulfillment

of the Requirements for the Degree of

Doctor of Philosophy

Psychology

Walden University

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## Abstract

Existing literature indicates that the COVID-19 pandemic led to increased levels of loneliness, particularly among individuals with transnational ties. Travel and entry bans, along with social distancing, led to separation from family abroad and from people and communities in the countries of new residence. In this qualitative phenomenological study, experiences of loneliness and belonging among U.S.-born women during the COVID-19 Pandemic in Germany were explored. The transaction theory of stress guided the scientific enquiry, and the evolutionary theory of loneliness served as a conceptual framework for examining loneliness in the given context. Six adult female participants, born in the United States and residing in Germany, were recruited via social media and participated in in-depth, semistructured interviews. The data were analyzed using IPA methodology to capture participants' experiences within their unique sociocultural contexts. Analysis revealed six group experiential themes: (a) belonging as fundamental to identity; (b) belonging as a relationship; (c) belonging as an interaction; (d) loneliness as a painful experience of disconnection and nonbelonging; (e) coping with loneliness through belonging and engagement; and (f) emotional appraisal of the pandemic as change, uncertainty, fear, disconnection, loss and grieving. Findings demonstrated that loneliness and belonging are multifaceted and incorporating emotional, relational, and collective dimensions. By highlighting the psychological impacts of migratory disconnection and nonbelonging experienced by women with transnational ties, the findings contribute to positive social change by informing context-sensitive interventions that foster belonging and social connectedness and prevent loneliness.

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## Dedication

To my husband, Dmitri, whose steady support carried me through moments of doubt and uncertainty. A devoted father, loving husband, and true friend, his unwavering encouragement made the completion of this work possible.

To my children, Liza and Mark, whose curiosity, encouragement, and emotional support inspired me throughout this journey. I hope this work guides you to face challenges with courage and to use your efforts for the benefit of this world.

To those whose lives and connections across borders were shaken during the COVID-19 pandemic, and who faced hardship in reaching the people most important to them. May their voices be heard.

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## Chapter 1: Introduction to the Study

### **Introduction**

With global mobility on the rise, the number of families living across nation-state borders is not just a statistic but a significant societal shift (Bryceson, 2019). Following Marrow and Klekowski von Koppenfels (2020), the number of Americans living abroad grew substantially from 6.3 million in 2012 to approximately 9 million, or 3% of the U.S. population, in 2016. According to the U.S. Census Bureau, in 2011, one-fifth of all married-couple households in the United States included at least one spouse born abroad, underscoring the increasing prevalence of transnational families. These transnational families, often described as imagined communities, maintain their sense of familyhood through co-presence and care arrangements (Bryceson & Vuorela, 2020; Merla et al., 2020). However, migration can disrupt the connection with the country of birth, additionally requiring significant time and effort to establish connections with the host countries. This double disconnection can lead to feelings of non-belonging (Ten Kate et al., 2020), loneliness, and social isolation (Klussman et al., 2020).

Loneliness is a serious mental health issue, especially among migrant populations. The sense of belonging and social connections that protect against loneliness are often disrupted by the experience of migration (Albert, 2021). Loneliness and a low sense of belonging can have consequences for both mental and physical health (Lim et al., 2020; McHugh Power et al., 2018). While previous research on loneliness has mainly focused on older adults, recent studies have begun to explore the economic and social

implications of loneliness among broader populations including younger women (Majmudar et al., 2022; Mihalopoulos et al., 2020; Wickens et al., 2021).

The World Health Organization (WHO, 2020) monitored and assessed the spread and severity of the virus starting from the beginning; in March 2020, after evaluating the outbreak, the WHO director-general declared COVID-19 a global pandemic. The coronavirus disease affected families located in more than one country in a very special way. National governments undertook steps to protect resident populations by closing borders, denying or hindering the return, or summoning their citizens to stay (Mégret, 2020). Other measures included a stay-at-home policy, homeschooling, social distancing, quarantines, and lockdowns, which led to either physical separations, disconnection, or forced proximity, created a shift in routines, rituals and rules, increased stress and changed family cohesion (Prime et al., 2020; van Bavel et al., 2020). State-imposed protective measures disrupted belonging to the country of residence and hindered connections to countries of origin (Barker, 2021; Camellia & Fattah, 2020). Though WHO (2023) called off the state of emergency associated with coronavirus disease in October 2023, the Pandemic was not over.

Though at the beginning of the pandemic, loneliness researchers focused on elderly citizens, later studies identified that women, younger people, and unemployed individuals were at a greater risk of developing psychiatric symptoms and loneliness (Wickens et al., 2021). According to Carella et al. (2022), members of transnational families experienced high levels of loneliness. It is essential to explore how lockdowns

and other protective measures during the Pandemic influenced the mental health and well-being of diverse populations in interconnected global societies (Brooks et al., 2020).

In this chapter, I review the relevant literature on the experiences and meanings of loneliness and belonging among U.S.-born women in Germany during the COVID-19 pandemic and explained the research methodology.

### **Background**

Loneliness is an experience of disconnection from people and environments (Franklin & Tranter, 2021; McKenna-Plumley et al., 2023). The perception of loneliness can stretch from a positive space for personal growth (Gierveld et al., 2018) to a pervasive unpleasant experience (Perlman, & Peplau, 1981). Following Cacioppo and Cacioppo's (2012, 2018a) evolutionary view on loneliness, loneliness results from the imbalance between the expectations of belongingness and quality of social connections and actual lived experiences of an individual. The psychological and physical pain of disconnection motivates humans to restore broken bonds and reestablish social contacts to ensure survival (Cacioppo et al., 2015a; Cacioppo, & Cacioppo, 2012, 2018a).

Loneliness is spreading rapidly. Research showed that nearly 20% of a nationally representative sample of US adults between 18 and 70 years of age identified themselves as lonely (Hyland et al., 2019). It is well documented that loneliness is harmful to health and well-being (Bu, Zaninotto, & Fancourt, 2020; Domènech-Abella et al., 2019; McDonald et al., 2022). Due to its widespread prevalence and significant effects, loneliness can become one of the primary health concerns in the 21st century.

Belonging serves as an antidote to loneliness. Research on loneliness and belonging has demonstrated that developing relationships with trusted individuals and social groups fostered a sense of closeness (Ten Kate, et al., 2020), helped alleviate the cycle of isolation (Lund et al., 2019), imbued a feeling of being part of something larger (Albert, 2021; McKenna-Plumley et al., 2023), and reduced feelings of loneliness.

Belonging is a fundamental human need and motivation (Baumeister & Leary, 1995). It is the perception of embeddedness and requires a personal sense of fitting in and positive feedback from individuals and social groups (Allen et al., 2021; Hagerty et al., 1992). Belonging evolves through active engagement with one's surroundings (Allen et al., 2021; Baumeister & Leary, 1995). Whereas social exclusion and low levels of belonging may lead to increased mortality and morbidity (Mattes & Lang, 2021), a sense of belonging benefits life satisfaction and well-being (Jakubec et al., 2019), reduces a neuro-immune reactivity to threats and supports healthy functioning of the immune system (Mattes & Lang, 2021; Slavich et al., 2023), and facilitates recovery from mental illness (Dell et al., 2021; Doroud et al., 2018). All these aspects make belonging an integral part of the health concept.

Migration is a risk factor for loneliness: migrants are lonelier than local people of their age (Lim et al., 2020). Migration also impacts belonging by influencing the individual perception of social connections. Though identification with many cultures has become a norm (Van De Vijver, 2015), migrants may experience contradicting feelings toward both host and home countries (Sonn et al., 2017), may feel as if they do not fit in (Donnalaja & McAvay, 2022). Although they feel attached to the geographical areas of

their new home countries, they still cannot identify themselves as locals (Simonsen, 2018).

The COVID-19 pandemic and the measures taken to control its spread had a profound impact on loneliness worldwide. In the UK, the percentage of individuals reporting loneliness rose to 40% (Groarke et al., 2020; Li & Wang, 2020). Women faced additional challenges due to increased household responsibilities and caring for family members (Lepinteur et al., 2022; Oreffice & Quintana-Domeque, 2021). Recent research (Lepinteur et al., 2021; Wickens et al., 2021) has provided evidence that women are more susceptible to loneliness. The significant change in social environment has resulted in time and space deficits for their own needs, interests, and activities, which may have led women to experience social loneliness, thus feeling disconnected from their valued social roles (Russell et al., 1984; Wolters et al., 2023).

Rules and regulations implemented to combat the spread of coronavirus have significantly affected feelings of belongingness on various levels: families could not see distant members, communal spaces were closed, workspaces were relocated to home offices, and travel and entry bans impeded physical connections with family and close friends. According to Wamsler et al. (2022), these changes have led to the activation of ethnic conceptions of belonging based on national and ethnic ancestry and common religious backgrounds, thereby polarizing society in several European countries and impacting migrants and members of transnational families. Migrants also reported increased feelings of otherness, disappointment, and estrangement (Gao, 2021; Spagnuolo, 2022); some felt disconnected from home and host societies (Gao, 2021).

Most of the research at the beginning of the pandemic focused on healthcare workers (Conversano, Marchi, & Miniati, 2020; Manzano-García & Ayala Calvo, 2021; Romero et al., 2020), students (Rolak et al., 2020; Wang et al., 2021), employees (Trougakos et al., 2020), and elderly (Robb et al., 2020). However, research about loneliness and women belonging to transnational families is limited in the scientific literature. Lim and colleagues (2020) recommended using diverse research methods and approaches to studying loneliness within social contexts, identifying migration as an understudied risk factor.

This qualitative investigation was focused on women from transnational families who experienced loneliness during the COVID-19 pandemic. I examined how women experience loneliness across different contexts of belonging. It may contribute to understanding the psychological impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on loneliness, specifically investigating gender- and group-specific factors associated with increased loneliness. Furthermore, the study may familiarize communities with measures to enhance a sense of belonging and thereby reduce loneliness among women and migrants (see Allen & Furlong, 2021). This knowledge may also inform public policies and the development of population-based, culturally appropriate interventions.

### **Problem Statement**

The social issue examined in this study was the increase in loneliness during the COVID-19 pandemic (see Ernst et al., 2022). Loneliness was identified as a comorbid factor affecting both physical and mental health (Bu, Zaninotto, & Fancourt, 2020; Domènech-Abella et al., 2019; McDonald et al., 2022; Pourriyahi et al., 2021; Smith et

al., 2020). Research conducted during this period revealed a growing gender gap in experiences of loneliness, highlighting women as a particularly vulnerable population (Li & Wang, 2020; Oreffice & Quintana-Domeque, 2021). Additionally, demographic changes in society, combined with COVID-19 restrictions, diminished the opportunities for lonely individuals to reintegrate into social environments (Ernst et al., 2022; Fried et al., 2020). According to Holt-Lunstad (2022), the sense of belonging—which encompasses the quality of social connections—is a crucial determinant of health. Therefore, introducing the concept of belonging improved the understanding of social embeddedness and its impact on loneliness, allowing the researcher to study loneliness within the specific contexts in which it arises (Allen & Furlong, 2021).

Though most of the previous research addressed loneliness and social isolation within national borders (Wickens et al., 2021), it was not known how public protection measures during the COVID-19 pandemic affected levels of loneliness and a sense of belonging among female migrants with transnational family ties. The understanding of how particular groups of women experienced and made sense of loneliness and social connectedness/disconnectedness across various belonging contexts during the COVID-19 pandemic may increase exploration of female vulnerability to loneliness and impaired belonging (Power, 2020; Ten Kate et al., 2020) and may help to protect women by adapting policies to include particular interests of women and their role in the family and community functioning (Thibaut & van Wijngaarden-Cremers, 2020).

The specific research problem I addressed through this study was how migrant women with transnational family ties experienced loneliness and belonging during the

COVID-19 Pandemic in Germany. Without paying adequate attention to how migrant women experience loneliness within their social relationships and communities, migrant-specific factors and intervention strategies for this population cannot be identified (see Ten Kate et al., 2020). The study may inform public policies and develop population-based and culturally appropriate interventions, moving away from specific symptoms of disorders to general psychological symptoms and loneliness among representatives of particularly vulnerable groups, for example, migrant women (see Li & Wang, 2020).

### **Purpose of the Study**

The purpose of this qualitative study was to understand the experiences of loneliness and belonging among U.S.-born female migrants with transnational family ties during the COVID-19 pandemic in Germany using an idiographic phenomenological perspective. I employed interpretative phenomenological analysis (IPA), as further discussed in Chapter 3. The aim was to gain a deeper understanding of individual experiences in the context of the coronavirus crisis. According to Smith and Osborn (2008), IPA is an experiential research method that offers a systematic approach to understanding experience through interpretation at the case level, thereby creating a unified narrative comprising individual accounts.

Due to the implementation of measures such as social distancing and lockdowns aimed at curtailing the spread of the virus throughout the COVID-19 pandemic, loneliness emerged as a significant nonclinical psychological condition influencing health and well-being (Li & Wang, 2020). While some communities initially experienced increased social connectedness and inclusion during the early stages of the lockdown, the

prolonged enforcement of protective measures disrupted feelings of belonging and social integration among and within different groups (Saiz, González-Sanguino, et al., 2021). In this study, the IPA method, commonly used in health and psychology research, was employed to understand women's subjective experiences with loneliness within the context of belonging and nonbelonging during the pandemic. A comprehensive idiographic and in-depth analysis of these subjective experiences may contribute to understanding the disproportionate rise of loneliness among women in various social contexts.

### **Research Question**

The research question “How did US-born female migrants with transnational family ties experience loneliness and belonging during the COVID-19 Pandemic in Germany?” guided the study.

### **Theoretical and Conceptual Framework for the Study**

#### **Theoretical Foundation**

Lazarus and Folkman's (1984) stress appraisal theory and its subsequent developments and applications informed this study (Austenfeld & Stanton, 2004; Park & Folkman, 1997; Smith & Lazarus, 1993). This theory suggests that when stress disrupts an organism's balance, it must reassess the situation. This first assessment, or primary appraisal, involves evaluating a stressor and its level of threat to survival and well-being. The second assessment occurs when the stress is considered critical for survival. The individual is drawn to reevaluate their emotional and cognitive resources to manage stressors and future expectations if the stress persists (Smith & Lazarus, 1993). In the

secondary appraisal process, the person assesses whether they are in control and have sufficient resources to address the environmental change. The assessments yield different patterns of emotion regulation and stress-coping attempts.

### **Conceptual Framework**

Loneliness is understood through the lens of the evolutionary theory of loneliness (ETL) (Cacioppo et al., 2015a; Cacioppo & Cacioppo, 2012, 2018a). According to Cacioppo and Cacioppo, loneliness is an emotional state that signifies the absence of relationships and is perceived as a relational threat; loneliness is a dual product of objective social isolation and the subjective perceptions of the individual. In line with ETL, the evolutionary goal of loneliness is to enhance adaptation and ensure short-term survival by seeking and maintaining contact with relational partners (Cacioppo & Cacioppo, 2018a). Understanding the pandemic as a threat for survival may help to understand the essence of loneliness.

Cacioppo and Cacioppo (2012, 2018a) identified three basic dimensions of loneliness that explain the degree of disconnection and isolation: intimate, relational, and collective. They identified loneliness as an intrapersonal and interpersonal experience, and social relationships play a central role in the experience. The dual continuum model of loneliness and belonging (Lim et al., 2021) is a framework for exploring these phenomena. It posits that loneliness and belonging coexist within four distinct groups characterized by high and low magnitude: socially fulfilled individuals are low in loneliness and high in belonging; the socially searching group is high in belongingness and also high in loneliness; the socially distressed group has low belongingness and

higher levels of loneliness, and socially indifferent group lower in belongingness and lower in loneliness. This model underscores belonging and unbelonging are contexts for loneliness and social embeddedness (Lim et al., 2021).

The logical connections between Lazarus and Folkman's (1984) stress appraisal theory, ETL (Cacioppo & Cacioppo, 2012, 2018a), the dual continuum model of loneliness and belonging (Lim et al., 2021), and the qualitative nature of my study were demonstrated in the practical application of these theories and conceptual frameworks in the inquiry. I used Lazarus and Folkman's (1984) theory of stress appraisal to create an interview schedule. The interview questions encompassed primary and secondary appraisals, coping efforts, and descriptions of belonging as a context for the three dimensions of loneliness explored in the literature review.

Migration was characterized by multiple belongings (Berry & Hou, 2019). The application of the dual continuum model of loneliness and belonging enriched interview questions and encompassed multiple belongings, their valence, and features that either support or prevent loneliness among women with transnational ties. The participants provided a firsthand account of their responses to loneliness and disconnection. This subjective experience, expressed in participants' own words, was used by both the participants and me to gain a deeper understanding of the phenomena being studied in a specific context (see Smith, 2011). Assessing loneliness among migrant populations in the contexts of belonging and non-belonging allowed me to understand different types of loneliness better and find tailored approaches for prevention and intervention solutions.

I used IPA, a method developed for health psychology by Smith and Osborne (2008). This approach is well-suited for understanding the subjective meanings of events and states experienced by the study participants. It aligns with Husserl's philosophy, diving deep into human experience to identify the essential qualities within the given context (Smith et al., 2009). Employing the IPA methodology, I explored the embodied experiences of belonging, nonbelonging, and loneliness; cognitive, emotional, and behavioral responses to these experiences, and the participants' sense-making processes. Subsequently, I interpreted the participants' narratives, synthesizing my own interpretations with those of the participants (see Smith et al., 2009).

Rising levels of loneliness and prolonged stress during the COVID-19 pandemic (Généreux et al., 2020; Marroquín et al., 2020) supported the choice of theory. The stress appraisal theory guided the construction of the research questions. Numerous researchers have applied it to the study of stressful situations and conditions. I incorporated the ETL (Cacioppo & Cacioppo, 2012, 2018a) and the dual continuum model of loneliness and belonging (Lim et al., 2021) into the conceptual framework to enhance understanding of the experience of loneliness both with and without social connectedness. The supporting studies are reviewed in detail in Chapter 2.

### **Nature of the Study**

In this qualitative study, I used IPA to address the research question and investigate how participants experience and make sense of their experiences in specific social situations case by case (see Smith et al., 2009). Apart from the phenomenological influences described in the theory section, the study was grounded in hermeneutics.

Interpretation was a dual dynamic process, where the participants made meaning of their experience, and I made meaning of the participants' meaning, leading to overall understanding (see Smith & Osborne, 2008; Smith et al., 2009).

The third theoretical underpinning of the IPA, ideography, influenced the current research at two levels. First, I was interested in a very detailed description of experience. Second, I focused on how this experience was understood by a particular target group (migrant women) in a specific context (COVID Pandemic in Europe).

I interviewed, analyzed, and interpreted the interviews with migrant women in Germany. IPA was appropriate to understand how women from transnational families experienced and perceived loneliness in the context of belonging during the COVID-19 pandemic. IPA methodology is pertinent to investigate complex, novel experiences in emotional and stressful contexts (Dowling et al., 2020). I used this interpretive approach to integrate participants' thoughts and experiences, my perspective, and current literature to understand the phenomenon of loneliness (see Motta & Larkin, 2023).

I recruited a sample of 6 female participants. I used a screening instrument to increase the sample's homogeneity and meet the research study's criteria. The participants were 40–59-year-old women born in the United States, who still had parts of their families in the United States. During the pandemic the participants permanently resided in Germany with their nuclear families. I collected data face-to-face in person or through Zoom video communication service, using Zoom audio recording only. I conducted one-to-one semistructured interviews herself, the interviews were audio recorded and

transcribed verbatim using Zoom speech-to-text audio transcription option. The data included Zoom records, transcribed participants' responses, and researchers' notes.

I followed the IPA protocol described in Emery and Anderman (2020), Motta and Larkin (2023), and Smith and Fieldsend (2021): (a) line-by-line reading and rereading of each interview transcript and my notes; (b) line-by-line reading and initial noting; (c) development of emergent themes; (d) searching for connections across emergent themes and development of superordinate themes; and (e) a cross case analysis across six cases. The multistage IPA process was first applied at the individual-case level, followed by a case comparison across transcripts.

### **Definitions**

*Belonging*: According to Baumeister and Leary (1995) "the need to belong is a fundamental human motivation" (p. 520). Belonging is a sense of embeddedness in the environment; it requires an individual perception of fit and positive feedback from environments and social groups, supported by active participation and interactions with them (Allen et al., 2021; Baumeister & Leary, 1995; Hagerty et al., 1992).

*Individuals with Transnational Ties (ITT)*: Individuals with Transnational Ties (ITT) are members of *transnational families* with connections to families and communities across national and state borders. While some use the term "migrants," others describe them as "mobile" individuals who have voluntarily separated from their families (Bryceson & Vuorela, 2002). Instead of "transmigrants" (Gerber & Ravazzini, 2021), the researcher used the term "individuals with transnational ties" (ITT) to refer to members of transnational families who maintain family, social, economic, and political

relations across borders. This definition ensured the focus on the individual's psychological experience and connections, regardless of their citizenship status.

*Loneliness:* Loneliness is an experience of disconnection from people and environments (Franklin & Tranter, 2021; McKenna-Plumley et al., 2023). The perception of loneliness can stretch from a positive space for personal growth (Gierveld et al., 2018) to a pervasive, unpleasant experience (Van Tilburg, 2021).

*Transnational families:* Transnational families maintain their sense of familyhood and belonging despite living across different geographical borders. They do this through different means, such as care arrangements, experiences of co-presence, and imagination work (Baldassar, 2008; Skrbiš, 2008). These families are connected by their lack of shared physical space and are distributed across multiple locations (Bryceson & Vuorela, 2020).

### **Assumptions**

I made several assumptions in my study. Firstly, I assumed that the research participants would be forthcoming and truthful in expressing their thoughts and beliefs about their experiences of loneliness and belonging. Secondly, I assumed that although some experiences may date back two or three years, the participants could still recall them in greater detail. Finally, I assumed that the sample was relatively homogenous. The assumptions were needed to ensure reflexivity, transparency and trustworthiness of the research.

### **Scope and Delimitations**

I aimed to understand the experiences of loneliness and belonging of middle-aged migrant women with transnational ties during the COVID-19 pandemic in Germany. I selected women as the target group to examine changes in loneliness trajectories during COVID-19, identifying women as a vulnerable group. Much of the loneliness research was done with older participants, followed by younger ones. I aimed to focus more on middle-aged women, to understand their experiences before they age and reach even higher levels of loneliness.

I used a screening instrument to set boundaries and reach the target group: The participants were 40-59-year-old women, born outside Germany, with relatives outside Germany, and who permanently reside with part of their families in Germany. Purposeful samples and thick descriptions ensured the transferability of qualitative studies (Campbell et al., 2020; Shenton, 2004). Another delimitation was the method of recruitment. The population comprised women with computers and internet access who were active on social media - since recruitment occurred through social media platforms, most recruited participants had sufficient social media expertise).

### **Limitations**

Qualitative studies using IPA methodology may have the following limitations associated with research participants: the type of sampling and smaller sample sizes make it difficult to generalize study results for larger populations (Brocki & Wearden, 2006; Sibalija et al., 2020). Other limitations included difficulties obtaining a valid sample of volunteers for the interview study.

IPA is a subjective research method, and researchers must take precautions to ensure validity and reliability (see Brocki & Wearden, 2006). Analyzing data independently could increase the risk of subjectivity and researcher bias. Having acknowledged this limitation, I bracketed personal assumptions and interpretations and engaged in reflexive practices to mitigate potential bias.

I was aware of the participants' potential emotional reactions and planned for longer intervals and pauses during the interview (see Webber-Ritchey et al., 2021). In accordance with Dempsey et al. (2016), I considered potential distressing factors related to revisiting the experience. For example, individuals experiencing bereavement were advised against participating in the research. Potential interviewees were provided with information on confidentiality and informed consent and were instructed that they could withdraw from the interview at any time. They were advised to attend a counselling session at a university clinic in their city of residence in the event of distress and were provided with the clinic's contact details (see Dempsey et al., 2016).

When reflecting on events that occurred 2-3 years prior, participants were required to rely on retrospective recall to provide their accounts. I was aware of such retrospective accounts and was cautious of limitations in recall and retrospective interpretation bias (Dowling et al., 2022).

### **Significance**

The study adds to the understanding of the burdensome psychological experiences of the COVID-19 Pandemic, experiences of loneliness and belonging in a transnational context, and people's experiences of belonging in their multiple social relationships

during the pandemic. The study expands understanding of the specific gender- and social-connection-related factors that contribute to higher levels of loneliness, thereby filling a gap in the explanation of why women are vulnerable to loneliness (see Power, 2020; Ten Kate et al., 2020). It may also help protect women by informing policymakers to consider their interests and role in family functioning (see Thibaut & van Wijngaarden-Cremers, 2020).

Furthermore, the study may inform communities about measures to increase a sense of belonging and thus reduce loneliness among women and migrants (see Allen & Furlong, 2021). This knowledge may inform public policies and develop population-based and culturally appropriate interventions.

The results of this study should empower migrant women by amplifying their voices within the given context. Communities may better understand individuals' needs in a transnational context during and beyond the COVID-19 Pandemic. As the number of transnational families continues to increase, these findings could help shape mental health interventions for this group in the event of future disasters.

### **Summary**

As various studies have shown, loneliness is considered a health problem of the 21st century (Bu, Zaninotto, & Fancourt, 2020; Domènech-Abella et al., 2019; McDonald et al., 2022). The existing literature suggested that different factors, such as migration (Lim et al., 2020) and being a woman during the COVID-19 pandemic (Lepinteur et al., 2021; Wickens et al., 2021) increased loneliness. Conversely, a sense of belonging to families, communities, and even nations appeared to buffer against loneliness (Brown et

al., 2023). Though recent studies highlighted the disturbing effect of COVID-19 protective measures on feelings of belonging and loneliness during the pandemic, the research on loneliness among women in transnational families has been limited in the scientific literature (Lim et al., 2020). Lim and colleagues recommend using diverse research methods and approaches to enhance understanding of loneliness to comprehend risk factors of different vulnerability groups. In Chapter 2, I provide a detailed account on literature regarding theory and conceptual framework, concepts of loneliness and belonging, and experiences of loneliness and belonging among women, migrants, and during the COVID-19 pandemic.

## Chapter 2: Literature Review

### Introduction

In this qualitative phenomenological study, I aimed to understand how female migrants with transnational family ties experienced loneliness and belonging during the COVID-19 Pandemic in Germany. Loneliness is gaining attention worldwide. It has been recognized as a risk factor for mental, cognitive, and physical health (Jeste et al., 2021; Lim et al., 2020). Hyland et al. (2019) found that nearly 20% of adults in the United States experienced loneliness. Nevertheless, interventions and global solutions to fight loneliness were unsuccessful due to the heterogeneity of the phenomenon and insufficient understanding of the individual experience of loneliness in context (Akhter-Khan & Au, 2020). According to Baumeister and Leary (1995), loneliness emanates from the human need to belong. Different levels of belonging and unbelonging may create contexts for loneliness (Lim et al., 2021). The COVID-19 pandemic has led to increased loneliness worldwide due to changes in social contacts, including their norms, occurrence, frequency, and perception of belongingness (Barjaková et al., 2023; Groarke et al., 2020; Lampraki et al., 2022; Wickens et al., 2021). However, most of the COVID-19-associated research on loneliness was done within national contexts.

A literature review on belonging and loneliness in transnational families situated loneliness within the context of multiple belongings to both home and host countries. Research on multiple belongings highlighted their positive influence on health and well-being of migrants (Berry & Hou, 2019). Other studies showed that lack of belonging and social embeddedness, such as the absence of close dyadic connections, absence of

community embeddedness and interaction with similar others, and lack of meaningful relationships where a person is a part of something bigger, active, and receives positive feedback from this environment, resulted in loneliness (Cacioppo et al., 2015a; Maes et al., 2019; McKenna-Plumley et al., 2023). Protective measures introduced during the COVID-19 pandemic disrupted belonging inside the host country and connections with the country of origin (Barker, 2021; Camellia & Fattah, 2020) and increased loneliness. Previous studies on loneliness ignored young age and female gender, which later emerged as a vulnerability factor during the COVID-19 pandemic (Bu, Steptoe, & Fancourt, 2020).

The review is organized into sections of related topics and subtopics, including the theoretical framework of the stress appraisal theory, the conceptual framework of the dual continuum model of loneliness and belonging, coping models, a review of critical concepts of belonging, loneliness, and transnational families, a review of literature about loneliness and belonging in a transnational context and during the COVID-19 Pandemic, and a brief description of research methodology.

### **Literature Search Strategy**

I searched the literature in the library of Walden University electronic databases. The researcher searched the databases APA PsychArticles, SAGE Journals, Psychinfo, Psychnet, EBSCO, Thoreau multidatabase, Google Scholar and Research Gate. The keywords and databases searched included:

- *Transnational families OR migrant OR migrant women;*
- *COVID-19 OR coronavirus pandemic OR pandemic;*

- *belongingness OR connectedness OR belonging OR community;*
- *loneliness OR social isolation OR social exclusion OR lonely.*

I employed alternative terminology in the searches to establish the need for the research and its connection to research methodology. I sought studies on loneliness and belonging that employed qualitative methods, including *phenomenology*, *phenomenological analysis*, and *interpretive phenomenological analysis*. Furthermore, to develop the conceptual framework, I examined additional theoretical approaches using the following keywords: *stress appraisal*, *appraisal theory*, and *coping*.

I initiated the search in 2021, when information related to COVID-19 was first emerging. Given the relative scarcity of the literature on transnational families, I first examined loneliness and belonging during COVID-19. The first quantitative studies investigated the emergence, frequencies, and associations of symptoms and conditions associated with the COVID-19 pandemic. I added information on transnational families in 2022 and 2023, as it became available in libraries. The inclusion criteria were peer-reviewed articles in English on loneliness and belonging published in the last 5 years, starting in 2021.

### **Theoretical Foundation**

I used Lazarus and Folkman's (1984) theory of stress appraisal to guide this study. According to this theory, environmental changes force individuals to assess the situation. When a situation is perceived as threatening to one's survival and well-being, a person assesses their coping resources. In other words, the appraisal occurs in two stages: primary appraisal - the evaluation of the encounter or a stressor, and secondary appraisal

- the evaluation of the individual coping potential and resources. Consequently, psychological stress response is a product of a situation appraisal.

Lazarus and colleagues further developed the theory to include emotional appraisal (Smith & Lazarus, 1993). According to scholars, primary appraisal combines motivational relevance and motivational congruence. Secondary appraisal includes the following components: (a) accountability, (b) problem-focused and emotion-focused potential, and (c) future expectancy. Having assessed the encounter as critical and concerning their own life and well-being (primary appraisal), the individual had to decide who was responsible for control or who was to blame (accountability), whether one could manage stress by acting in a certain way (problem-focused coping), or adjusting on a psychological level (emotion-focused coping), and what were the prospects for a change in a psychological situation.

According to Smith and Lazarus (1993), individuals actively choose to engage in problem-focused coping when they perceive themselves capable of managing the encounter. Deckx and colleagues' (2018) systematic review of quantitative studies also established a significant association between loneliness and coping. The review conclusively demonstrated that problem-focused coping styles are connected to lower levels of loneliness. Feeling incapable of managing a situation, people turn to managing their psychological states through disengaging, avoiding, or suppressing disturbing emotions (Smith & Lazarus, 1993). This emotion-focused coping is less effective in addressing loneliness (Deckx et al., 2018).

Austenfeld and Stanton (2004) developed the concept of emotion approach coping, which is based on processing and expressing emotion associated with a stressor. Research showed that an emotional approach to coping contributed to better adjustment in the case of uncontrollable stressors such as chronic illness, infertility, and sexual assault. Additional research has indicated that the receptiveness and openness of the social environment can increase the effect of emotional approach coping among cancer patients; patients who could openly discuss their problems and express their respective emotions felt more regulated (Darabos et al., 2021; Reese et al., 2017).

In addition to emotion-approach coping, meaning-focused coping can be used in circumstances beyond personal control, and negative emotional responses cannot be changed immediately. According to Park and Folkman (1997), making sense of a stressful situation and integrating this meaning into individual beliefs and goals improved adaptation and increased resiliency.

Several studies have applied the transaction model of stress to examine stressful situations and conditions. For example, in a study by Morgan and Burholt (2022), the theory was used to examine loneliness and coping strategies among participants aged 67–84. The researchers hypothesized that the assessment of loneliness-related events influenced coping behaviors. The findings, collected and assessed using IPA, supported the assumption that participants used emotion-focused coping when loneliness was perceived as unmodifiable and the situation could not be altered.

Schoenmakers et al. (2015) used stress appraisal theory to examine coping strategies among lonely older adults. According to researchers, recently lonely

individuals employed problem-focused strategies to improve their relationships and emotion-focused strategies to reduce their expectations about relationships. Persistently lonely individuals were more likely to turn to emotion-focused coping and risked staying involved in a circular process of abandoning their efforts in both types of coping.

Schmidt et al. (2010) examined how emotional appraisal related to emotion regulation among 610 Italian high school students three weeks before the diploma (final) exam. Using the structural equation model, they determined how the appraisal process affected the quality and the intensity of the emotion, thus influencing the choice of emotion regulation strategy. The findings revealed that when students perceived the exam as important and felt confident in their ability to cope, they experienced positive emotions such as hope and a sense of challenge. In such cases, they tended to employ learning and positive reappraisal strategies. If students perceived their coping potential as low, they experienced more negative emotions, including anxiety, fear, and frustration. Anxiety and fear led to an overemphasis on the stressor (exam) without the possibility of changing attentional focus; they focused on the stressor and not on learning itself, using problem-focused coping. When the subjects perceived the outcome as subject to external factors, students experienced frustration and powerlessness, and their emotion regulation strategies were response-focused, distancing, suppression, and drugs (Schmidt et al., 2010).

The choice of the theory was prompted by the chronic stress situation during the Coronavirus pandemic (see Génereux et al., 2020; Marroquín et al., 2020). Measures to stop the spread of the virus increased loneliness and reduced feelings of belonging in

specific population groups (Gao, 2021; Li & Wang, 2020; Spagnuolo, 2022; Wamsler et al., 2022; Wickens et al., 2021). Based on stress appraisal theory (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984), I aimed to understand how female members of transnational families experienced loneliness and belonging during the COVID-19 pandemic. The exploration of loneliness as an experience was studied following the model: whether loneliness presented a threat to one's safety and well-being in the context of belonging (primary appraisal), and if yes, which emotions, physiology, and action tendency followed this appraisal (secondary appraisal); and how this action tendency was translated into coping activity.

### **Conceptual Framework**

The conceptual framework that informed the understanding of loneliness was Cacioppo and Cacioppo's (2012, 2018a) ETL. According to the model, humans possess an innate need to connect, create, maintain, and recover relationships with others. When this need goes unmet, individuals feel lonely. Thus, loneliness is an emotional state that arises from perceived insufficiencies in essential relationships and motivates individuals to restore them. According to Cacioppo and Cacioppo (2018a), the evolutionary goal of loneliness is to ensure short-term survival. However, chronic loneliness may have a deteriorating effect on physical and mental health. Loneliness can result from actual social isolation and/or from an individual's perception of feeling lonely (see Cacioppo & Cacioppo, 2018b).

The experience of loneliness is significantly influenced by the social world (Cacioppo & Cacioppo, 2018b). However, the number of social contacts did not protect against loneliness. Human beings required contact with trusted significant others.

Belonging was the opposite of social exclusion and determined the context for loneliness. Having a family and engaging in group activities protected against loneliness in middle and older age (Cacioppo & Cacioppo, 2018b).

Lim et al. (2021) developed a dual continuum model of loneliness and belonging. According to the model, loneliness and belonging were distinct phenomena, however, they could coexist. Individuals were classified into four groups based on high or low levels of loneliness and belonging. The socially fulfilled group experienced low loneliness and high levels of belonging. The socially searching group experienced high levels of both belonging and loneliness. The socially distressed group experienced low levels of belonging and higher levels of loneliness. The socially indifferent group experienced low levels of both belonging and loneliness. Combining experiences of loneliness and belonging, the model posited that lonely individuals could have varying levels of belonging, ranging from high to low. Assessing loneliness in the contexts of belonging and nonbelonging enabled the researcher to better understand different types of loneliness and to identify tailored approaches to prevention and intervention.

I drew on the ETL and the dual continuum model to examine the experiences of loneliness in the context of belonging among female migrants with transnational family connections in Germany during the COVID-19 pandemic. The exploration of loneliness proceeded across three phenotypical dimensions: intimate loneliness and dyadic belongings, social or relational loneliness and belonging to smaller social groups, and collective loneliness and belonging to larger groups, communities, and nations.

## Review of Primary Writings Related to Key Constructs

### Transnational Families

In the literature, individuals voluntarily separated from their families are sometimes referred to as mobile (Bryceson & Vuorela, 2020). Gerber and Ravazzini (2021) coined the term *transmigrants* for individuals who maintain family, social, economic, and political connections across national borders. I used the term ITT to refer to individuals in transnational families who have nuclear family members across borders and who engage with these core processes at the emotional level. This definition allowed me to focus on a person and her psychological experiences and belongings, rather than on citizenship.

Though transnational families differ in the art of separation: involuntary, for example, forced migration or migration to countries with intolerant immigration laws, and voluntary separation, which is a decision to leave to gain a comparative advantage or privilege (voluntary), they are connected by the absence of common ground (Bryceson & Vuorela, 2020). Transnational families are flexible and dynamic, existing in multiple geolocations; with time, they undergo the deterritorialisation process (Appadurai, 1996). Without "places of origin"--common geographical locations where everyone meets for important family events and rituals, families become mostly "imagined communities" (Bryceson & Vuorela, 2020; Skrbiš, 2008).

A sense of familyhood keeps imagined communities together. Family negotiates roles, belonging, parenting, and care of elderly family members. Family unity is sustained through the practice of co-presence, virtually, through a proxy, in person, or in

imagination, emotional work, and transnational caregiving (material and practical remittances in the form of money or advice, direct assistance through return visits, coordination of care arrangements from a distance, arranged assistance through third parties at a care home (Baldassar, 2008, 2015; Baldassar et al., 2014; Bryceson, 2019; Merla et al., 2020). Various arrangements enable the maintenance of an embodied sense of familyhood and belonging by internalizing or imagining the immediate presence of physically absent family members (Baldassar, 2008).

### *Copresence*

One of the most important ways to maintain emotional ties and a sense of belonging to the family abroad is the experience of copresence (Skrbiš, 2008). Physical presence is valued higher than other forms of copresence (Baldassar, 2008). According to Skrbiš (2008), the experience of return visits and transnational family reunions provides possibilities for physical co-presence. Return visits enable first-generation migrants to remain connected and to review changes in family dynamics. Family reunions are proof of family cohesion and emotional re-emplacement: they help to maintain healthy family ties, particularly during important family events such as birthdays, weddings, illnesses, and death (Ryan et al., 2015; Skrbiš, 2008). According to Christensen (2009), physical visits create narratives about oneself and ancestry; thus, physical visits to the birth country of one's parents are essential for identity formation among second-generation migrants.

### ***Longing***

On the emotional level, transnational experience is filled with the pain of loss and absence of home and family, parents, children, grandparents, and grandchildren residing overseas (Baldassar, 2008; Skrbiš, 2008). Furthermore, according to Baldassar (2008), longing for people and places is a deep inner experience of missing someone or something, expressed on four levels: verbal, physical, behavioral, and through imagination. Longing for something supports and maintains transnational connections (Baldassar, 2008; Skrbiš, 2008). As with all emotional experiences, these emotions motivate ITTs to maintain transnational connections.

### ***Care Arrangements***

Transnational families rely on various forms of caregiving support, including exchanging money and goods, advice and practical help, emotional and moral support, and provision of accommodation (Baldassar et al., 2014). Family care can take place in different ways, such as visits of foreign-born grandparents to help with child-rearing (Thi Nguyen et al., 2023) or support from a distance using information and communication technology (Andruske & O'Connor, 2020). Caregiving can also involve engaging local personnel from a distance or delegating responsibilities to social workers and services (Merla et al., 2020).

### ***Belonging***

The concept of belonging is widely discussed in psychological literature. Humans have historically worked together to ensure the survival and prosperity of their groups. Social cooperation was necessary for individual and collective advancement (Ferguson,

1989). Belonging has been a central theme in humanistic approaches. Maslow in his motivation theory (1962), argued that belonging influenced both conscious and unconscious behavior processes, indicating the importance of fulfilling social relationships. Rogers (1995) emphasized the significance of acceptance and positive social regard in personality development. A sense of connectedness reduced social tensions and conflicts, while an unmet need to belong resulted in mental distress and forced individuals to seek gratification (Maslow, 1962).

In their seminal work Baumeister and Leary (1995) defined belongingness as a fundamental need to connect with other human beings. Consistent with the belongingness hypothesis, humans tend to form and maintain stable attachments with other humans and groups. These relationships may include frequent contact, long-term duration, caring, affective concern, and emotional stability. People required few meaningful close relationships and a larger number of less important interchangeable ones. An unfulfilled need to belong motivated them to maintain current group memberships or to seek new ones. A sense of belonging positively influenced health and well-being, whereas a lack of belonging resulted in emotional distress and illness (Baumeister & Leary, 1995).

Most humans share a need to belong and be connected to others. Bowlby in the attachment theory (1969) also emphasized the value of human connection, focusing on close dyadic relationships. However, Baumeister and Leary (1995) highlighted the need to belong to social groups and organizations at all levels of human functioning.

Most research on belonging had focused on its social aspect, but Allen and colleagues (2021) introduced an intrapersonal dimension to the construct. In their

comprehensive review of the concept, the researchers identified belonging as a dynamic feeling and experience that involved several intrapersonal qualities, including innate capacity (energy and potential), motivations, and one's perceptions about experiences of belonging, as well as the social opportunity to belong (Allen et al., 2021).

In line with previous conceptualizations, belonging represented a fundamental human need to establish meaningful connections with other individuals and groups (Baumeister & Leary, 1995; Maslow, 1962), the implementation of proactive measures and affiliative behaviors that help to initiate and sustain these rewarding interpersonal relationships over time (Allen et al., 2021; Baumeister, & Leary, 1995; Hagerty et al., 1992), and the subjective experience of fit with people, groups, and environments (Allen et al., 2021; Hagerty et al., 1992). Belonging occurred when individual capabilities were aligned with the degree of acceptance in the environment (Allen et al., 2021).

### **Degrees of Belongingness**

The sense of belongingness exists on a continuum, from feeling connected and integrated to feeling detached and isolated (Lim et al., 2020). One's sense of belonging may depend on the level of access to human relationships, groups, and institutions (Lähdesmäki et al., 2016), as well as the proximity and accessibility of places of belonging, including a sense of home (Sonn et al., 2017). Researchers have examined varying degrees of belonging to better understand this concept.

Thwarted belongingness involved the subjective perception of reduced connectedness and a sense of disconnection from meaningful relationships (Gratz et al., 2020; Umphrey et al., 2020). The term 'nonbelonging' applied to irregular immigrants

and minority groups, reflecting societal barriers to social integration and limited access to places, communities, and services (Lähdesmäki et al., 2016). Unbelonging was characterized by emotional alienation from a group, culture, or nation and the experience of varying degrees of social exclusion (Gao, 2021). Double unbelonging, which became salient during the COVID-19 Pandemic, represented a bilateral process whereby individuals faced social exclusion from home and host societies and a sense of uprootedness (Gao, 2021).

### ***Individual Experience of Belonging***

I examined individual experiences of belonging and loneliness through the lens of stress appraisal theory (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984). The theorists postulated that individual perception shaped appraisals. When a situation was perceived as relevant for one's health and well-being and individuals believed they could exert control over it, these appraisals triggered emotional responses affecting physiology, action tendencies, and coping activity (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984; Smith & Lazarus, 1993).

Evolutionarily, the need to belong was closely linked with the need for safety. According to Dean et al. (2019), a diminished sense of belonging heightened perceptions of harm and danger. In their experimental study involving 91 undergraduate students, the researchers found that threats to belonging increased the usage of words indicating physical vulnerability, made participants feel less safe, and raised expectations of physical harm (Dean et al., 2019). Unbelonging, nonbelonging, and thwarted belongingness increased social vulnerability.

Le Bourdon (2021) conducted an ethnological case study on children's experiences in an international summer village. The researcher explored how everyday practices foster a sense of belonging. Shared experiences affected children on a sensory level and enhanced a feeling of being part of a larger community. The sensorial experiences were found to be instrumental in establishing an emotional attachment between individuals and the community and developing feelings of familiarity. They contributed to mutual trust, thus forming affective foundations for the connection between individuals and communities (Le Bourdon, 2021).

Belonging generated sensory pathways of trust, connectedness, and safety (Le Bourdon, 2021), whereas the experiences of unbelonging evoked contrasted sensory experiences. Mutamba and colleagues (2022) conducted an exploratory investigation to understand self-harm among migrant youth. After interviewing 14 participants aged 16 to 32 years, researchers found that self-harm was an embodied expression of detachment between body, self, emotion, and environment. Furthermore, self-harm was perceived as a means to reduce feelings of unbelonging and to transition from apathy toward a sense of agency (Mutamba et al., 2022). Sensory reactions to unbelonging were noted in other studies; for example, Bendixsen (2020) described insomnia, somatic pain, and a feeling of being overwhelmed as a response to deprivation of human care among irregular immigrants in Norway.

On the emotional level, belonging and establishing new connections were known to create positive affect, evoking feelings of joy, pride, contentment, satisfaction, calm (Baumeister & Leary, 1995), self-compassion, and hope (Umphrey et al., 2020). In

contrast, isolation and not fitting in evoked self-related feelings of rage, grief, guilt, shame, helplessness, and numbness (Mutamba et al., 2022). Leary (2021) indicated that impaired belongingness elicited social emotions such as social anxiety, loneliness, hurt feelings, jealousy, and social sadness. In sum, given the high emotional salience of states of belongingness, fostering and supporting social embeddedness was an element of emotional regulation and mental balance.

Emotional reactions to different levels of belonging and unbelonging may motivate prosocial behaviors. For example, Brown & Sacco (2017) conducted a quantitative study recruiting 154 American workers (81 women, 73 men, 69% white) to determine whether the need to belong was related to a preference for certain faces. According to researchers, affiliative motives influenced the behavior: individuals with a higher need to belong actively chose extroverted female faces. Women's open and friendly expressions facilitated better opportunities for creating equitable connections (Brown & Sacco, 2017).

Liu et al. (2020) conducted an online study with 237 members of online health communities (OHC) in China (138 males, 99 females). The study investigated the relationship between a sense of belonging and prosocial behaviors, such as sharing information, demonstrating responsible attitudes, providing feedback, and advocating for others. The findings indicated that feelings of belonging to the online community encouraged participants to engage in supportive behaviors and value contribution, whereas poorer mental health reduced the strength of this relationship (Liu et al., 2020).

In their 2023 study, Tian and colleagues investigated the effects of COVID-19 on academic procrastination and negative emotions among 776 undergraduate students in China. The examination of a mediation model (Model 4) and a moderated mediation model (Model 7) revealed the moderating role of students' sense of school belonging. Researchers revealed a negative association between academic procrastination and school belonging, as well as a positive relationship between school belonging and life autonomy. Furthermore, the findings suggested that a lack of school belonging represented the initial stage in the pathway linking negative emotions, life autonomy, and academic procrastination, leading to procrastination and withdrawal behaviors (Tian et al., 2023).

### ***Impact of Belonging and Unbelonging on a Sense of Self***

The sense of belonging may contribute to a healthy self-concept. Positive interactions between an individual and the group, receiving supportive feedback, and showing mutual respect contribute to improved self-esteem among older adults (Jakubec et al., 2019), individuals recovering from mental illness (Lund et al., 2019), or students (Tian et al., 2023). According to Lund et al., participating in a mental recovery group provided participants with a new understanding of self. Through group involvement and active participation, research subjects were able to overcome feelings of isolation, experience validation, address existing biases, and develop self-confidence through meaningful and supportive social interaction (Lund et al., 2019).

An impaired sense of belongingness may result in a decrease in self-esteem. Muradoglu and colleagues (2022) examined the impact of gender and career stage on imposter feelings in academia. The researchers surveyed 4,000 academics from 9 U.S.

universities and found that a lower sense of belonging was associated with stronger feelings of inadequacy. The study also reported a more significant gender gap in imposter feelings in fields that emphasize brilliance: women, especially those from racial and ethnic minority groups and those at the beginning of their careers, were more likely to experience feelings of inadequacy. The findings suggested that a low sense of social belonging may contribute to feelings of inadequacy and impaired competency, with stronger effects observed among women, particularly women from minority groups (Muradoglu et al., 2022).

The lack of belonging may profoundly impact the self-worth of migrants. In an ethnographic study, Bendixsen (2020) explored the existential nature of displacement among illegal migrants in Norway. The researcher analyzed around 50 semistructured interviews with predominantly male participants aged 20 to 45. Illegal migration status constrained individuals' experience to mere daily survival. Deprived of access to social life and medical care, they felt like they did not belong in the world around them. This physical and social isolation resulted in various losses, such as loss of sleep (insomnia), loss of appetite, loss of energy and positive affect (depression), and a loss of cognitive clarity (Bendixsen, 2020). Unbelonging may evoke the feeling of being mentally damaged.

### ***Impact of Belonging and Unbelonging on Health and Well-Being***

Levels of belonging and inclusion/exclusion may affect health and well-being. Mattes and Lang (2021) introduced the concept of embodied belonging, which united the cognitive, emotional, and social dimensions of belonging. Having reviewed the impact of

non-belonging on the human body, researchers found that inadequate belonging at the societal level limited individuals' access to health services and social support systems, resulting in higher morbidity and mortality rates among comparable social groups and societies (Mattes & Lang, 2021).

Further research provided a detailed account of embodied suffering related to lower levels of belonging. Stress and uncertainty related to unbelonging were associated with impaired immune functioning, such as heightened inflammatory activity (Slavich, 2020). According to Bendixsen (2020), physical symptoms associated with nonbelonging included headaches, loss of appetite and sleep, stomachaches, and diffuse pain. In addition, nonbelonging was associated with cognitive impairments, such as difficulties in concentrating, and emotional symptoms, such as depression, despair, anger, impulse control problems, and negativity. Other consequences of diminished belonging included anxiety and paranoia (Brance et al., 2022), suicide risk (Umprey et al., 2020), self-harm, and loneliness (Bendixsen, 2020). The symptoms of disconnection could be found across different social groups, including individuals with migration background and adolescents in school contexts (Arslan, 2021).

There is an increasing acknowledgment of the positive impact of belonging on mental health. Stanley et al. (2019) reported higher levels of belonging and social support from supervisors, coworkers, and family/friends were associated with less severe PTSD symptoms among firefighters, highlighting the role of social embeddedness in stress coping. According to Dell et al. (2020), belonging contributed to developing a more resilient sense of self and supported the process of mental health recovery (Dell et al.,

2020). Belonging also protected against depression and, in some cases, against anxiety (Gopalan et al., 2022). A stronger sense of belonging was associated with better well-being and mental health among older adults (Jakubec et al., 2019) and across three generations of immigrants to Canada (Berry & Hou, 2021).

A sense of belongingness is a bilateral process. On the one hand, it is an individual perception of social embeddedness, acceptance, and inclusion. Conversely, belonging depends on active interaction with the environment and feedback about one's perceived fit. The varying degrees of belonging may create contexts for loneliness.

### ***Loneliness***

Loneliness is a psychological experience set in a particular context. It is an experience of perceived or fundamental disconnection and alienation between individuals, detachment from physical spaces, and personal time frame (Franklin & Tranter, 2021; McKenna-Plumley et al., 2023; Perlman & Peplau, 1981).

Despite the common perception of loneliness as a pervasive experience, it can also be positive. Positive or voluntary loneliness is the conscious withdrawal from social relationships and contacts with the goal of reflection, meditation, personal growth, communication with something more significant, or the development of personal projects, such as writing or painting (Gierveld et al., 2018).

Some types of loneliness cannot be clearly defined as negative or positive. Moustakas (2016) framed existential loneliness as the inner process of self-confrontation in times of uncertainty and personal crisis. A profound engagement with the authentic self contributed to developing a self-concept and understanding one's place in life and

environment. It included doubt, uncertainty, and isolation on the one hand and personal growth on the other hand (Gierveld et al., 2018; Moustakas, 2016; Perlman & Peplau, 1981).

### ***Loneliness and Health***

Cacioppo and Cacioppo (2012, 2018) pinpointed the link between the physiology of loneliness and health. Loneliness may mobilize the stress system, activating the HPA axis and impairing the sleep pattern. Short-term stress response could help individuals survive in unsafe environments and would disappear after reestablishing social connections. However, in the long term, these stress reactions would lead to serious health hazards (Cacioppo & Cacioppo, 2012, 2018). Thus, loneliness may cause higher morbidity and mortality.

Several studies confirmed various adverse health outcomes of loneliness. Loneliness was identified as a psychosocial vulnerability for the development of depression (Domènech-Abella et al., 2019; Ward et al., 2023), anxiety (Domènech-Abella et al., 2019; McDonald et al., 2022), psychotic symptoms (Gizdic et al., 2022; Le et al., 2019;), cardiovascular disease (Bu, Zaninotto, & Fancourt, 2020; Golaszewski et al., 2022), pain (Loeffler, & Steptoe, 2021), immunologic conditions (Eisenberger et al., 2017; Pourriyahi et al., 2021; Smith et al., 2020), and metabolic conditions (Pourriyahi et al., 2021). From this perspective, loneliness posed a threat to mental and physical health.

### ***Purpose of Loneliness***

From the evolutionary perspective, loneliness had a regulatory function. According to Cacioppo and Cacioppo (2018a), humans felt lonely when the evolutionary-

important desire to connect or maintain relevant relationships was compromised. Following Cacioppo's ETL (2012, 2018a), the absence of others historically posed a threat to survival. Such threatening states were associated with unconscious short-term self-preservation strategies such as hypervigilance to social threats and self-centeredness. These responses in turn led to increased negative expectations and avoidance of further contact (Goossens, 2018). At the same time, loneliness reduced individuals' sensitivity to reward networks activated by positive encounters (Vitale & Smith, 2022; Wilkialis et al., 2021). Loneliness functioned as a signal of impaired connections motivating individuals to restore them.

In sum, loneliness is a human experience of disconnection from people and environments (McKenna-Plumley et al., 2023; Franklin & Tranter, 2021). The goal of loneliness is to inform and motivate the individual to restore relationships essential to survival. The valence of loneliness is unequivocal: It stretches from a positive space for personal growth (Gierveld et al., 2018) to a pervasive unpleasant experience (Van Tilburg, 2021) that may have deteriorating results for health and well-being (Bu, Zaninotto, & Fancourt, 2020; Domènech-Abella et al., 2019; McDonald et al., 2022). One's experience of loneliness can vary depending on the environment.

### ***Dimensions of Loneliness***

Cacioppo & Cacioppo (2012, 2018a) identified three basic dimensions of loneliness that explain the degree of disconnection and isolation: (a) intimate, (b) relational, and (c) collective loneliness. Similarly, Russel et al. (1984) discussed emotional loneliness, or the lack of close relationships; social loneliness, or the lack of

social contacts; and existential loneliness in relationships, a painful realization of one's unique isolation and disconnection from other human beings. In the present work, I adopted the first conceptualization, as it allowed for more coherent integration of the belonging and relational relevance underlying these dimensions of loneliness.

The first dimension was intimate loneliness, stemming from the loss or absence of close dyadic relationships and encompassing romantic and familial attachments (Cacioppo et al., 2015a; Maes et al., 2019). This type of loneliness evoked emotional pain and a longing for an intimate connection. It was grounded in early child-caregiver attachments and was associated with heightened sensitivity to intimate isolation (Cacioppo et al., 2015a; Maes et al., 2019).

Family connectedness may influence the experience of loneliness. Albert (2021) studied perceived loneliness among first-generation Portuguese immigrants in Luxemburg. Results showed that, while intergenerational ties within families were a protective factor and even compensated for feelings of disconnection from society, intergenerational conflict among migrant families was the strongest predictor of participants' perceived loneliness (Albert, 2021).

Physical separation may intensify feelings of loneliness in a transnational context. Carella et al. (2022) analyzed loneliness and belonging as components of subjective well-being among transnational migrant families in Italy. Researchers ran a logistic regression analysis to analyze a sample of 6019 married individuals; the data was collected in an ISTAT survey of households from 2011-2012. Transnational individuals with a spouse/a child living abroad were likelier to report higher levels of loneliness (Carella et al., 2022).

The second dimension in Cacioppo & Cacioppo's (2012; 2018a) ETL was relational disconnection, known as social loneliness. Evolutionarily, humans had to learn to work together and share responsibilities to survive. Social or relational loneliness referred to the number and quality of social connections with people and groups who share specific characteristics or commonalities, such as larger family, friends, classroom peers, co-ethnic peers, and work colleagues (Cacioppo et al., 2015a; Maes et al., 2019; McKenna-Plumley et al., 2023). The absence of close social contact amplified the sensitivity to disconnection, and activated regulatory process aimed at restoring and maintaining social bonds (Cacioppo et al., 2015a).

Such relationships were essential for migrants. Connections to trusted people and groups created a sense of closeness and protected from loneliness (Ten Kate et al., 2020). Having a job, speaking the language, and spending extended time in the country of residence contributed to greater social connectedness and reduced the risk of social loneliness among migrants (Carella et al., 2022).

Collective loneliness represented the third phenotype. According to Cacioppo & Cacioppo (2012, 2018a), collective loneliness was associated with the absence or insufficiency of meaningful social connections with similar others in a larger group, such as a community, workspace, or nation. Collective loneliness motivated prosocial behavior and cooperation based on group membership rather than kin work.

Migration is a source of collective loneliness. Migration and transnational separations may lead to a loss of cultural connectedness (De Witte & Van Regenmortel, 2022), cultural identity conflict, increased perception of not fitting in, and acculturative

stress (Albert, 2021). At the same time, forming cultural ties with the host country and engaging in social life fostered a sense of belonging and feelings of inclusion in a larger social whole (Albert, 2021; McKenna et al., 2023). Individuals who perceived themselves as valuable members of the group were more likely to conform to group norms and engage with others (Cacioppo & Cacioppo, 2012). Though migration often results in disconnection, fostering belonging may lead to finding a new home.

### ***Experience of Loneliness***

By affecting neural information processing, the state of loneliness could alter the interpretation of social cues: the brain of lonely individuals showed heightened activation in response to negative and nonsocial stimuli, directing attention to adverse cues, such as rejection and hostile intent attributions (Spithoven et al., 2017), and increased the state of hypervigilance and autogestion (Meng et al., 2020). Furthermore, lonely individuals showed impaired trust-related brain activity and connectivity, as well as reduced capacity for social trust (Lieberz et al., 2021). Altered information processing increased negative self-appraisals: lonely people perceived themselves as rejected and unworthy (Ten Kate et al., 2020) and had lower levels of self-efficacy (Spithoven et al., 2017).

Loneliness manifested physically through HPA axis activation, such as impaired sleep, increased sensitivity to physical pain, and feelings of emptiness (Cacioppo et al., 2015b; Gierveld et al., 2018). Emotionally, it was associated with stronger emotions such as hostility, anger, fear, and guilt or diffuse feelings of anxiety, boredom, emptiness, depression, and overall dissatisfaction (Gierveld et al., 2018; McKenna-Plumley et al.,

2023; Tsong et al., 2021). Loneliness affected body and mind by triggering a stress response and emotional distress.

As a product of both genetic predisposition and social environment, loneliness actively shapes attention, influences cognition, and motivates behavior. Lonely individuals are more likely to engage in preventive and avoidant behaviors, failing to pursue promotion-oriented goals, approach tendencies, and positive social pictures (Cacioppo & Cacioppo, 2018a). Lonely individuals are trapped in a cycle of suffering and avoiding new, potentially painful contacts.

Loneliness may affect everyone and anyone. Goossens (2018) advocated applying the ETL (Cacioppo & Cacioppo, 2012, 2018a) to the study of loneliness among adolescents, noting that loneliness was also a product of individuals' perceptions of their relationships, genetic makeup, and experiences in earlier developmental stages. The experience of loneliness varied by age: adolescents were more likely to feel lonely due to the lack of intimate friendships and peer relationships, whereas older adults were more prone to social and collective loneliness (Goossens, 2018).

### **Application of the Theoretical and Conceptual Frameworks**

Schmidt and colleagues (2010) proposed an integrative framework to study emotional states combining Smith and Lazarus' (1993) theory of emotional appraisals and Gross's (1998) model of emotion regulation. Having detected the discrepancies between the perceived and desired social connections and the level of social integration, the individuals evaluated their significance for their safety and well-being (primary appraisal), control over the situation and coping potential. Schmidt and colleagues

revealed three types of emotional responses and three coping strategies. Individuals who perceived themselves as responsible for the situation and possessed enough coping resources, exhibited positive emotional responses and were motivated to solve the problem. Conversely, those who felt accountable but lacked adequate coping resources experienced anxiety, fear, preoccupied and hypervigilant behaviors. When individuals experienced little control and minimal coping potential, they felt frustration, powerlessness and used suppressive and avoidant emotion regulation strategies to distance themselves from problem resolution (Schmidt et al., 2010).

Drawing on Lazarus and Folkman's stress appraisal theory (1984), and in line with Lin et al. (2023) it was assumed that feelings of loneliness involved the evaluation of a general sense of disconnection, level of belonging, number or quality of contacts, and social isolation in terms of their potential threat to one's health and well-being. Depending on the controllability of the situation, individuals became either fearful, focused on loneliness, and preoccupied with the problem, or passive, withdrawn, and distant. Following the ETL and a dual continuum model as a conceptual framework for this study, the experience of loneliness included the feelings, physiology, cognitions, and adaptive behaviors at three ecological levels of belonging: close dyadic relationships, smaller social groups, and more extensive social relations with others. This study investigated the experience of loneliness and the associated coping behaviors, including self-focused attention, preoccupation with the problem, avoidance of social encounters or, conversely, seeking help, support, and companionship of others, and engaging in community work, and volunteering.

## **Literature Review Related to Loneliness and Belonging in Transnational Context During the COVID-19 Pandemic**

Transnational individuals maintain family connections and ancestry that span national borders, with some family members remaining in the country of origin while others have migrated. To fulfill a universal need to belong, ITTs must maintain connections with their countries of origin and establish new ones. Further review highlights the process of forming, replacing, and sustaining meaningful connections that foster a sense of belonging.

### **Belonging in Transnational Context**

Previous research has largely focused on belonging to a single country or culture, examining, for example, locals or migrants within a single national context, in social situations such as school, workplace, or family. In contrast, limited attention was given to belongings in a transnational context that spans multiple countries or cultural contexts. According to Ariely (2020), the sense of national belonging was determined by national and ethnic ancestry, place of birth, time and terms of residence in the country, language proficiency, citizenship, and compliance with laws and regulations. Such relationships formed within national boundaries contributed to the development of a national sense of belonging (Ariely, 2020).

Migrants may lack some of the characteristics of a national sense of belonging outlined above. Evidence suggested that in the absence of natural social embeddedness, close interpersonal connections, including family, community, and religious group involvement, served a protective role for mental health and diminished feelings of

loneliness (Albert, 2021). Albert conducted a study to identify protective and risk factors for loneliness in middle and older age among 131 first-generation immigrants (51.9% female) residing in Luxembourg for an average of 32 years and with adult children. According to the researcher, intergenerational belonging, in the form of family cohesion, a sense of mutual support, absence of open family conflicts and arguments, and value consensus between migrants and their adult children, played a vital role in protecting against loneliness; furthermore, intergenerational belonging encouraged cultural and social encounters with the receiving society (Albert, 2021).

Migration affected contexts of belonging. Mosanya and Kwiatkowska (2021) investigated the cultural adjustment and well-being of women who grew up in a transnational context. Hierarchical regression analyses with data from 122 female undergraduate students at a British overseas university campus in Dubai revealed that social inclusiveness predicted life satisfaction and bicultural identity integration. Furthermore, adult third-culture kids' women tended to choose multiple belongings to smaller groups with personal relationships over belonging to broader groups with unknown members. Dyadic connections, such as friends and close family members, as well as relationships with extended family and smaller organizations, were found to predict the life satisfaction of adult TCK women in the absence of strong national affiliations or affiliations with larger groups (Mosanya & Kwiatkowska, 2021).

In contemporary society, it is increasingly common for individuals to identify with multiple cultures (Van De Vivier, 2015). Berry and Hou (2019) analyzed data from the 2013 general social survey conducted by statistics Canada to explain the relationships

between acculturation strategies and well-being through the lens of belonging among 10627 immigrants and Canadian-born individuals with at least one immigrant parent. The researchers used three dimensions of belonging: belonging to the receiving culture, belonging to the home culture, and religious belonging, to understand whether belonging to multiple groups led to better life satisfaction and mental health. Being part of multiple communities, including the host country and ethnic and religious groups, was associated with higher life satisfaction and mental health. According to Berry and Hou, identifying with the receiving country and belonging to a religious and ethnic group in the country of residence enhanced migrant well-being (Berry & Hou, 2019). Having multiple belongings is critical to understanding belonging in a transnational context.

The availability of physical spaces for meeting and fostering a sense of belonging was identified as another facilitator of social connectedness. Doroud et al. (2018) conducted a meta-ethnographic study to understand the role of place in mental health recovery. Synthesized findings from twelve qualitative research papers revealed key qualities that supported emotional and mental balance. The physical place was found to serve as a space for shared activities, contact with others, personal growth, and a sense of belonging, which emerged as a central mechanism supporting recovery among people with mental diagnoses (Doroud et al., 2018). Similarly, Jakubec and colleagues (2019) stressed the importance of physical space in facilitating mutual activities, interaction, and communication among older adults in Canada.

Sonn and colleagues (2017) reported that immigrants in Australia who had lost or left their homes in South Africa invested in creating new physical spaces for social

interaction, which supported identity adjustment and compensated for the loss of a homeland. Physical places, essential to establishing new belongings, served as protection against a state of in-betweenness and helped to reduce emotional suffering. Additionally, Sonn and colleagues (2017) demonstrated that ethnically distinct descendants from South Africa attributed different meanings to belonging, identity, and finding a new home, highlighting the culturally situated nature of belonging.

Although a sense of belonging was shaped by birthplace and enculturation, migrants made sustained efforts to develop attachments to their host countries. These forms of belonging were supported by varying degrees of cultural engagement with the host country (Albert, 2021; Barker, 2021), language proficiency, and a global mindset, as well as the maintenance of family ties, participation in small groups, and access to community spaces (Mosanya & Kwiatkowska, 2021). Overall, migrants' sense of belonging was fostered through cultural engagement with the host society, linguistic competence, social participation, and access to supportive community spaces.

It was crucial to understand how individuals perceived their adequacy and sense of belonging within a given environment. Perceptions of fit and social inclusion were shaped by both individual capabilities and the capacity of society to accommodate diversity. A study by Ward and colleagues (2020) used structural equation modeling to examine the relationship between perceived multicultural norms and the well-being of Korean migrants in New Zealand. The research revealed that multicultural policies directly supported well-being and indirectly enhanced it through strengthening a sense of belonging. At the same time, contrary to expectations, mere multicultural contact did not

have a meaningful impact on the sense of belonging and subjective well-being.

Furthermore, an individual perception of belonging was more important for well-being than a quantity of social contacts in the community (Ward et al., 2020).

Sobtian (2022) explored the experiences of refugee schoolchildren in Northeast of England. The researcher used interviews and an interpretive phenomenological analysis to understand the views on school belongings. When students felt understood and accepted, had positive interactions with peers, and their cultural and ethnic identity was respected, they developed a sense of belonging within a school or group, accompanied by greater feelings of safety. Consequently, group feedback in the form of acceptance or exclusion emerged as a critical component of belonging (Sobtian, 2022).

Another finding reported by Sobtian (2022) indicated that the sense of agency—defined as the degree to which an individual can exert control over both their environment and themselves—constituted a critical component of belonging. Refugees and migrants reported a general lack of control over their environments and the future. To avoid confusion, understanding local rules, and attaining proficiency in the language, were considered essential. Participation in groups and activities enhanced an individual's sense of agency (Sobtian, 2022). In sum, a sense of belonging required both the individual motivation and the opportunity to participate actively in community interactions.

Meaningful connections and group engagements contribute to a sense of fit. Donnalaja and McAvay (2022) used the trajectories and origins survey to understand the sense of national belonging and intention to naturalize in France. The analysis of surveys

conducted in 2008-2009 with 21,000 first-generation adult immigrants revealed that only one-third of respondents reported a complete sense of belonging in France. According to the researchers, a complete sense of belonging included feeling at home, self-identification as French, and recognition of one's French identity by others. Nearly 30% of migrants reported experiencing a lack of social integration and not fitting in. The other 30% approached complete belonging, however, despite feeling at home, they were either not perceived as French by others or did not identify as French (Donnalaja & McAvay, 2022).

The migratory trajectory may result in scattered feelings of belonging. In the exploratory study of unbelonging among second-generation Middle Eastern immigrants in Europe, Simonsen (2018) identified further ambivalent belonging trajectories: participants showed strong identification and attachment to the geographical area and the state of Denmark, its norms and society, while resisting identifying themselves as Danish (Simonsen, 2018).

The migratory experience could engender a sense of being caught between two worlds, as physical relocation from the country of origin to a host country did not inherently ensure acculturation or successful adaptation. As highlighted by Sonn and colleagues (2017), even after 10 years in Australia South African immigrants continued to experience ambivalence —oscillating between belonging and non-belonging— and maintained dual often conflicted cultural identities. Attachment to the culture of origin was negatively correlated with a growing sense of belonging to the receiving country (Sonn et al., 2017).

Belonging is a universal need, and without feedback regarding fit and acceptance, individuals persist in seeking for alternative ways to belong to the receiving society. According to Donnalaja and McAvay (2022), migrants with conflicted identities and a conflicted sense of belonging were found to be the first to pursue citizenship, followed by the group of those with a strong sense of belonging, with those gradually approaching a sense of belonging being at the end. The study by Barros and Albert (2020a) showed similar results. These findings highlighted that belonging was a reciprocal process requiring both migrants' efforts to integrate and the host community to recognize this effort, with the citizenship as a validating mechanism of social belongingness.

### ***Experience of Belonging***

First- and second-generation migrants differ in their degrees of belongingness and emotional attachments towards their countries of origin and current residence. In a mixed-methods study, Barros and Albert (2020a) examined immigration, identity, and belonging across different cultural frames among two generations of Portuguese immigrants in Luxembourg. The researchers interviewed 209 Portuguese parents and their adult children in Luxembourg. According to researchers, the first generation of Portuguese migrants in Luxembourg felt culturally and emotionally attached to their country of origin and were proud of their ancestry. Their feeling about the receiving country were normal to neutral (Barros & Albert, 2020a).

While the first generations of migrants were more attached to their country of birth, adult children born in Luxembourg showed a detached sense of belonging to their parents' country of origin (Barros & Albert, 2020a). They identified Luxembourg as their

home. In contrast, adult children born in Portugal and raised in Luxembourg had ambivalent belonging and felt they could achieve full integration in Luxembourg only through citizenship (Barros & Albert, 2020a).

Other studies have shown that the experience of immigration may reduce a sense of connectedness to the country of origin. Sonn and colleagues (2017) explored the migration experiences of black and white South African residents in Australia; both groups considered immigration as a betrayal: white South Africans felt disloyal to their home country, and black South Africans felt that their land abandoned them. The qualitative nature of the study enabled researchers to identify this fine distinction associated with ethnical and cultural background of research participants (Sonn et al., 2017).

### **Belonging in Transnational Context During the COVID-19 Pandemic**

The initial response of health authorities to the COVID-19 pandemic aimed to limit the spread of the virus and reduce mortality. Most measures focused on keeping local populations safe within national boundaries, communities, and apartments. However, these protective measures generated unintended social consequences, including heightened isolation, reduction and restructuring of social networks and social interaction, and affecting relationships (Long et al., 2022).

The initial acute phase of the pandemic increased social support and connection within local communities. According to Saiz, González-Sanguino, et al. (2021), the COVID-19 outbreak and subsequent stay-at-home regulations in Spain affected individuals' sense of belonging to local communities and to the country. The sense of

belonging increased significantly during quarantine, supported by weekly appearances by the president of the government, multiple television announcements providing information on measures to combat the virus, calls for unity, and spontaneous community support networks (Saiz, González-Sanguino, et al., 2021). Increased social support, solidarity, and a sense of "we-ness" predicted greater belonging among immigrant groups (Lewis et al., 2022; Spagnuolo, 2022). Helping others during the first stage of the outbreak increased agency and participation in smaller groups of people, including migrants (Spagnuolo, 2022).

The COVID-19 pandemic was globally, reaching different countries at a different pace. Spagnuolo (2022) conducted a study to examine the early Pandemic's impact on thirty Italian-born migrants in Wales. Consistent with observations in local communities in Spain (Saiz, González-Sanguino, et al., 2021), the sense of community belonging among Italians in Wales declined dramatically when the first lockdown measures were lifted (Spagnuolo, 2022). Another finding of Spagnuolo was that the differences in timing of the Italian and the U.K. governments' responses to the pandemic intensified feelings of otherness, distress, disappointment, non-belonging, and alienation among Italian immigrants toward the host society in Wales (Spagnuolo, 2022). As a result of the travel ban, belonging to one's country of origin was affected and could not be fully replaced by online communication with friends and family.

The source of information and guidance was a critical factor affecting migrants' sense of belonging during the COVID-19 pandemic. For example, Italian migrants' perceptions of inclusion in the host society were influenced by whether such information

and practices were provided by local authorities or by Italian sources (Spagnuolo, 2022). Conflicting norms of protection from Coronavirus, including mask-wearing policies, contradictory temporal estimations of virus spread, and sudden policy reversals, increased the sense of alienation from host societies, the feelings of otherness, distress, and disappointment, and the non-belonging of migrants from different continents (Gao, 2021; Spagnuolo, 2022).

The political confrontation between the country of origin and the host country imposed a double burden of social alienation on Chinese immigrants during the COVID-19 crisis (Gao, 2021). It injured the concept of self and its embeddedness in the environment. Discouragement to return to China, hostility and restrictions upon return, and accusations of contaminating China with the virus from abroad shattered the feeling of belonging to their homeland and resulted in feelings of abandonment, mental alienation, and psychological distress (Gao, 2021).

The acute threat of the virus led to a rethinking of social connections and influences in- and outgroup belonging. Wamsler et al. (2022) revealed the activation of an ethnic conception of belonging grounded in national and ethnic ancestry and shared religious backgrounds across six European countries, including Germany, France, and Italy. Furthermore, the pandemic-related threat activated anger, leading to polarization, prejudice to outgroups, and higher aggression potential. Elevated threat perception and heightened anger were obstacles to social inclusion contributing to increase in discrimination (Wamsler et al., 2022).

In some cases, social connectedness functioned as a protective factor that mitigated the effects of discrimination. Brance and colleagues (2022) studied the role of social connectedness in immigrant mental health during the COVID-19 crisis. Researchers used convenience sampling to study the social connectedness of 104 adult immigrants in Greece. Research indicated that the pandemic did not lead to an increase in discrimination in this sample; however, perceived discrimination corresponded with lower feelings of belonging, while social connectedness served to buffer its negative impact on mental health (Brance et al., 2022).

Chinese and East Asians faced stigma and discrimination associated with the virus's origin. Gao (2021) conducted an ethnographic study to understand Chinese immigrants' experience in and outside mainland China during the COVID-19 Pandemic. According to Gao, emotional responses to discrimination were also outrage, fear, and shame; they increased feelings of inadequacy, embarrassment, diminished self-efficacy, and self-esteem, resulting in avoidant behaviors of Chinese immigrants abroad (Gao, 2021). These findings were supported by Camellia and Fattah (2020), who described the increased insecurity of Bangladeshi immigrants facing discrimination and demands to return to their home country in Australia.

Social distancing measures deprived migrants of their close connections, such as family and friends, in the host country. According to John et al. (2021), who explored the experiences of pregnancy and childbirth among ethnic minority women in the Scottish urban areas of the U.K., protective measures led to higher levels of isolation from friends

and family, other mothers in similar positions, community, and medical treatment facilities. The outcomes were fear, isolation, and a lack of autonomy (John et al., 2021).

In a collaborative autoethnographic study of immigrants' experiences in New Zealand, Lewis et al. (2022) reported that reduced transnational and local contacts associated with the lockdown led to feelings of dislocation and disruption. The inability to keep contact with both worlds destabilized the participants' sense of belonging to both home and host countries and increased psychological distress, anxiety, and loneliness in individuals with transnational biographies (Lewis et al., 2022).

Other migrants faced travel restrictions, increasing their feelings of disconnection from their homeland and family (Lewis et al., 2022; Spagnuolo, 2022). Different levels of medical support in the home and host countries, and bans on leaving the country of residence, increased uncertainty and concern for the family (Camellia & Fattah, 2020). At the same time, the rise of digital communication, access to information from the home country, and cultural practices, such as eating, cooking, home recipes, and parcels from home, facilitated a virtual connection to home and a sense of co-presence (Spagnuolo, 2022).

COVID-19 has taken a toll on transnational individuals. Migrants faced double unbelonging, a feeling of disconnection and alienation to home and host countries; it affected identity and self-consciousness and resulted in feelings of shame, depression, social withdrawal, and loss of agency (Gao, 2021), and an increase of suicidal ideation (Gratz et al., 2020). Loss of connection to home increased pain, anxiety, fear, and helplessness (Lewis et al., 2022; Spagnuolo, 2022).

The COVID-19 Pandemic strengthened geographical and national borders, creating new contexts and forcing people to rethink the usual standards of belonging and communication. Lewis et al. (2022) proposed that COVID-19-related measures affected acculturation passways and adaptation processes. Gao (2021) underlined that disrupted belongings led to identity split and mental health problems. The literature review showed how the pandemic-related protective measures affected access to communities and increased negative feedback on the fit between migrants and receiving societies and migrants and their home countries, resulting in distress, alienation, and separation. Following Saiz, Ausín, et al. (2021), understanding the experiences of belonging may foster new strategies of self-regulation and steps to increase social connectedness to increase resilience and maintain well-being in adverse situations. This knowledge may help to close the gaps between research and practice in the context of belonging (Allen et al., 2021).

There were limitations to qualitative studies: small qualitative studies were not representative of entire populations and could not be generalized to all contexts. Simultaneously, the novel coronavirus pandemic introduced a unique constellation of stressors and barriers to belonging, highlighting the need for an in-depth review. In contrast, quantitative studies that used standardized measures to assess belonging during COVID-19 and in some cases missed factors relevant to sub-populations with varying vulnerabilities and social context (see Mattes & Lang, 2021). This is supported by Allen et al. (2021), who reported that the existing measures to assess individual belongings did not account for contextual factors or feedback mechanisms.

### **Loneliness Among Individuals with Transnational Ties**

In line with the genetic or evolutionary perspective on loneliness (Cacioppo & Cacioppo, 2012, 2018a), humans were genetically predisposed to form attachments to survive, and the psychological and physical pain associated with disconnection functioned as a motivational signal that prompted them to repair broken bonds and reestablish social contact. However, the transnational nature of relationships altered how individuals maintained and restored broken connections across all ecological levels of belonging. Given that belonging constituted the context for mental health, well-being, and recovery from mental illness, the goal of this study was to explore experiences of loneliness across different belonging contexts.

Transnational families are affected by disconnection and loneliness. Carella et al. (2022) analyzed loneliness and belonging as components of subjective well-being among transnational migrant families before the COVID-19 Pandemic in Italy. The research was based on data from the ISTAT survey of 9,553 households conducted in 2011-2012, and included a sample of 6,019 married couples. Married immigrants whose partners resided abroad were more likely to show lower levels of life satisfaction; while ITTs with a spouse or a child living abroad were more likely to report higher levels of loneliness. Migration-specific factors, including length of residence in the host country, migratory trajectory, and social capital, were found to alleviate feelings of loneliness; moreover, employment status and language proficiency further contributed to reducing these feelings. Although females reported lower overall life satisfaction, they demonstrated lower levels of loneliness than males. The information was collected before the

pandemic, and it remained unclear how such separation influenced the transnational families during the COVID-19 pandemic. These results may challenge previously described findings about the increased gender gap and females experiencing more adverse effects (Carella et al., 2022).

Ten Kate et al. (2020) examined loneliness experiences among older first-generation migrants in the Netherlands. Researchers used data from statistics Netherlands (N = 7,920) with first-generation migrants and Dutch natives aged 40. Despite similar contact frequency, first-generation migrants experienced more social and emotional loneliness. Consistent with researchers' findings satisfaction with social contacts—rather than their frequency—influenced perceived loneliness among the migrants (Ten Kate et al., 2020).

Cultural expectations about the norms of social connectedness explained the difference in perception of loneliness among migrants of different ethnic backgrounds. De Witte and Van Regenmortel (2022) used the data of the survey of health, ageing, and retirement in Europe to investigate the relationship between loneliness and migration among older adults in Belgium. The study compared first-, second-generation immigrants and natives. The results showed that both first- and second-generation immigrants experienced higher levels of loneliness than the natives; the difference between first and second-generation immigrants was insignificant. The length of residence of first-generation immigrants in Belgium was not significantly related to loneliness. The prevalence of loneliness depended on the region of origin and was lowest among northern Europeans, followed by natives, Eastern Europeans, Western Europeans, people from

outside Europe, and Southern Europeans. Researchers attributed these differences to (a) cultural expectations regarding family cohesion and (b) participants' perceived health status (De Witte & Van Regenmortel, 2022).

Tsong et al. (2021) explored experiences of growing up in transnational families among 15 Asian American young adults who moved to and lived in the U.S. as children, either without their parents (i.e., parachute kids) or primarily with only one parent (i.e., satellite kids or kids with astronaut parents). According to researchers, migration and uprootedness affected cultural identity formation, development of personal strengths, family and interpersonal relationships. The increased distress due to physical distance, and separation from family and culture continued to be sources of loneliness and reduced well-being throughout adulthood (Tsong et al., 2021).

As shown above, contexts were essential in determining how people cope with stressors. In stressful situations, people who rely heavily on interpersonal peer support were more prone to intimate and relational loneliness (McDonald et al., 2022). Lacking dyadic relationships, such as being separated or divorced (Groarke et al., 2020), living alone (Bu et al., 2020), not having a relationship as a young person (Maes et al., 2019), being a woman and not having intimate dyadic relationships, both friendly and romantic (Wickens et al., 2021) were also known to increase loneliness. In a transnational context, physical family separation, reduced chances for co-presence, and limited access to interpersonal belonging resulted in greater intimate and relational loneliness (see (Cacioppo & Cacioppo, 2012, 2018a).

## **Loneliness During the COVID-19 Pandemic**

Loneliness was one of the mental health issues during the COVID-19 pandemic worldwide. Li and Wang (2020) investigated the prevalence of loneliness among the U.K. population during the first three months of the COVID pandemic. Out of 15,530 participants in the nationally representative Survey, 35.86% sometimes or often felt lonely. Groarke et al. (2020) reported comparable findings, indicating that nearly one-third of the population experienced some degree of, and individuals infected with coronavirus experiencing even higher levels of loneliness. Collectively, these findings suggested that the observed effects were related to protective measures.

Multiple studies indicated a link between loneliness and age. For instance, Groarke et al. (2020), in their investigation of the prevalence and predictors of loneliness in the United Kingdom, identified that younger age was associated with higher susceptibility to loneliness. According to Wickens et al. (2021) the relationship between loneliness and age was U-shaped: younger (18–29 years) and older women (over 60) were more vulnerable for loneliness, independent of marital status, household income, education, living alone, and employment status. Age also significantly influenced the association between loneliness and anxiety (McDonald et al., 2022).

Gender was another predictor of loneliness. In a pre-pandemic meta-analytic review researchers identified a modest gender difference in loneliness across the life span, with males reporting higher levels of loneliness from adolescence through mid-adulthood, after which the difference disappeared (Maes et al., 2019). Pandemic research

revealed the opposite trend (Lepinteur et al., 2021; Wickens et al., 2021). These findings indicated contextual vulnerability to loneliness.

Wickens et al. (2021) examined the relationships between age, gender, and loneliness during the coronavirus pandemic and social distancing measures related to it. English-speaking Canadian adults aged 18 and older filled in an online questionnaire. Results from multivariable logistic regression analyses indicated that women were at a higher risk of experiencing loneliness than men, after controlling for age (Wickens et al.). The findings were consistent with other studies identifying female gender as a vulnerability factor (Conversano, C., Di Giuseppe et al., 2020; Li & Wang, 2020).

Similarly, Lepinteur et al. (2022) examined the relationships among gender, loneliness, and well-being in a German sample. They found that the pandemic more than doubled the gender gap in loneliness, with overall loneliness scores increasing by 40% between 2017 and 2020. While both men and women experienced increases, men's scores rose by approximately 2 points, whereas women's scores increased by nearly 2.5 points. Consistent with these findings, Oreffice and Quintana-Domeque (2021) reported a pronounced gender gap in loneliness and declining mental health during the first three months following the initial U.K. lockdown in March 2020.

In a study of loneliness and depression among women, Idzik et al. (2021) examined the prevalence of loneliness and other mental health symptoms in Poland during the COVID-19 Pandemic. According to researchers, two out of three women experienced loneliness, and twenty percent experienced relatively high levels of

loneliness, with women of younger age scoring the highest (Idzik et al., 2021). This finding further heightened the vulnerability of younger women.

Folkman et al. (1987) suggested that coping responses to stressful situations varied by gender and age. This pattern was further supported by McDonald et al. (2022), who found that younger adults favored peer support while older adults employed intrapersonal, emotion-focused strategies. Variations in emotional regulation could help account for observed gender differences: as observed by Wickens et al., (2021) women were more likely to use emotional co-regulation while talking to a friend or hugging. Consequently, the implementation of hygiene and protective measures limited women's opportunities for private, intimate co-regulation, thereby increasing chronic stress (Wickens et al., 2021). The reduction in social interactions and interpersonal encounters disproportionately affected women compared to men.

Furthermore, the increased burden of household responsibilities, childcare, and care for older adults altered lifestyles and resulted in a marked increase in loneliness and general stress symptoms among women (Lepinteur et al., 2022; Oreffice & Quintana-Domeque, 2021). Despite being constantly in the presence of others, inadequate opportunities for personal space may have led women to experience social loneliness and a diminished sense of their valued social identities (Gallagher, 2014).

Loneliness stemmed from a complex interplay of demographic, socioeconomic, and psychological factors. In addition to younger age and gender, other predictors included clinical depression, poor emotion regulation, poor sleep quality, separation or divorce, absence of a relationship, and lack of a steady income or full-time employment

(Groarke et al., 2020; Maes et al., 2019). Migrants were more likely to suffer from collective loneliness during the COVID-19 Pandemic. According to Bu, Steptoe and Fancourt (2020), a lack of connection to work, university, community, or culture increased the risk of loneliness. Restrictive measures, discrimination (Damle et al., 2022), lay-offs (Nardon et al., 2022), reduced access to social environments, such as community and health centers, limited participation of migrant women in meaningful belonging contexts, and increased feelings of loneliness. At the same time, higher levels of social support, being married/cohabiting, and living with more adults in the household were protective factors (Groarke et al., 2020; Maes et al., 2019).

In line with the attachment theory, humans are genetically predisposed to form attachments to survive (Bowlby, 1969). Cacioppo et al. (2015) argued that loneliness was an adaptive experience of distress in response to perceived social disconnection. The pain of disconnection, both physical and psychological, motivated humans to restore broken bonds and reestablish social contacts (Cacioppo, & Cacioppo, 2012, 2018a). Loneliness and disconnection resulting from pandemic-associated protective measures were a hurtful emotional experience for almost one-third of the population in the U.K. (Li & Wang, 2020). Similar findings were reported in a German sample (Lepinteur et al., 2022). The transnational nature of relationships altered how individuals maintained and restored broken connections across all ecological levels of belonging. Given that belonging served as a protective factor against loneliness (Albert, 2021) and was critical for mental health, well-being, and recovery from mental illness (Doroud et al., 2018; Mancini et al., 2022),

the goal of this study was to explore experiences of loneliness across different belonging contexts.

The research question “How do female migrants with transnational family ties experience loneliness and belonging during the COVID-19 Pandemic in Germany?” was explored using Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA). According to Smith and Osborne (2008), the IPA method was particularly well-suited for exploring the subjective meanings of events and states experienced by the study participants. The study adopted the position of Husserl to examine human experience in detail and identify the essential qualities of the experience in the given context (Smith et al., 2009). IPA is a proven approach in the studies of loneliness. Motta and Larkin (2023) employed an IPA approach to examine the phenomenon and meaning of loneliness among six religious women living near a convent in central England. IPA allowed the researchers to understand the phenomenon from an intraindividual perspective. Similarly, Ho and colleagues (2022) used phenomenology and thematic analysis to explore the lived experiences of loneliness among 15 older adults living in seven residential care homes; researchers were able to understand intrapsychic processes, such as self-perception, collapse, and dissolution of self due to pandemic-related measures, and the strategies of coping with loneliness employed by the participants during the pandemic (Ho et al., 2022).

### **Summary and Conclusions**

Loneliness will remain a mental health issue. According to an age U.K. survey (2018), loneliness rates were expected to rise by almost 50% by 2026 (Age U.K., 2018).

Loneliness was associated with premature mortality and several psychiatric symptoms and disorders, such as anxiety, depression, and psychotic conditions (Cacioppo et al., 2015a; Golaszewski et al., 2022; McDonald et al., 2022). According to the dual continuum model of loneliness and belonging (Lim et al., 2021), belonging coexisted with loneliness, creating the context for this experience. In this research, loneliness was reviewed through various belonging contexts: intimate relationships, family, friendships, community, culture, and nation.

A sense of belonging is grounded in an individual perception of fit, shaped by positive feedback from environments and social groups, and a motivation towards social interaction (Allen et al., 2021; Baumeister & Leary, 1995; Hagerty et al., 1992). In the absence of these conditions a person may experience diminished degrees of belonging, unbelonging, isolation, and disconnection. Loneliness is a painful discrepancy between one's expectations of belongingness and social connectedness, and the subjective perception of this experience (Cacioppo et al., 2015a). According to Cacioppo and Cacioppo (2012, 2018a) loneliness can be experienced and explored dyadic, relational and social levels. To investigate loneliness, I employed stress appraisal theory (Lazarus and Folkman, 1984) as a theoretical framework.

Pandemic-related protective measures disrupted family connectedness, community, cultural, and national belonging for ITTs who reside across country borders: in-person visits, care arrangements were limited or stopped; this encompassed both participants' home and host countries. These policies increased polarization and prejudice, resulting in alienation, distress, discrimination, non-belonging, and double

unbelonging (Gao, 2021; Spanguolo, 2022). Furthermore, limited physical contact with communities, friends, and family in receiving societies led to feelings of isolation, distress, and fear (John et al., 2021). Even before the COVID-19 pandemic, transnational families experienced the effects of loneliness (Carella et al., 2022). Confronted with bans from leaving or entering their home and host countries, migrants switched to other methods of communication (Lewis et al., 2022; Spanguolo, 2022). Notwithstanding, migrants from different generations experienced varying degrees and dimensions of loneliness in relation to their home and host countries, with intergenerational contact and community support serving as key factors in mitigating loneliness (Ten Kate et al., 2020). During the COVID-19 pandemic, in addition to collective loneliness characterized by isolation, and a lack of satisfying integration into new communities and cultures (see Cacioppo & Cacioppo, 2012, 2015, 2018), migrants also encountered relational loneliness and social loneliness in relation to their home countries.

Even pre-pandemic studies anticipated that loneliness would significantly threaten health and well-being (Allen & Furlong, 2021). With the coronavirus outbreak, many scholars and practitioners urged the research to focus on the existing vulnerable groups, stressing that they might experience more severe problems (Bu, Steptoe, & Fancourt, 2020). Subsequent research identified women and younger people as vulnerable groups (Conversano, Di Giuseppe et al., 2020; Li & Wang, 2020; Wickens et al., 2021). Franklin and Tranter (2021) emphasized the importance of identifying patterns of diminished belongingness across diverse migrant groups to ensure the development of effective support measures for migrants experiencing loneliness. Wickens et al. (2021) highlighted

the importance of studying groups vulnerable to loneliness and social isolation to assess needs and prepare resources and programs for the pandemic and life after the pandemic.

McHugh Power et al. (2018) indicated that there was no comprehensive phenomenological account of loneliness before the pandemic; the unexpected shift in the burden of loneliness to women and younger people during the pandemic highlighted the need for further extensive exploration of the subject. The IPA methodology enabled an in-depth investigation of subjective experiences of research participants through the lens of language, social relationships, and cultural and socio-historical meanings (Tuffour, 2017). Chapter 3 presents a more detailed description of the research design.

## Chapter 3: Research Method

### **Introduction**

The lasting COVID-19 pandemic affected the mental health and well-being of diverse populations in the globalized world (Brooks et al., 2020). Most studies were conducted within the nation-state boundaries (Ding et al., 2021; Généreux et al., 2020). The purpose of this qualitative study was to understand the experiences of loneliness and belonging among U.S.-born female migrants with transnational family ties during the COVID-19 pandemic in Germany from an idiographic phenomenological perspective. I conducted semistructured interviews to explore the experiences of members of transnational families; the researcher performed an IPA to decipher and explain the data.

In this methodology chapter, I restate the research question and outline the research design and rationale. I discuss the role of the researcher, described the methodology, and detailed participant selection criteria and instrumentation. I also cover procedures for recruitment and participation, data collection, data analysis, and interpretation, along with ethical considerations—focusing on the protection of human subjects—and issues of trustworthiness.

### **Research Design and Rationale**

The research question “How US-born female migrants with transnational family ties experienced loneliness and belonging during the COVID-19 Pandemic in Germany?” guided the study. I explored the psychological experience of loneliness, which is characterized by a perceived or fundamental disconnection and alienation between individuals, detachment from physical spaces, and a personal time frame (Franklin &

Tranter, 202; McKenna-Plumley et al., 2023; Perlman & Peplau, 1981). I aimed to investigate the experience of loneliness across various belonging contexts. Belonging, as an experience, is the opposite of exclusion by a social group, and it refers to the feeling of connection and fit to people, groups, and places (Allen et al., 2021; Hagerty et al., 1992). To understand the experience of loneliness and belonging among a specific population of U.S.-born female migrants in a particular context of the COVID-19 pandemic, I employed a qualitative research method and an IPA.

IPA is a phenomenologically informed research method (Smith et al., 2009). As reflected by Motta and Larkin (2023), IPA investigates first-hand experiences relevant to the participants and in relation to the world around them. This relational aspect contributes to the creation of valence and meaning of the phenomena to the participants (Motta & Larkin, 2023). This conscious interpretation allowed me to provide a deeper understanding of the lived experiences on an individual idiographic level to then connect them with the experiences of other participants in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic.

The novelty of the research problem also supported the choice of IPA. IPA is not theory-driven but data-driven research for the in-depth study of a phenomenon of interest (Emerly & Anderman, 2020). This experiential research method offers a systematic approach to understanding the experience through the initial interpretation of experiences on a case level and further compilation of a unified narrative filled with individual accounts (Smith & Osborn 2008). Descending from health psychology research and has been applied to research of lived experiences during the COVID-19 pandemic

(McGlinchey et al., 2021), investigating the experiences of loneliness (Motta & Larkin, 2023), belongings among refugee youth (Sobitan, 2022), the impact of migration on perceived health (Dowling et al., 2022). A systematic examination of the experiences and meanings of loneliness and belonging among U.S.-born women residing in Germany, using IPA, may contribute to filling the research gap on transnational families.

Apart from phenomenology, IPA is based on hermeneutics. It uses a dual hermeneutics process that (a) describes how participants make meaning of their experiences and how the researcher decodes them (b) facilitates creating a second-order meaning of the findings by the researcher (Pietkiewicz & Smith, 2014). IPA follows basic steps: close examination of first-person information from inside of the experience where phenomena are being lived; conscious meaning-making provided by those who experienced the phenomena; and interpretation through examining individuals in the world they belong and their meanings by the researcher (Motta & Larkin, 2023; Pietkiewicz & Smith, 2014). I approached research participants as active players who influenced and were influenced by the world around them (see McGlinchey et al., 2021).

The third theoretical basis of IPA is ideography. Following Pietkiewicz and Smith (2014) and Motta and Larkin (2023), I examined each interview, focusing on the distinct experiences of each interviewee, with the emphasis on particular details and meanings for a particular participant. I proceeded to analyze the situation on a case-by-case basis. Ideographic depth and systematic comparison helped the researcher construct a dynamic account of the phenomena' representation, variability, and prevalence (Nizza et al., 2021).

In sum, I employed the qualitative phenomenological methodology effectively to achieve the research goal of studying experiences and phenomena in detail and crystallizing the meaning of belonging and loneliness. By capturing the voices of diverse populations (Delaunay et al., 2019), this methodology was applied to understand the experiences of a particular population of individuals with family ties in two different countries. The IPA approach, developed for health research, provided a solid framework to examine the essence and structure of health-related issues (see Tuffour, 2017), as well as ambiguous and intense affective experiences (see Smith & Osborn, 2008).

### **Role of the Researcher**

In qualitative methodology, individuals conducting research are the primary instruments for data collection and analysis; the main goal of human research instruments is to understand and describe the human experience (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016; Ravitsch & Carl, 2016). IPA as a research method also involves interpretation: researchers go beyond reading, interviewing, and observing; they interpret findings and establish meaning (Motta & Larkin, 2023; Pietkiewicz & Smith, 2014; Smith et al., 2009).

The personality of a researcher is essential in IPA. Following Pietkiewicz and Smith (2014), I played an active role and used empathy to facilitate the narration and access participants' experiences. In line with Motta and Larkin (2023), I was open-minded, flexible, and nondirective, showing curiosity and patience to engage with the complexity of human experience. Additionally, I was confronted and had to handle and organize the complexity of narratives that usually occur when addressing relational,

systemic, and other socially relevant questions (see Smith et al., 2009; Smith & Fieldsend, 2021).

Following the IPA process, during the data collection phase, the researcher remained open-minded and free from her own preconceptions and theoretical expectations. When meeting a research participant, I set aside my own life experiences and assisted the participant in uncovering their story (see Smith et al., 2009). Having collected the data, I reviewed her preconceptions and experiences to reflect on and interpret the data.

In this study, in line with Smith et al. (2009), I had a dual role: (a) employing the same mental and personal skills and capacities as the participant to try to understand the essence of experience as a human being; (b) then applying those skills more systematically to make meaning of the meaning-making experience through own understanding of participants' world. Consequently, I was engaged in a double hermeneutic: trying to make sense of how a participant was trying to make sense of what was happening.

The study was not conducted at my place of employment, and there was no client-counselor, supervisor-supervisee, or other relationships that implied power over the participants or impacted the degree of openness and trust. The confidentiality issues were discussed with research participants, and informed consent was obtained by email prior to the interviews.

## **Methodology**

### **Participant Selection Logic**

Based on the research question, I interviewed six women born in the United States who resided in European countries for at least 2 years before the COVID-19 pandemic and had family members living in Germany and Europe.

IPA analysis aims to understand and make sense of individual experiences and requires a small homogeneous sample (Motta & Larkin, 2023). In line with the IPA methodology, I aimed to select a purposeful sample of a few rich cases (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). To explore the answers to the research questions, I used three criteria for the sample selection. I invited women (a) who were born in the United States, (b) who were currently residing in Germany and had been residing in Germany before the pandemic, (c) and who had close family members in both countries to participate in my study. To increase the homogeneity of the sample, I used the following data points: 40-60-year-old female participants without small children; women with children under 12 were not included to avoid "parenting stress interference" during the homeschooling phase.

In the current study, the sample size was six women from transnational families sharing a similar experience of loneliness within belonging contexts during the COVID-19 pandemic. The sample size was increased during the study from four initial participants to six participants to reach a thicker description and better saturation (see Dowling et al., 2022; Sim et al., 2018).

The participants for this research project were recruited upon Walden University's Institutional Review Board (IRB) approval 11-15-24-0632844. I contacted the potential volunteers advertising in social media and Facebook sites, inviting them to contact the researcher using Walden University email. The invitation and recruitment process was developed in contact with the IRB. The researcher sent the consent form to volunteers who responded to a social media invitation. Upon reading the consent form and agreeing to participate in the study, volunteers were asked to provide written consent via email.

Upon receiving the written consent, I asked volunteers to complete a screening survey to ensure that the selection criteria were met. The screening survey was informed by the literature review and developed by the researcher. Apart from biographical data, such as age, gender, country of birth, country of current residency, year of arrival to Germany, marital status, family members in Germany, and family members in the United States., the questionnaire included Three Items Loneliness Scale (see Hughes et al., 2004). The screening instrument ensured the selection of participants with similar experiences. The women who met the criteria were invited to participate in the recorded interview.

The IPA, with its focus on deep case-by-case analysis, allowed me to understand the phenomenon of interest without the necessity to generalize over the population (see Pietkiewicz & Smith, 2014). This approach required a relatively small, homogeneous sample (Pietkiewicz & Smith, 2014; Motta & Larkin, 2023). Smith and colleagues (2009) recommended a range of three to 10 participants. Recent studies on loneliness using IPA

involved seven and six participants respectively (see Forward et al., 2023; Motta & Larkin, 2023).

Interview duration may also influence the richness of data. According to Corbin and Strauss (2015), five 60-minute interviews were enough for theoretical saturation. Hennink et al. (2017) reported that 53% code saturation was achieved after coding the first interview, increasing to over 90% after the sixth interview. The meaning saturation was reached by the ninth interview for concrete notions and the 24th interview for more complex phenomena (Hennink et al., 2017).

Saturation, a key concept in qualitative research, is a gradual process that depends on theory and analytic approaches. Saunders et al. (2018) indicated that, in qualitative research, saturation referred to a process rather than an event; the goal was to provide greater richness in the data, leaving room for new information to emerge. Each additional interview was supposed to enrich this description and increase the researchers' confidence. At the same time, adding extra information would not automatically mean that the saturation was reached. As new information may also appear after the saturation is reached, Sanders and colleagues recommended reviewing the assumptions about saturation while the study is in progress. This caution is important to ensure the trustworthiness of the research. Furthermore, Dowling et al. (2022) suggested determining the final sample size when saturation was reached.

Following this strategy, I recruited and interviewed four participants in February-March 2025; I coded these interviews to monitor whether new themes continued to appear. Upon this initial analysis on a case-by-case basis, methodology chair and I more

participants were needed to support the process of saturation and ensure that no new themes emerged. In April-May 2025, two more participants were recruited and interviewed. The saturation point was reached after analyzing and interpreting the fifth interview, which indicated that I collected enough data to answer the research questions meaningfully.

### **Instrumentation**

After a preliminary screening, I obtained a homogeneous sample of participants. I collected data face-to-face through Zoom, a user-friendly and straightforward electronic platform that ensured rapport and convenience of online qualitative studies (see Archibald et al., 2019). I employed a one-to-one semistructured interview, a common approach for IPA (Smith et al., 2009; Smith & Osborne, 2008). This type of interview supported mutual engagement in real time (Pietkiewicz & Smith, 2014). The interviews were audio-recorded to ensure further data interpretation.

I developed an interview schedule following the IPA guidelines outlined in work of Smith and colleagues (2009). The construction of questions was guided by Lazarus and Folkman's (1984) stress appraisal theory and its subsequent developments and applications (Austenfeld & Stanton, 2004; Park & Folkman, 1997; Smith & Lazarus, 1990). The questionnaire comprised three expansive, exploratory sections that addressed the experiences of belonging, loneliness, and coping to encourage further discussion. Participants were asked the following questions:

1. Please describe the experience of belonging/ unbelonging during the COVID-19 pandemic.

2. Please describe your experiences of loneliness during the COVID-19 pandemic.
3. Describe how you were dealing with experiences of loneliness and belonging during COVID-19 pandemic in Germany.

I developed semistructured interviews using neutral and open-ended questions, in line with the IPA guidelines (Smith & Osborne, 2008). I employed funneling techniques, starting with broader questions and moving to more specific areas of interest. With minimal prompting, participants were encouraged to speak freely to provide in-depth descriptions of their experiences. The creation of the interview schedule was the initial step in ensuring content validity, and a copy of the complete schedule can be found in Appendix B.

I conducted practice interviews with friends and subsequent cognitive debriefings to gain an understanding of and reflect on the perspective of the population of interest. The participants in practice interviews met the same criteria as the primary study participants. The interview schedule and data collection process were identical to those of the main study. Practice interview participant debriefing was conducted in accordance with Brod et al. (2009) and included verbal probing to explore participants' understanding of the questions and identify phenomena and constructs that were missing from the interview. Practice interview participant debriefing served to understand whether the content is relevant and essential to the participants and whether there are areas not covered by the interview questions (Brod et al., 2009). The purpose of the practice interviews was to generate new information to confirm the content validity of the main

interview instrument and to adjust interview questions, if necessary. The researcher did not include practice interviews in the final study results.

### **Procedures For Recruitment, Participation, and Data Collection**

Once the interview schedule was finalized and the research received IRB approval from Walden University, I began data collection. The volunteers who met the eligibility requirements were notified of their selection via email. The email invited participants to an audio-recorded Zoom interview and requested proposed dates and times. Dates and times were coordinated and agreed on per email. A confirmation email was sent to the participants one to four days before the interview. Participants were advised to choose a private, comfortable, and quiet location.

I conducted one-to-one interviews using the Zoom Platform. Before the recording the participants were requested to select a disguised first name and were referred to using this name during the interview. The interview lasted 60-90 minutes. The interviews were audio-recorded using Zoom platform. I took field notes.

After the interview, I answered further questions and informed the participants of the next steps of the research, explaining the data analysis process. I offered the participants a 25 Euro Amazon gift card for their time and willingness to speak about experiences during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Following the data collection interview, I finalized my interview notes and recorded my reflections on the potential impact on the research (my identity, location, and circumstances), the usefulness and applicability of the results, transferability, and potential ethical issues in a research journal.

## **Data Analysis Plan**

I used IPA to understand how women in transnational families experienced and made sense of loneliness in the context of belonging during the COVID-19 Pandemic. Following Dowling and colleagues (2022), the IPA methodology suited to investigate complex experiences in emotional and stressful contexts. The study employed the interpretive approach to connect the thoughts and experiences of participants, my analytical standpoint, situating them within the existing body of knowledge (see Motta & Larkin, 2023).

I followed the IPA protocol described in Emery & Anderman (2020), Motta & Larkin (2023), and Sobtian (2022). IPA protocol began with (a) line-by-line reading and rereading of each interview transcript and my notes associated with the case, performing exploratory coding, identifying claims of a participant regarding the experience and the meaning, and identifying the areas where my preliminary knowledge and understanding were relevant (b) line-by-line reading and annotation identifying objects of concern (themes and patterns that belong to the phenomena in the world of the participant) and their experiential descriptions; (c) reflecting the participant's experience, the subjective structure of the world and how the meaning is created through language, imagery, and tone; (d) searching for connections between data and emergent themes (perspective of the participant) and researcher's experience and knowledge, development of superordinate themes using the essence of subordinate themes, (e) performing a cross case analysis on all six cases and developing general experiential themes. The data was be organized in tables: each case transcript was organized in transcript tables with line numbers, objects

and meanings, and researcher's notes; the first table included objects and meanings of the participant, meaning of the researcher, case level themes and data sources, and case summary; the second table included objects, meanings, case level themes, and data sources; the third table presented superordinate themes, subordinate case level themes, extensive researcher's interpretative comments regarding the research themes and data sources (see Motta & Larkin, 2023). These tables presented a framework for interpretation organizing the findings in a coherent way (see Emery & Anderman, 2020).

I made speech-to-text audio transcription herself. For recording the researcher used Zoom platform. I carefully examined the company's privacy and data protection policy and found that Zoom Inc. has a strict customer confidentiality policy bolstered by secure technology to ensure customer files remain private and protected from unauthorized access. Additionally, Zoom Inc. adheres to various U.S. Privacy Laws, including the California Consumer Privacy Act, the CCPA, and the EU General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR).

The multi-stage IPA process was first applied at the individual-case level, followed by a case comparison across transcripts. The researcher intentionally focused on data that challenged the researcher's expectations. Part of the information in one case was qualitatively distinct from other participants' responses; this data was identified and analyzed in greater detail.

### **Issues of Trustworthiness**

IPA is a 'Big-Q' methodology, a flexible method to study human experiences in a particular context (Motta & Larkin, 2023). The goal was a deeper idiographic

understanding and interpretation of a smaller number of homogeneous cases rather than a broad surface encounter with a significant number of a variety of cases (see Motta & Larkin, 2023; Smith, 2011). A smaller homogeneous sample and subjectivity of the researcher may evoke questions about the trustworthiness of the research, particularly among positivist scholars. To address these concerns, the research process was transparent and well documented, thereby meeting the trustworthiness criteria for qualitative research: credibility (internal validity), transferability (external validity), dependability (reliability), and neutrality (see Guba, & Lincoln, 1982).

### **Credibility**

I actively followed psychological research emerging during the COVID-19 pandemic. An extensive literature review and my own experiences during the Pandemic in Germany increased familiarity with the culture of the studied group, thereby increasing credibility (Shenton, 2004). In line with Merriam & Tisdell (2016) and Shenton (2004), to reach internal validity, I (a) used multiple sources of data: interviews, observations, researcher's notes; (b) spent extended time on data analysis and interpretation; (c) employed critical self-reflection and journaling during the whole process of the study. Credibility was established through triangulation or by using multiple sources, methods, or theories to support the interpretation of data (see Merriam & Tisdell, 2016).

### **Transferability**

To achieve transferability or external validity (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016), it is recommended that sufficient, well-structured information be provided about the data itself and the process of data collection, enabling others to apply the findings elsewhere.

Detailed descriptions of the data itself and the process of data collection and interpretation were presented to increase the generalizability of the process and the replicability of study processes or the applicability of study results to further population groups (see Maxwell, 2021; Tuval-Mashiach, 2021). Thick descriptions of the findings were developed to ensure further extrapolation (see Merriam & Tisdell, 2016; Tuval-Mashiach, 2021).

### **Dependability**

In the positivist worldview, dependability underlines the stability of results every time the study is replicated (Tuval-Mashiach, 2021). Due to the fluid nature of qualitative data and the variation of human experiences, the results of a replica study may vary (Shenton, 2004). In qualitative research, dependability suggests "trackable variability" (Tuval-Mashiach, 2021, p. 369). The goal is not the replica of the results but the ability to replicate the research process. Following Shenton (2004), I included the strategic plan for the research, revealed details of the data collection process, and recorded reflexive evaluations of the effectiveness of the research process.

### **Confirmability**

Confirmability includes efforts to approach objectivity independent of the skill and perception of an individual researcher (Shenton, 2004). I used reflexive commentary to become aware and note their assumptions and biases. To create a replicable methodological description, I recorded an "audit trail." An audit trail included raw data, data instruction and synthesis, process notes, personal reflexive journals, and instrument

development information (see Guba & Lincoln, 1982). I also developed an alternative set of judgment-free notes (see Birt et al., 2016).

### **Researcher's Reflexivity**

To promote the validity and credibility of the research I adopted a critical reflexive position. Starting at the literature review stage during the COVID-19 Pandemic in 2020-2021, I observed myself, my environment, and my experiences to identify critical elements that informed and influenced the research process. Working on Chapter 3 I started making notes about my preconceptions and writing reflexive notes in the journal. The journal notes included reasons for the choice of the research question, assumptions on migration biography, assumptions on distress associated with the pandemic in a transnational context, my value system, feelings associated with the research topic, potential role conflicts, potential benefits for end-users of the research (see Tufford, & Newman, 2012). Additionally, I recorded reflections immediately after each interview (see Treharne & Riggs, 2015).

I undertook the coding process alone, developing themes and interpretations. I consistently ameliorated my coding style, documented how I developed themes, to ensure transparency and establish a rigorous analysis. A structured reflexivity process enabled intercoder reliability.

As outlined above, the steps undertaken to establish trustworthiness were interconnected. To ensure the clarity of the research process during the study's conceptualization, I developed the summary guideline for the process in a tabular form and followed these guidelines.

### **Ethical Procedures**

In researching human beings, I adopted a relational approach. According to Ravitch and Carl (2019), a relational approach is merged with feminist research. This approach asserted that both the researcher and the subject of research, termed as co-researchers, were in a relationship and open to vulnerability, self-reflection, and change (see Ravitch & Carl). Following the ethical principles of a relational approach to qualitative research, I rejected the use of the term "subject" and the asymmetrical power relations it entailed. In this way I cultivated trust and equal collaborative relationships with research participants (see Jeffrey & Thorpe, 2024; Ravitch & Carl, 2019).

The global COVID-19 Pandemic turned every researched population into a vulnerable one: the proximity to suffering due to physical, geographical, or emotional factors, as well as the gendered impacts of the pandemic, made both me, as the researcher, and the collaborating participants subject to vulnerability (see Jeffrey & Thorpe, 2024). Furthermore, transnational families were often underrepresented in the research. I was aware of the sensitivity of the research project, and the following steps were undertaken to avoid or minimize emotional harm: informed consent, the right to withdraw from a study at any time, the right to refuse to answer uncomfortable questions, the right to participate in a debriefing meeting (see Jeffrey, & Thorpe, 2024).

This study received approval from the Walden University IRB, under approval number 11-15-24-0632844, which expired on November 14, 2025.

I recruited the participants using social media platforms, leaving a Walden University email address for the potential participants to reply to the researcher directly.

The identities of potential participants who replied to the recruitment email are kept confidential. Each person who indicated their interest in participating in research in the response email received the recruitment letter with informed consent. The positive response to this email indicated the willingness to participate in the study and to schedule the interview.

Informed consent is an established ethical requirement in research. I used technology to circulate and obtain consent forms (see Newman et al., 2021). The letter of consent contained the following information: (a) what consent is being sought for; (b) a clear and relevant justification of the study; (c) information on its risks, benefits, and consequences, demands on the time of participants; (d) free nature of consent: information about voluntary nature of research; information how the data would be handled, processed and disseminated; and consequent free agreement on participating must be given without them being coerced or convinced (see Ravitch, & Carl, 2019; Taquette, & Borges da Matta Souza, 2022).

I obtained the data online via the Zoom online platform and transcribed the data myself. I carefully examined the privacy and data protection policies of Zoom to ensure the platform complies with the U.S. and European data protection regulations. Before the interview, the research participants chose a pseudonym or a nickname to safeguard their confidentiality and privacy (see Newman et al., 2021). The participants were encouraged to be mindful and not display identifying information during the interview. In rare cases of disclosure, I deleted or masked the personally identifiable data in the process of transcription (see Ravitch & Carl, 2019).

The use of digital media in the research may compromise confidentiality (see Newman et al., 2021). To minimize the threat of confidentiality breach, I kept and analyzed only the audio record and its transcription. The data is stored on a password-protected external disk in the researcher's home safe. In addition to Zoom audio records, the data included emails, interview protocols, interview transcripts, and field notes. The data will be retained for five years, after which it will be securely destroyed.

### **Summary**

In this chapter, I described the research methodology and instrumentation to ensure research replicability and the quality of this research. I justified the selection of IPA as the most appropriate method to explore transnational family experiences of loneliness and belonging during the COVID-19 Pandemic in Germany among US-born female migrants. The central phenomena of interest were the experiences of loneliness and the experiences of belonging encountered by migrant women.

I presented a rigorous and precise account of data collection: (a) the screening instrument, ensured that research participants met the study inclusion criteria; (b) the open-ended interview questions enabled broad exploration and detailed descriptions of the phenomena under study, (c) IPA protocol was chosen to gather insight into individual experiences of each participant and experiences of research participants as a group. In Chapter 4, I present a detailed account of the findings.

## Chapter 4: Results

### **Introduction**

The purpose of this IPA study was to understand the experiences of loneliness and belonging among U.S.-born female migrants with transnational family ties during the COVID-19 pandemic in Germany. The research question for the study was “How did US-born female migrants with transnational family ties experience loneliness and belonging during the COVID-19 pandemic in Germany?” I aimed to gain insight into the lived experiences of this research population.

In this chapter, I describe the study's setting, including the demographics of the participants, the data collection methods, the data analysis process, and evidence of trustworthiness. Furthermore, I present the results of this study based on the group experiential themes. The chapter concludes with a summary and a transition to Chapter 5.

### **Setting**

I completed an IRB application to proceed with the study. I conducted recruitment via social media, specifically Facebook, to reach the expat community in Germany. After the first recruitment phase in January 2025, I successfully recruited and interviewed four participants. I had to repeat the recruitment phase in April 2025. Three more people responded through social media. One of them realized that she did not meet the eligibility criteria, another had never responded to a consent email, and the last one was invited to participate in the study as the Participant 5. The sixth participant learnt about the study through snowball recruitment by Participant 5. The final interviews were conducted in April and May 2025. Five participants were from the city where I reside; one participant

was from another city in Germany. The participants were offered the choice of having the interview face-to-face or via Zoom and chose the Zoom interview. Before the interview, the research participants chose a nickname to safeguard their confidentiality and privacy; they were addressed by this name during the interview. I conducted and interpreted the interviews herself, ensuring that all identifiers were deleted from the transcripts. There were no personal or organizational conditions that influenced the interpretation of the data.

### **Remembering the Pandemic**

Although the experiences discussed in this chapter occurred several years ago, I assumed the research participants could answer the research questions based on their autobiographical memory. COVID-19 memories are widely researched. Slowdown and time compression make public events during lockdowns more memorable than events before or after the Pandemic (Rouhani et al., 2023). According to Brown (2022), a high degree of self-relevance for distinctive events and experiences leads to long-lasting autobiographical memory. The idea was supported by Bikmen (2025), who indicated that the relevance of pandemic-related events to one's social identity increased memory formation and retrieval. Rouhani et al. (2023) emphasized that the unexpected nature of the Pandemic created a flashbulb effect, particularly for the first lockdown, intensifying the memory. Possible explanations for the increase in encoding, storage, and retrieval of memories were the slowdown of time and time compression. These factors facilitated the formation of long-term memory for pandemic-related events (Rouhani et al.). Emotional nature of events also contributed to memory formation (Droit-Volet et al., 2023).

### **Positivity and Habituation Bias**

I was aware of biases associated with remembering stress-related events. According to Droit-Volet and colleagues (2023), the slow passage of time increased the positivity bias: when remembering the Pandemic, participants were more likely to recall happiness, better sleep, and routines associated with positive emotions. Positivity bias could be related to coping strategies or the striving to present a positive self-image (Droit-Volet et al.). Another reason for more positive memories about the Pandemic was emotional adjustment and habituation while lockdowns became more predictable and less strenuous (Droit-Volet et al., 2023).

### **Demographics**

All participants were female, born in the United States, spoke English, had relocated to Germany before the pandemic, and lived with their families in Germany during the COVID-19 pandemic. They had extended family members in the United States. The participants reported experiencing feelings of loneliness often or sometimes during the COVID-19 Pandemic. Table 1 presents participant demographics.

**Table 1.**  
*Demographics of Participants*

Participant	Age	Duration of stay in Germany	Relatives in the United States during the pandemic	Relatives in Germany during the pandemic
1- Participant 1	50	15 years	Mother, father, aunts, uncles, cousins	Husband, son
2 - Participant 2	58	9 years	Mother, two sisters	Husband, in-laws
3 - Participant 3	54	20 years	Mother, father, two sisters, brother, two nieces, four nephews	Husband, son, in-laws
4 - Participant 4	40	20 years	both parents, grandparents, aunts, uncles, cousins	Husband, two daughters, in-laws
5 - Participant 5	54	32 years	Mother, father, four sisters	Husband, son, daughter
6 - Participant 6	59	22 years	Father, daughter, brother, in-laws, husband's in-laws, nieces, nephews	Husband, in-laws, one 1 nephew

### **Data Collection**

I followed the recruitment procedure agreed upon with the IRB of Walden University, approval 11-15-24-0632844. I sent the consent form, which explained the goal of the study, to volunteers who responded to a social media invitation for further information. I asked the volunteers to read and study the consent form and to respond, "I consent," if they agreed to participate in the study. Upon receiving the written consent in the email, I asked the participants to complete a screening survey via email. The participants who met the eligibility criteria received an email inviting them to participate

in an audio-recorded interview, which requested or suggested dates and times for the interview. Finally, I sent the participants the link for the interview.

I conducted interviews from my office, and all six participants connected from their homes. Before the interview, the research participants chose a nickname to safeguard their confidentiality and privacy; this name was used to address them during the interview. The participants were informed that their conversations would be recorded and transcribed. Before the recording, participants had to actively agree to being recorded (via Zoom setup). All participants completed their interviews during a single meeting. The data were recorded with their permission using the Zoom desktop app for Windows (version 6.1.6) and transcribed by me. The data included audio recordings, transcripts, and the handwritten notes made during the interview. The length of the interviews ranged from 46 to 97 minutes.

I encountered no significant variations in the data or unusual circumstances during the interview. Using the screening instrument, I successfully recruited a homogeneous sample of participants, and any ineligible participants were excluded before data collection.

### **Data Analysis**

I employed an inductive research approach, specifically IPA, to conduct the data analysis. IPA is a systematic analytical procedure that allows interviewers to immerse themselves in the world of the participant (Smith et al., 2009). I read and reread the transcript, making exploratory notes, translating the data and notes into experiential statements or emergent themes, and further clustering them into personal experiential

themes (PETs) or superordinate themes for each participant (see Smith, 2009; Smith & Fieldsend, 2021). PETs were grouped into a table for each interview. At the beginning stage, I approached each case individually.

The steps below describe the data analysis process. I followed the IPA adapted from Emery and Anderman (2020), Motta and Larkin (2023), and Smith and Fieldsend (2021). Step 1 of the data analysis began with a line-by-line reading and rereading of an individual interview transcript, along with the researcher's notes for the case (Emery & Anderman, 2020). I highlighted key passages of text and identified claims made by the participant to understand how the participant made sense of their experiences of loneliness and belonging. I also underlined areas where the researcher's preliminary knowledge and understanding were relevant. The printed version of the document with highlights and handwritten notes was placed in a case/participant binder.

Step 2 included line-by-line reading and initial noting. I highlighted and reflected on lived experiences, making descriptive comments with a focus on content and subject, as well as emotional remarks with a focus on language use (written in italics). Additionally, I kept engaged at a more interrogative and conceptual level, moving beyond the text and making conceptual comments (see Motta & Larkin, 2023). The data was organized in a table: each case transcript was divided into transcript tables, which included text with line numbers, exploratory notes, and the researcher's notes, where necessary. The printed version of the document with handwritten notes was placed in the case binder.

Step 3 involved the development of emergent themes (see Smith et al., 2009) or experiential statements (see Smith & Fieldsend, 2021; Smith & Nizza, 2022). I focused on the participants' experiences and meanings, created through language, imagery, and tone. Experiential statements included the interviewee's experiential accounts and my interpretation of these accounts (see Smith & Fieldsend, 2021). The data table included three columns: exploratory notes, data sources examples, and experiential statements. The printed version of the document was placed in the case binder.

The goal of Step 4 was to search through connections across emergent themes or experiential statements. Though the IRB approved of the use of data analysis software, I decided to recreate this process herself. I cut the experiential statements from printed transcripts and placed them on the floor in my office. I grouped and regrouped the experiential statements to develop individuals' superordinate themes (see Smith et al., 2009) or PETs (see Smith & Fieldsend, 2021). I tried to refine the understanding of the emotional, temporal, and contextual impact on the experience. Some of the experiential statements could not be grouped at the individual stage and were put aside. The data was organized in a Microsoft Word Table: PETs, subordinate themes, and illustrative extracts with line numbers (see Smith & Fieldsend, 2021). These tables coherently organized the findings and presented a framework for data interpretation (see Emery & Anderman, 2020). The first four steps were repeated for every case.

In Step 5, I conducted a cross-case analysis to examine patterns across all six cases and identify commonalities at the group level (Condliffe, 2023; Smith et al., 2009). I printed out the PET tables and put them on a common surface (the floor in my study).

Then I looked for commonalities and differences. I developed group experiential themes (GETs) that represented shared experiences identified between participants. The GETs are listed in the Table 2 below.

**Table 2**

*Group Experiential Themes*

Group experiential themes	Subthemes
GET 1 Belonging and identity	Safety to be self Emotional pain of non-belonging Non-belonging and invisible self Language as a ground for belonging
GET 2 Relational nature of belonging	Relationship to people and place Positive feedback and reciprocity Quality of relationship Nature of belonging: natural or created
GET 3 Interactional nature of belonging	Co-experiencing Mutual undertakings Being involved, staying engaged Belonging requires an effort to be maintained
GET 4 Loneliness is a tribulation of disconnection and nonbelonging	Suffering Inferior self Disconnection from self Disconnection from people Disconnection from family Disconnection from experiences and a meaningful life Loneliness and belonging are connected
GET 5 Coping with loneliness through belonging and engagement	Coping through Physical Contact and Connection Connecting Virtually Coping through Imagined or Remembered Contact
GET 6: Emotional appraisal of the pandemic	Perception: Change and Uncertainty Emotion: Fear Relationships: Disconnection Disconnection from Self Isolation with Nuclear Family Emotion of Disconnection: Sadness and Grieving

## **Evidence of Trustworthiness**

### **Credibility**

During the interviews, I was open and fully present. The interview schedule was developed based on an extensive literature review, ensuring a structured process. I was aware and took an effort to bracket my own emotions and expectations; I employed contextual and personal reflexivity to keep track and set aside her preconceptions and to avoid impairment in data interpretation (Walsh, 2003). In line with and Merriam and Tisdell (2016) and Shenton (2004), to achieve internal validity, I employed multiple data sources, including interviews, transcripts, notes taken during the interviews, and the researcher's notes made during the data analysis process. Furthermore, I spent extended time on data analysis and interpretation of the first four cases before moving to Step 5 and identifying GETs. Then, two more cases were analyzed in detail, and the PETs of cases five and six were subjected to a cross-case analysis. Data saturation was achieved after the fifth interview, as no new PET subthemes emerged.

### **Transferability**

Following Maxwell (2021) and Merriam and Tisdell (2016), I maintained a sufficient and well-structured account of the data itself and the process of data collection, which may enable other researchers to replicate the study or apply the study results to further population groups. I presented thick descriptions of the experiences of loneliness and belonging during the COVID-19 pandemic to ensure further extrapolation (see Merriam & Tisdell, 2016; Tuval-Mashiach, 2021). I included demographic data to enable those outside the study to understand the sample criteria and its homogeneity. I further

used the direct quotes of the participants to highlight the thickness of experiential accounts.

### **Dependability**

I ensured the dependability of the results by transcribing the interviews myself, using both a transcript and an audio recording, and my notes during Steps 1-4 of the data analysis phase. To ensure the trackable validity (Tuval-Mashiach, 2021, p. 369) of the study, I maintained an audit trail for every case throughout the data collection and data analysis steps. Additionally, in line with the recruitment guidelines established with the IRB of Walden University, I followed the steps and procedures for recruitment and data collection and informed the research participants of every step taken. Due to the fluid nature of human experiences, qualitative research aims to replicate methodological steps rather than the essence of experiences (Shenton, 2004). In line with Shenton (2004), the taken measures enabled the replication of the research process in the future.

### **Confirmability**

During the study, I made efforts to maintain objectivity in the research (see Shenton, 2004). I used reflexive comments to become aware of and note my assumptions and biases every time I read and re-read transcripts and other documents associated with the analysis steps. Following Guba and Lincoln (1982), I created an audit trail for each case file, which included raw data, data transcripts with notes, data tables, experiential accounts, PETs with notes, a table of GETs with notes, personal reflexive notes, and instrument development information.

### **Researcher's Reflexivity**

I adopted a critical reflexive position to promote the validity and credibility of the research. Considering reflexivity, I analyzed the following accounts: personal reflexivity and contextual reflexivity (see Walsch, 2003). In line with Walsh, personal reflexivity is the exploration of why the phenomenon came to view and how its various aspects appeared to make sense to me. I experienced disconnection from my family of origin, dealing with the COVID-19 Pandemic in Germany. In the first 2 years of the pandemic, I conducted an intensive literature search on pandemic-associated topics, particularly in the transnational context. I was aware of and bracketed the aspects of my own life experiences, attitudes, and expectations that were closely associated with the phenomenon of loneliness, belonging, and coping.

### **Results**

I collected data from six participants using a semistructured interview with three groups of questions on belonging, loneliness, and coping with it during the pandemic. For all interview participants, belonging is associated with the sense of community and connection, as well as identification and a positive relationship with people within that community. In addition to relationships with people, for some participants belonging included a physical location. All six participants described loneliness as a disconnection from others, including those they love and those who love them, as well as from social support. Loneliness is characterized by a lack of deeper connections with others and with oneself, as well as a disconnection from one's own wants.

**GET 1: Belonging: safety and identity*****Safety to be Self***

All participants agreed that belonging provided a sense of community and increased a person's safety to be self. For Participant 1, belonging meant being accepted in her community and social network: "When I think of belonging, I think of a mutual respect, the peers or elders that accept me for who I am." Belonging was associated with various positive states: Participant 5 reported feeling rooted, connected, and grounded; Participants 3 and 5 identified the feelings of being wanted and valued; Participant 6 spoke of safety to express their own ideas, opinions, and spirituality. Feedback from the community allowed the Participant 6 to gain a better understanding of herself. In sum, for all participants, belonging and acceptance contributed to a stable sense of identity.

***Emotional Pain of Nonbelonging: "You are Never Part of It"***

The participants differed in degrees of cultural adaptation in Germany. Participant 2 spoke more about nonbelonging than belonging. The consequence of nonbelonging for Participant 2 was depression, anxiety, and constant stress levels; Participants 3 and 6 reported feelings of being awkward or out of place when they did not belong or waited to be accepted into social groups. Most participants reported feelings of self-doubt, insecurity, and anxiety associated with a sense of non-belonging. Both Participants 2 and 4 described questioning themselves, their actions, or self-efficacy, thinking they were "not trying hard enough" (Participant 4).

***Nonbelonging and Invisible Self***

Participant 1 described the non-belonging self as an invisible self,

In my experience, sometimes it's lack of eye contact, lack of handshaking, even lack of just the overall communication. Sometimes you know how people, they look over you, opposed to looking at you. And so, I, I seem to know the cues very quickly. Usually if I extend my hand to you and you disregard that, or you can't look me in the eyes, or just look over me. So, there's sometimes there's been situations where someone's been standing right next to me and they always look in their direction. So, you're never a part of it.

Being unseen or disregarded hindered participants' ability to exercise decision-making power in social situations and prevented them from sharing their opinions or feedback on societal development. This resulted in a perception that their well-being, difficulties, or even existence were often disregarded. Participant 3, for example, felt diminished belonging when she was obliged to go to the office during the COVID-19 Pandemic, regardless of the danger of the virus. Participant 3 felt that her physical health was disregarded and that she was "taken for granted."

This evaluation of a 'non-belonging self' corresponded with the invisible self, described by Participant 1. Belonging, on the contrary, would turn a person into a visible and valuable member of a social group.

### ***Language as a Ground for Belonging***

Language proficiency contributes to a more stable sense of belonging: "I think if I spoke better German, I would feel more like I belonged here" (Participant 3, line 044). Participant 2 described her language struggles, noting that German was a challenging language for English speakers. Most of the participants supported this argument.

Participant 6 revealed challenges in perceiving humor in colloquial situations. Participant 6 reported,

I've wanted to be a part of groups, and I didn't understand what they were talking about, or I didn't get the joke, or that kind of thing. So even though people were nice to me, I still kind of feel that isolation. Whenever I don't cross over that cultural barrier, I think.

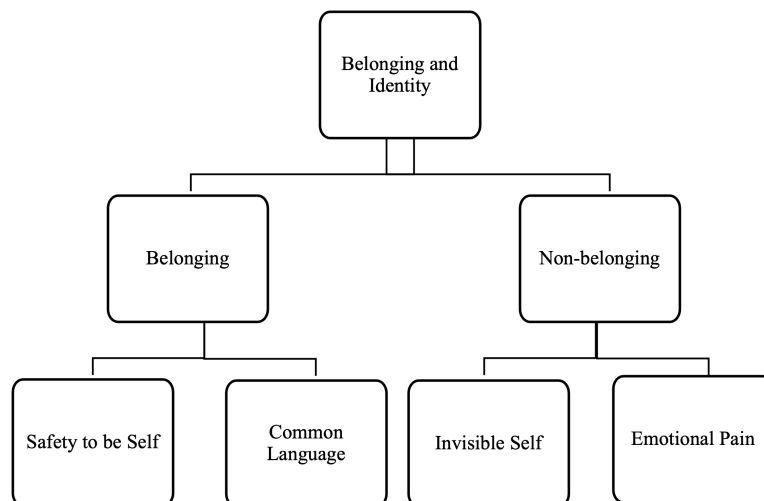
Participant 5 described difficulties of virtual communication in German with her colleagues. Without proper German language proficiency, Participant 2 felt stressed and fearful about interacting with locals. Poor language proficiency led to a sense of disconnection, self-doubt, and insecurity. Participant 2 blamed the failures of communication on herself, saying, "Maybe I did something wrong, maybe I didn't handle it well...".

In contrast, connection to other Americans and English-speaking individuals in Hamburg after the pandemic increased her ability to express herself and reduced the levels of anxiety. Belonging plays a fundamental role in It functions as a stabilizing factor for being oneself by fostering a positive self-image, increasing safety, and contributing to a sense of being valued and welcomed. Individuals with migration biographies are particularly sensitive to environmental responses conveyed through the language. A good command of the local language may increase the chances of understanding others and feeling a part of the community serving as a bridge towards better integration. Conversely, low language proficiency intensifies feelings of non-belonging, inducing negative affect and undermining a positive, socially integrated self.

Most participants expressed discomfort about situations where they did not belong and actively sought to avoid them.

**Figure 1**

*Belonging and Identity*



**GET 2: Relational Nature of Belonging**

*Relationship to People and Place*

Belonging is a natural or created reciprocal relationship to people, communities and physical spaces. Territorial connection to the country of origin, its nature, and landscape supported the feelings of belonging. Most participants spoke about their relationships with their family and place of growing up as an imaginary foundation of belonging. Participant 5 kept the connection to her home country through vivid memories of past experiences of belonging,

The area that I still know and recognize just the landscape, my surroundings, the physical surroundings, that route that, yeah, yeah, I would say maybe in the sense

inside, I feel like, okay, I know this place, I feel very familiar with it, I feel at home, there's a lot of memories that I share that I have here in this place and that's a physical place and with my family, of course, they're my family and I know there's ... I will always belong to them or I will always be connected with them if I live there or not, but I belong to them...

In terms of its significance, participants perceived the relationships with people as more important than relationships to place. Participant 2 compared belonging to attachment, indicating that "...relationships have always been stronger than my locations". However, she simultaneously described her sense of belonging in Germany during the COVID-19 pandemic as more strongly rooted in place than in people. This discrepancy could be explained by her failure to form connections with the local German community beyond her nuclear family.

When asked about belonging, all participants spoke about family, specifically the nuclear family in Germany, including husbands and children, and the extended family in the United States, which encompassed parents, siblings, aunts, and uncles. Friendships represented another source of belonging. For Participant 5 and Participant 6, a relationship to God contributed to a sense of belonging in the world and with people of the same ideology. Participant 3, Participant 4, Participant 5, and Participant 6 reported that their work, colleagues, and environment represented the third pillar for belonging.

### ***Positive Feedback and Reciprocity***

All participants spoke about positive feedback as a constitutive element of belonging. For Participant 1: "Belonging is the interaction with others, how they express

themselves to me, how they enjoy being around me, how they, the involuntarily or so ... initiate contact, and that's a great feeling."

Participant 6 also identified feedback as one of the key elements of the “back and forth” process of belonging. Participant 5 sense of belonging was reinforced through the feedback she receives from people, ideology, or environment. During the pandemic, with private contacts held to a minimum, Participant 4 received positive feedback from people at her work and her clients, which increased her sense of belonging to Germany:

So, during that time, I would say because I was working so much and having so much contact with people outside of my family, and my village, and my friendship circle, I had more of a sense of belonging because I felt welcomed in the field that I was in. So, more of a sense of belonging here [in Germany] at that time, less of a sense of belonging in the United States.

The lack of positivity in the feedback can undermine the feelings of belonging. When Participant 4 moved away from the United States, the feedback from her family changed. Below is her report full of pain of disconnection:

I come from the southern parts of the United States, where the culture is drastically different to the northern German culture. Usually, when I do go home, there's family members that tell me that my opinions aren't welcome. I'm not American enough anymore. I don't live there. I don't count. I think the pandemic, not being able to physically go home, it was isolating. It definitely made me look a little bit harder at what I self-identify as. But like I said, I think when you spend

enough time in a different country that's not your home country, there's going to be a bit of an identity crisis that goes on somewhere along the lines.

Belonging is a relationship of an individual with their environment. Most participants spoke about the mutual, reciprocal bond, one that requires care and maintenance from both sides. Participant 3 described belonging as a reciprocal process,

Well, like I said, [belonging is] the feeling of security and comfort, but also the reciprocal. You want to connect with either people, or a situation, an environment. And the environment also [is] where the people ask you to participate, whether it be a real invitation or provide materials that speak to you. So, I think in that way, it's reciprocal. The knowing is reciprocal.

According to Participant 2, another driving power of the belonging process is the "high intensity of wanting to belong", which reflects a need and a motivation to engage with others or the environment.

Participant 5 linked nonbelonging to the absence of such need,

Unbelonging or not belonging. Yeah, not having the need for, or not even missing that connection, because there was no, their ...[belonging] never existed, if that makes any sense. And not having a direct connection, missing the connection, missing the need because it never existed.

### ***Quality of Relationship***

Belonging is strongly associated with meaningful relationships. The ability to form deeper connections is essential for feeling a sense of belonging within groups and

friendships. For Participant 6, belonging is understanding and communication on a deeper level,

So I feel like I don't belong sometimes when it's not that I wanted to, but I don't belong whenever people are just making small talk. And that's, I mean, to some level, that's fine. But whenever it gets to where it's just small talk after I've met them several times, and it's just kind of on that level. And I don't feel like I belong there, because I usually like to go deep with people.

### *Nature of Belonging*

Most participants described the connection to their country of birth as natural. Participant 1 described belonging to the country of birth where most of her family lives as "a kind of routine": "It's just natural to just, you kind of create your own, you can create your own way." Though the sense of belonging changed over time, most of the participants easily reconnected with their home country. Participant 1 reported: "Every time I go back to the States, it just comes right back here. It's just so natural."

If the attachment to the home country developed naturally during the developmental years, a corresponding connection to Germany required effort to be established. To reinforce the development of the sense of belonging to Germany, Participant 1 used "substitutes" and established contacts with other people in similar situations. Participant 5 reported that her involvement in various roles, including jobs, ministries, social networks, and community commitments, contributed to a stronger sense of belonging in her city. Several other participants spoke of the city of their current residency as a place of belonging. Lacking a natural connection to Germany as a country

of birth or a place of upbringing, the participants had to create connections to smaller groups and communities to establish and maintain the areas of belonging.

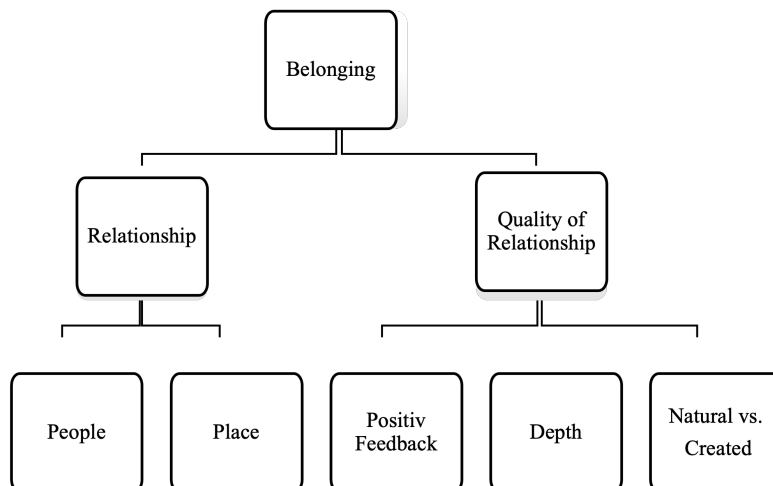
Belonging is fluid and context dependent. Most participants indicated that living between two countries led to an identity shift. While adapting to a new country, culture, or community, participants had to develop a new understanding of themselves.

Participant 5 described herself as adopting personal qualities aligned with a new country of belonging and letting go of some aspects of her original identity, that no longer resonated with her evolving understanding of self. Participant 3 reported belonging to both countries,

I think that has recently changed, I would have to admit, and it's in some way painful to admit, that I belong in both places. I feel a sense of community and belonging in both places, whether it be my hometown, town, my parents' home, my sisters' home, or the home that I've created here as... just for convenience sake I'll say it, as an expat. Okay. So I belong in both.

Participant 4 described her identity development,

As I mentioned, I turned 40 this past year. And that's also usually for a woman a big, a big age. And there's, there's a lot of soul searching that goes on. And a lot of 'where am I', 'who am I' at this point in my life? So it's somewhere in the middle. And it depends on what phase I am in my life as to where I belong more or belong less.

**Figure 2***Relational Nature of Belonging***GET 3: Interactional Nature of Belonging**

Belonging requires interaction. Doing things, being involved, taking care, and maintaining commitments provided the research participants with a feeling of connection with people and communities around them. At the same time, inability to be united within a similar experience led to feelings of disconnection.

*Coexperiencing*

Participant 6, who had lived overseas for 32 years, revealed that the absence of similar experiences may disconnect people. For her, the COVID-19 pandemic represented a unifying experience: people in different countries were confronted with a novel situation, the same virus, similar safety measures and security procedures for the first time in their lives. This uncertain threat connected people through their shared participation in a similar experience,

I always had to explain to people in the States what was going on around me... You know, what kind of problem was going on in Germany ... but I always had to explain it to them. However, during the COVID-19 pandemic, they were also going through the same thing. And I think that was for the first time I didn't have to explain what this crisis, these things were going on with me, and they understood too, at the same time...It helped me to feel more a part of my friends and family in the States.

At the same time, physical distance and inability to be physically present affected belonging and family cohesion. Participant 5 described the effect of not being with her family during the police violence in California, her home State, which profoundly affected the African American community in the United States. The role of an observer, who cannot be a part of her family's support system increased her sense of helplessness, disconnection, and despair: "I can't change this. Where I am, I can't do anything... or... you'd be ... of any value to my family there at all?" Participants 2 and 4 reported similar experiences when they were unable to reunite with their relatives in the US during times of hardship.

### ***Mutual Undertakings***

For all participants, one of the foundations of belonging was the ability to engage in shared activities together. For individuals with multiple belongings, a virtual connection was a means of establishing co-presence in situations where physical participation was not possible. As a result of the virtual involvement, Participant 1, Participant 3, and Participant 5 celebrated birthday parties of friends and family. For

instance, Participant 3 attended her friend's 50th birthday online party in Philadelphia, which she would not have had the opportunity to attend under normal circumstances. Participant 5 described Zoom as a "second-best friend". Zoom provided a chance to unite with families during other significant events, for example, Participants 4 and 6 attended funerals of their close relatives.

For Participant 1, belonging involved participation in organized formal groups, virtual groups, and learning projects. Participant 3 described many occasions of her participation in organized groups in the United States, which increased her feeling of belonging to her home country. Participant 5 and Participant 6 were participating in English-speaking church groups online, which supported belonging, connectedness, and emotional resiliency. Other participants reported similar experience, noting that organized groups provided a structure, timely information and feedback, enabling people to engage in mutual projects.

Participant 1 was missing small "cliques", especially in her home country, which functioning was based on physical copresence and spontaneous information sharing. Without structured interactions and physical presence, belonging was more challenging to achieve: "So, people that would just get together because they have that connection... opposed to me... You would hear something after the fact. It didn't feel good, it didn't feel good. And sometimes it was not by, it wasn't intentional that you were left out." The absence of timely information prevented Participant 1 from staying involved, reducing the opportunities for feedback and interaction.

***Being Involved, Staying Engaged***

Most Participants connected belonging with the ability to support groups and communities. For Participant 5, belonging meant participating in various jobs and activities, as well as having a chance to contribute to her city and community. Participant 5 experienced distress due to her inability to perform as a singer and expressed dissatisfaction with virtual communication and engagement in the church in Germany. For Participant 2, belonging was “a two-way street” which stretched beyond simple connection to contribution: "to be connected to other people, you are also responsible to other people...making sure that ... I respond to people when they need something". Participant 3 described the involvement in supporting local businesses increased her being a part of the community,

And to save our local businesses. We did a lot of that, too. And that also creates a sense of community. You want to make sure that the little coffee shop down the street stays open. We try to remember what we did. There were a couple of coffee shops and, you know, a little train store... We tried to source things locally to help the local businesses as well.

At the same time, in spite all the efforts to participate in organized WhatsApp help groups or engage with neighbors, which worked well during the pandemic, but did not result in closer connections after it. Participant 3 reported,

I would say, I think during the pandemic, when we put together a WhatsApp group, people started asking questions, you know, if they had stuff or if they

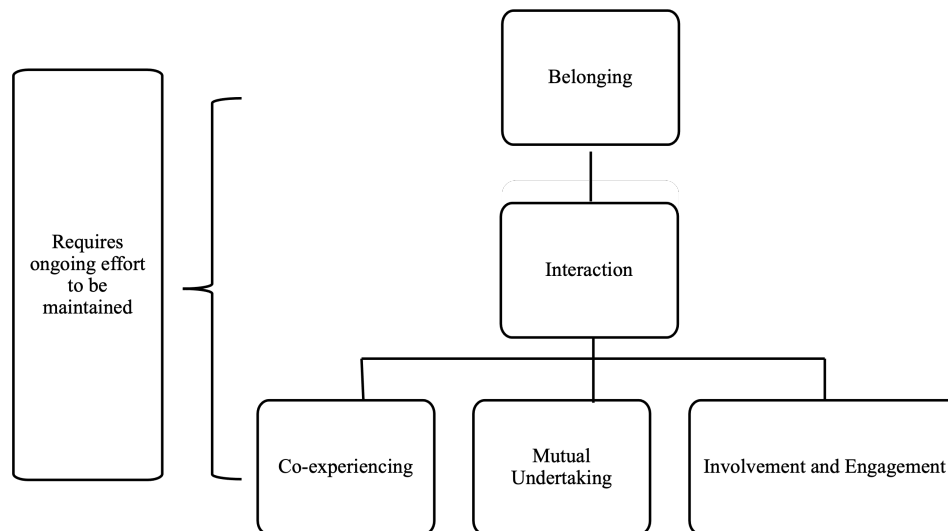
needed something, there was that. But it was very flat, you know, it was very two-dimensional, it was all digital.

### ***Belonging Requires an Effort to be Maintained***

Without commitments and investments, even steady belongings tend to fade. The COVID-19 pandemic limited physical interaction and international travel, leading to disconnection. For example, Participant 1 described losing connection to small, informal groups and cliques in the neighborhood, which left the participant feeling left out. Participant 3 reported that after the Pandemic, local WhatsApp help groups dissipated, and the neighbors distanced from each other: "I mean, I still don't know their names, but they were the closest neighbors and we would always greet each other if they, you know, if we weren't doing something."

Participant 2 experienced difficulties in maintaining a rewarding relationship with a demented mother in the United States. Inability to take care of her and visit her during the Pandemic, difficulty and lack of transparency in virtual relationships with her stepfather, who was the main caregiver of her mother, increased stress. At the same time, isolation to her immediate family reduced the necessity to interact with the German community and relieved the pain of non-belonging for Participant 2: "during the corona period I sort of enjoyed the isolation [laughs]. It was sort of... like a time out for me."

For other participants, isolation to the immediate family without the possibility to converse and interact with others, see others' diminished sense of belonging to the country of residence.

**Figure 3***Interactional Nature of Belonging*

**GET 4 Loneliness is a tribulation of disconnection and non-belonging.**

*Suffering*

For all six participants, loneliness meant suffering. Part of it was a physical response to disconnection: restlessness, pain or slight ache, or even more embodied stress-related responses, such as “a lump in my throat”, “upset stomach” or “less appetite”. On the emotional level, all participants mentioned sadness. Participant 4 and Participant 6 added grieving, unexpected anger. Participant 2 spoke of anxiety and depression. For Participant 1, it was a mix of despair and hopelessness. For Participant 6, reflections on missing someone or something evoked loneliness.

Other participants described a lonely state as being tired and lacking energy, "very draining" (Participant 4), "like a cell phone that can never fully charge" (Participant 4), "not at my own potential" (Participant 2), withdrawn, detached, "not open to engaging in a shared experience" (Participant 2). Participant 5, described herself when she was lonely,

I'm thinking of like having my light switch fully turned on, but kind of, you know, the dimmer switch. Yeah, not fully, not fully me, not fully alive, not fully me, I think is the word. If you can, if I just think of the dimmer, a light switch with the dimmer, that's turned a little bit low, not off, for sure not off. I'm still functioning, but I know that for myself within. Yeah, there's, yeah, I'm still there's there's lack in these are still things that are not fully -fully there.

### ***Inferior Self***

Loneliness determined how participants perceived themselves. For Participants 1, Participant 2, and Participant 3, the lonely self was inferior. Participant 2 would think that no one liked her, and no one enjoyed being around when she was sad and lonely. Participant 3 compared the lonely self to a child, lacking security and self-efficacy. For Participant 4, loneliness included helplessness and isolation. She described the state of being disconnected and the urge to connect: "Loneliness is this feeling of alienation, being in a lake or a body of water, and you can see the land, but not quite get there."

Loneliness has a capacity to shrink the perception of self. When lonely, the participants could no longer see themselves as capable adults. Loneliness reminded a dependable childhood self. Deprived of connection, the childish lonely self perceived itself as not deserving love and affection. Lacking self-efficacy, helplessness, and dependability did not allow the participants to experience life fully.

### ***Disconnection from Self***

Being alone did not mean being lonely. Loneliness meant also a disconnection from self. Participant 2 emphasized that being by herself and being connected to herself

did not make her feel lonely: "If I am connected to myself, I can connect with others."

Loneliness for Participant 2 was like being "in the undigested mood space", a lonely space for processing one's own experiences. According to Participant 5, loneliness was a disconnection from one's own needs and from people,

That's out with people. Again, I make music, and I perform and I sing, and there's something very communal about that. There's something very, depending on the setting, very intimate about that. There's something very life-giving. I just know that's an integral part of myself. ...if I'm not playing and I'm not singing or if I'm not out, then I notice that there's something in me that's missing that I need to touch on and I need to activate.

Without a physical connection, Participant 5 had a feeling of "not being used or not being active."

### ***Disconnection from People***

Loneliness was the state of being cut off from, or separated from, important people who have an affectionate relationship with, from "those whom I love, those whom I know, and people who know me and people who love me" (Participant 5).

For all participants, loneliness was characterized by the absence of close people, both physically and emotionally. For Participant 5, loneliness was a disconnection from meeting others in community spaces. For Participants 1 and 2, loneliness was more than just missing physical encounters; it was about missing compassion, timely responses, and a social support network outside their immediate family. For Participants 1 and 3, it was about missing friends and physical gestures of affection and closeness, such as hugs.

Participant 1 was looking forward to socializing with the neighborhood outside her immediate family "bubble".

### ***Disconnection from Family***

Being separated from or missing family members can contribute to feelings of loneliness. Participants 3 and 4 had to self-isolate from their immediate family after returning home from work, which increased uncomfortable feelings of disconnection. Inability to share with and get comfort after difficult experiences of the day was draining and was associated with loneliness. Participant 4 reported,

Sometimes when you're sad, you just want to be held. And I was making sure that that wasn't possible. So, I couldn't be soothed or comforted the way I needed to be. And there were several instances where that happened. And it's quite frustrating.

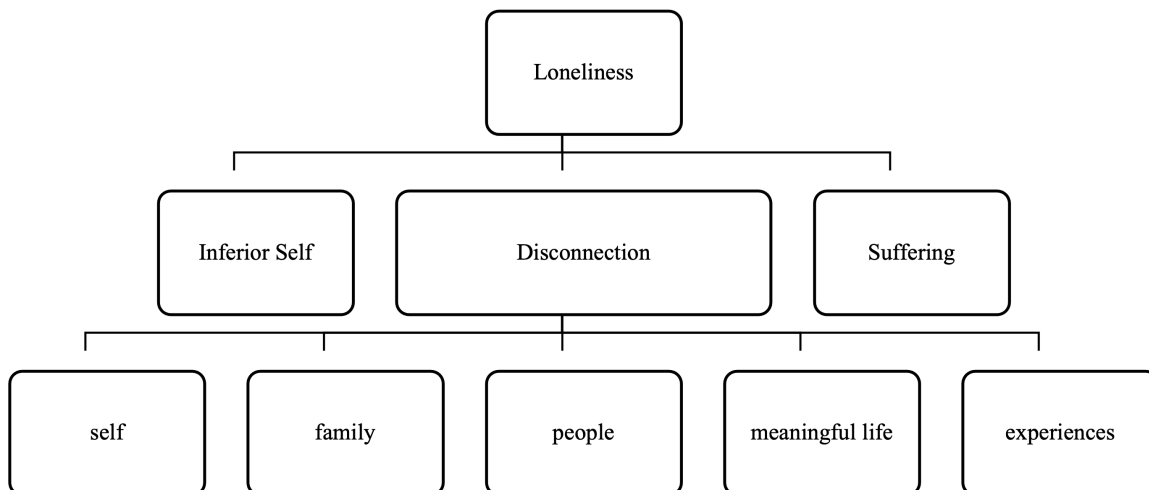
For Participant 5, the core family, including her children and husband, who were with her in Germany, represented only one part of her vital connections; the isolation from her family in the United States intensified her loneliness. Inability to make return visits to reunite with or to take care of their families affected the levels of suffering among all the participants, for example, Participant 2 said: "...I really felt lonely, particularly lonely and anxious and upset in the relationship to my mom. That was the worst". Participant 1 also reported missing her extended family, including parents, aunts, and uncles who resided in the US. Being cut off from the family members in the US increased the loneliness of all the participants.

### *Disconnection from Experience and Meaningful Life*

For Participant 5, the meaning of her life was to serve others, both in a church ministry or on the stage as a singer. Participant 5 felt she was not leading a meaningful life. "I was missing that I felt I was contributing." Participant 2 also described her experience during the COVID-19 pandemic as the existence reduced to nutrition and lodging as lonely and meaningless: "loneliness occurs when I go down to Maslow's like lowest level of like, food, shelter." And since Participant 2 had lived in loving relationships, loneliness for her was about missing a sense of belonging and social connections, as well as a sense of self-esteem and a meaningful life. Participant 3 felt lonely when she was unable to do something she wanted to do. Being unable to execute specific actions decreased her self-efficacy and increased feelings of helplessness, reminiscent of her childhood. Participant 1 also reported experiencing disconnection and an inability to share experiences, both positive and negative, with others; she also mentioned disconnection from everyday experiences, such as visiting bookstores and touching books, or seeing their covers. Disconnection from everyday experiences, unfulfilled plans and wishes, and missing activities that fill your life with purpose increased loneliness among the participants.

**Figure 4**

*Loneliness is a Tribulation of Disconnection and Nonbelonging*



***Loneliness and Belonging***

All six participants agreed that there's a connection between loneliness and a sense of belonging. For Participant 5, belonging meant that others recognized her existence. Not being known to others resulted in isolation and loneliness:

My idea of loneliness and belonging... I think that has definitely a lot to do with the aspect of knowing someone, being known and being known. So there's something ...I can know somebody, but if nobody knows me... I mean, when I'm known, much stronger. I think that's where, for me, belonging is solidified. And loneliness is not having that to me, not having someone that knows me.

For all participants it was easier to be alone without feeling lonely when the sense of belonging was present. Belonging and being intentional with connecting with others has the potential to reduce loneliness or even prevent its growth. Participant 3 reported,

And then, as I said before, I think loneliness is maybe even the flip side or the opposite of belonging because I think you can be alone without feeling lonely.

And I think when you have a sense of belonging, I don't think that you would feel lonely. The loneliness is not there.

### **Coping with Loneliness and Disconnection During the Pandemic**

To approach the study of loneliness and belonging during the Pandemic, the researcher employed the transactional theory of stress appraisal developed by Lazarus and Folkman (1984) and its subsequent extensions. All participants perceived the Coronavirus Pandemic as a threat to their health and well-being. The secondary appraisal revealed low accountability and high uncertainty. Below, the researcher provides an overview of the coping strategies the participants used to maintain their belonging and cope with loneliness. When confronted with stress, a person is drawn to seek communal resources, particularly attachments and belongings to groups and social support networks. Belonging can be a valid coping resource. Isolation and disconnection from others forces an individual to choose lonely coping strategies.

Participants 1 and 4 experienced loneliness while growing up as the only children in their family. Participant 6 first encountered loneliness as an adolescent at school. Participant 3 compared loneliness to a childish, helpless state. Five participants acknowledged loneliness to be a state they cannot or do not want to endure. Participant 4 described her approach to coping,

So, I make sure when I'm lonely not to fixate on it, not to think about it too much, and try to change it. Is there something I can do? Is there someone I can speak with on the phone, or even just a small amount of contact for a few minutes? If I can't, then I distract myself. I either go for a walk with my dog, or I read, or I do

yoga. But the worst thing for myself, and I've learned this, is to sit still and think about it too much. It's not a matter of running away from the problem but not trying to let it be too internalized.

### ***Lonely Coping with Loneliness***

Being alone or disconnected from others and having realised the first traces of loneliness, some of the participants choose emotion-focused coping; they undertake efforts to reduce the negative emotions associated with it. Participant 4 attempted to shift her attention away from this feeling, distracting herself and preventing it from becoming too internalized. Participant 3 also wanted to distract herself, to avoid being overwhelmed by this feeling for too long. Participant 5 blocked the signals of loneliness. Participant 1 described lonely road trips. Participant 2 described keeping herself busy as a way of distracting herself from suffering from loneliness, spending 6-7 hours a day “playing in her studio” doing arts and crafting projects, renovating the house, other participants mentioned reading, or watching TV, going for a walk with my dog, doing yoga or having road trips on her own.

Emotional approach coping is a coping strategy that stands between individual coping and coping with others. It involves two stages: understanding and accepting emotions, emotional processing, and sharing and expressing feelings. Being alone, Participant 1 turned to herself, acknowledging that she was missing people and how much she needed people, and that her possibilities to reach others were limited in some way, Participant 2 and Participant 4 used journaling to put their thoughts and emotions on paper, Participant 2 also used painting to express 'virus vibes' through free association,

Participant 4 would do yoga to reconnect with herself. Participant 6, whenever she became aware of arising feelings, shared her emotions through spirituality.

Meaning-focused coping is a process of creating meaning in difficult situations, which allows one to find a sense of humanity and purpose in challenging times.

Participant 1, Participant 4, and Participant 5 employed self-reflection, rethinking who they were and who they had become. Participant 1 developed into an 'encourager', trying to stay optimistic and share her optimism,

You're a change agent, so be that. And what I mean by that, Anna [the researcher's name], is that I am an individual that, if I see you, I'm going to say hello, I'm going to acknowledge, I'm going to smile. And in this horrific time, I found myself not changing, because initially, you get to this point where you're just wearing your mask, and you're walking past with it, you don't see them, you don't acknowledge them. And I caught on very, very quickly that that's not me.

That's not who I am. So it was so, I mean, this is something I knew, just to be able to have your mask on, and somebody recognized that you're acknowledging them and smiling, you know, it was absolutely beautiful. So it made me say, at least there are still human beings, they still want to be acknowledged.

Staying true to one's own beliefs helped to make little steps towards meaning and purpose and supported a sense of well-being. Being useful and doing her job filled Participant 4 with good feelings, despite the emotional challenges of the time.

Problem-focused coping aims to eliminate the causes of non-belonging and loneliness. Since it was beyond the individual's power to change safety regulations or the sources of distress, all participants employed other strategies described above and below.

### **GET 5: Coping with Loneliness through Belonging and Engagement**

#### ***Coping through Physical Contact and Connection***

**Engaging in Activities with Nuclear Family Members.** Turning to an attachment figure or close person in the moment of loneliness and distress is one of the basic coping mechanisms. However, for example, Participant 2 reported that her husband's North German mentality did not allow him to express, acknowledge, and process emotions in a way that would be supportive for her. Close friendships often replace emotional attachments, but during the first part of the Pandemic, physical contact for people outside their households was not allowed, and the expected emotion approach coping was impossible.

Though getting emotional support within a nuclear family unit was not always possible due to lack of emotional sensitivity of partners (Participant 2), or due to necessity to self isolate after a day in the office (Participant 3 and 4), all women reported that they were involved in activities together with family members, for example, watching movies, playing together video and board games, doing activity hunting, picnics, and city tours.

All participants reported some rituals associated with food. Participant 1 discussed exploring restaurants and revisiting ice cafes. Participant 4 taught her daughters how to cook, passing over her recipes and the way her mother and grandmother had once

done it. Participant 3 made bread every week. Interactions with the immediate family increased belonging and a feeling of community and reduced loneliness.

**Turning to Pets.** Participant 4 remembered that during the moments of self-isolation, she was with her dog: “And, I had a very strong connection with this dog. So even if I couldn't have contact with my family, I had my dog there with me, which was a very good, neutralizer, I guess you could say. Playing with the dog or just cuddling with the dog”. Relationships with pets were a replacement for attachment and physical touch.

**Keeping Connection with Communities in Germany.** Despite limited opportunities, most participants attempted to support the communities in which they lived. Participant 5, though struggling with online communication in German, continued to work in a Church community. Participant 1 continuously supported elderly neighbors with baked goods. Participants 3 and 6 were participating in WhatsApp community help groups, helping older neighbors with groceries and other chores. Participant 6 remembered making small care packages for her neighbors for Easter, which helped develop a better sense of community in the area they had moved to several months before the Pandemic. Doing things together and being involved in helping and supporting others increased the feeling of belonging to some extent.

The drawback of newly created communities in Germany in some cases was the one-sided nature of such relationships. Both Participant 1 and Participant 3 recalled missing the feedback regarding their engagements. Relationships that were not deep enough before, tended to be “flat” and “very two-dimensional”; it was difficult to sustain

and develop newly formed connections in the new culture due to their digital impersonal nature. Participant 3 remembered,

I would say, though, the feeling within the apartment building or the next community, maybe in some ways, was artificial, because you had to. We connected because you needed to share information, or there was stuff that people just didn't know about, and reached out. But I don't think I forged any real friendships at that time with neighbors.

Nevertheless, Participant 3 kept her commitments to the local community- she supported small businesses by purchasing products from grocery shops and cafes in the area, and also donated extra tips at the coffee shop to help homeless people with warm drinks and food.

**Work as a Place of Belonging and a Source for Coping.** Being able to go to the office or to work online provided a sense of belonging. Furthermore, work gave the participants, who continued working, a feeling of engagement in meaningful activities and a sense of contribution. Participant 4 remembered,

So, I was coming home quite tired from work, working a lot. And so it was very stressful. But also, I felt very productive because I was able to contribute in some way, besides just sitting at home; I was able to still help people. And that evened everything out a little bit.

### ***Coping Through Virtual Connection***

**Virtual Connection with Families and Friends in the United States.** All participants discussed the change in interaction when physical visits and in-person

interaction with the home country and families abroad were no longer possible.

Participants used digital tools - Zoom, FaceTime, Whatsapp, and regular phone calls.

Participant 2 did not perceive it as a critical change because, due to her longer stay abroad, she was used to using technology for digital communication,

I could FaceTime and we could have chats and it was really nice with both my sisters and my two half-sisters and some other family members in the US. But I was sort of doing that anyway. Do you know what I mean? Like it wasn't like a new or different change. It was sort of like, you know, my middle sister, she and I talk every two weeks [already before the Pandemic].

Participant 5 also relied heavily on Zoom and phone calls. She indicated that maintaining regular communication strengthened the sense of connection within her family unit, allowing their relationships to reach new levels of connectedness,

I utilized basically what the communication tools that were available and try to stay connected to them. It's funny, I have to admit that I think we were more ... online, zoom, telephone, and zoom. That was the most direct. And the fact that I could see everyone. We actually, I think we connected more as a unit collectively during that time, than we did probably any of the times that I can remember actually.

**Virtual Connection to Home Country.** Despite physical distancing, turning to others when suffering from loneliness and disconnection was the primary coping strategy. Participants learnt to turn to friends and family using phone, WhatsApp, or Zoom. Virtual communication enabled us to reconnect with friends residing in different countries

around the world. Participant 6 mentioned being able to reach out to her old contacts in Germany and Australia, and Participant 3 talked about reconnecting with her college peers and friends despite the time difference,

I felt like I more belonged to my home country during the pandemic. I spent a lot of time reconnecting with people. Being from the States and living in central Europe, the time difference is so large that often you couldn't connect with people on the weekends or be sure that you would find somebody. But during the pandemic, everybody was at home and everybody was looking for stuff to do.

(3:070-075)

Compared to newly formed relationships, reactivation of the existing ties required less effort and offered more depth and gratification.

**Interacting with Other American Women in Germany.** Several participants spoke about joining organizations of individuals with similar migration backgrounds.

Participant 4 described the effect of connecting to other American women in Germany,

But I was still a member of a book club with other American women. And we would [have] Zoom or Skype meetings during that time. So yes, that was my way to be able to participate ...some and get that feeling of belonging, but also with other women that knew exactly what situation I was in, because all of these women here that live in Germany are Americans that have families back home as well. So it was a very good way to stabilize and to be able to speak with people who were in the same situation.

As described before, coexperiencing – connecting to others who had the same situation, same cultural lens, and common language increased belonging. By uniting people in their particular situations, co-experiencing allowed them to stop treating these situations as abnormal and to bring some sense of normalcy.

**Attending Online Groups and Lectures.** Virtual connection to groups and projects offered online by private people and organizations in the United States and in the world helped to create new belongings and maintain connections to the country of origine. Online projects fostered new contacts and friendships with people around the world, united by shared goals, commitments, engagements, and a desire for personal growth. Participant 3 remembered that the unique situation of the pandemic allowed her to participate in educational and social projects, that otherwise were impossible to attend. Participant 1 described her experiences,

I had, and this is no exaggeration, I probably was tied to probably seven different clubs outside of the US, all virtual. But that was the beauty, where people that you would not even have access to, different clubs, different studies would not even .... have actually made themselves available, because no one was seeing each other. And that was, and I'll just use an example, like from one study, I met someone from South Africa, and we still keep in touch, which I would have never met her. And so these beautiful relationships that you would have not ever seen, but we're all seeking the same thing -community.

**Spiritual Coping.** Praying together was a form of coping with loneliness and stressors of the COVID-19 Pandemic. The organization to which Participant 6 belonged

started online prayer groups across Europe. The regular days and times for prayer not only fostered a connection with others and with God but also helped reestablish important daily routines disrupted by the pandemic. Participant 5 also attended an online English-speaking prayer group in her former church. Participant 5 described this reconnection: "And so we just found and we're just a group from, you know, my former church. And we really connected then and we still had, you know, strong ties". Online groups and communities created substitutes for missing belongings.

### ***Coping Through Imagined or Remembered Contact***

**Longing and Missing.** Imagined interactions with family in the home country or with friends and family after the pandemic helped maintain relationships with people and places separated by protective policies. Missing families and home country, and longing to see them, were among the essential elements of coping. Participant 1 described that, often, when she saw another family walking by, she would imagine herself strolling with her relatives, which would lift her spirits,

So, when you see certain things, I realize that that's the situation. And I actually almost find joy for that. Oh, it's great that you see these three generations that could walk together, whether it's mother, grandmother, great-grandmother, that's great. I look forward to the opportunity that I can do that again. So that's been a big one.

**News from Home – Connection and Disconnection.** Following the news and events happening in the home country created another imagined bond to the United States. Cases of police brutality that reached the participants through the internet or TV

channels provided a sense of emotional connectedness. At the same time it highlighted a sense of physical disconnection: without the opportunity to experience such events together with the families in the US, this emotional involvement was replaced by feelings of helplessness and pain. Mass media created an illusion of copresence, yet served as a reminder of being uninvolved. Participant 5 remembered,

I think, for me, maybe seeing a lot of things over taking place on the news, actually, because I think that was something where we were all looking at, we're all looking at screens. And so the news of just hearing what was going on in the United States, how are they responding. How you know, definitely. I missed just being able to share that experience with them there, because I knew they were going through, that they were, you know, having their experience and what was going on in my home state, and that that was different than what was happening here... Where I'm at, I can't do anything, or you'd be of any, you know, value to my family there at all. Yeah, or help. Yeah, that definitely exacerbated the distance and made it all the more real.

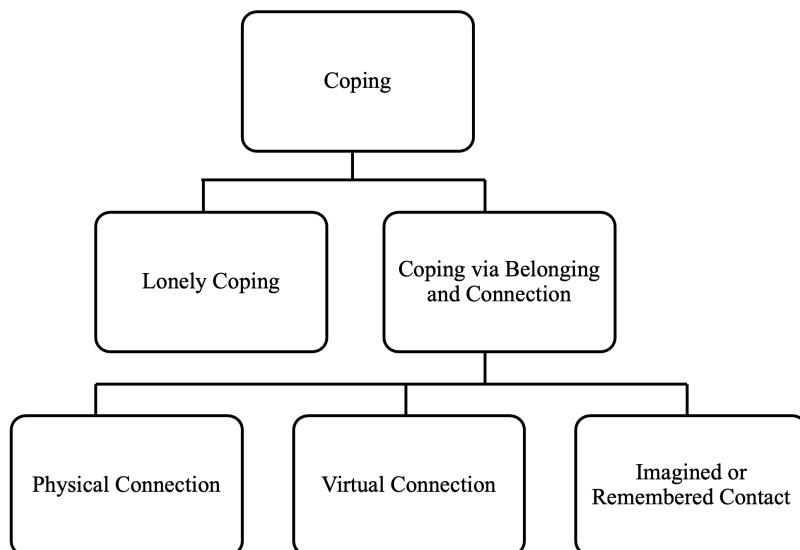
For Participant 3, news from her home country provided a sense of belonging, inspired her to undertake some action in support of the Black Lives Matter movement, and make deliberate choices,

I remember during COVID, there was a lot of negative press and a lot of cases of police brutality in America. There was a lot of, and that's when Breonna Taylor was killed, and George Floyd, and I think to some degree, Michael Brown was around that time. Anyway, there were several cases where black community back

home connected even in the isolation. I'm here so far away from home feeling disconnected, but those events gave me a sense of belonging. If that makes sense. But then there's only so much you can do from far away. So you buy a mask that has 'black lives matter', or you buy a mask from a black artist, or you don't buy something from somebody you know doesn't support the cause. So in that way I did things to at one time feel connected in the isolation, just feel a sense of belonging with the community that I actually didn't have a lot of physical contact with anymore.

**Spiritual Coping.** Participant 5 and Participant 6 highlighted connecting support in their faith. Prayer had a powerful positive impact. For Participant 6, raising her eyes upward was already associated with communicating with God. The researcher observed an inspiring change in her facial expression when Participant 6 spoke about God, directed her gaze at Him (upwards), and imagined or remembered the moments of spiritual connection. Participant 5 described her encounters and a feeling of being seen and not alone,

But knowing when I'm lonely, that I honestly, I have to say I, I would pray. And I would, because I just believe even that God, ... I believe He hears me, I believe that He knows me, and I believe that He, yeah, that He loves me. And yeah, it has ways also of just reminding me, you know, that even though He knows what it's like, or He knows I know that I'm feeling lonely, that He knows and He's there.

**Figure 5***Coping with Loneliness***GET 6: Emotional Appraisal of the Pandemic**

The COVID-19 pandemic, from 2020 to 2023, presented a context for studying loneliness and belonging. Although the perceptions of the pandemic itself were not included in the research question, the researcher describes below how the participants perceived the surrounding context. Contextual factors indirectly explain the state of loneliness and the perception of belonging and non-belonging.

***Perception: Change and Uncertainty***

All the participants perceived the Pandemic to be a drastic change ‘from one day to the other’(Participant 1), and the protective measures, such as travel bans, as unexpected and sudden. Participant 3 recalled: “I felt like I was thrown out there into the unknown”. Participant 5 described: “I, my life, and what I normally do day to day were changed. And it was so, yeah, disrupted...”, further she continued: “First of all, I never in

my wildest dreams would have expected that I would ever live through or have to live through something like this or something like that, definitely”.

Drastic change brought uncertainty. Participant 3 stated: "I felt like I was thrown out there into unknown. Because we didn't know, you know, nobody knew at the beginning." Participant 4 reported there was a lot of concern and vague questions about the future: "what's next?", or "how long is this going to last?". Those who needed a sense of control over their environment experienced emotional difficulties. Participant 4 explained: "It almost felt like I had signed up for a short race, but it was going to be a marathon and I wasn't prepared for it." Uncertainty referred to both the nature of the virus and its threat to health, and the duration of the new way of existing under this threat.

***Emotion: Fear***

The pandemic had a horrifying effect on the participants. The virus was scaled to be dangerous and lethal: "People are dropping dead" (Participant 2). Participant 3 reported becoming a "germaphobe" during the COVID pandemic; she paid exaggerated attention to protective measures and experienced high levels of anxiety even in open public spaces, such as streets and parks. For Participants 1 and 3 the fear of posing a threat to the health of loved ones led to refraining from travel to the United States, even when it became possible. Isolated within the family unit/ household in Germany, participants who had to work outside the home required to self-isolate. Participant 4 remembered,

At home, I had to [self-isolate] because I had so much contact with people. Our oldest daughter has asthma. So, there was very much a fear of infecting her should

I get sick, so I did a lot of self-isolation from my family to make sure that the exposure in the beginning wasn't as big. So, I would come home, and see my family from a distance in our house, but also retreat to make sure that we dial down the exposure factor.

***Relationships: Disconnection***

Disrupting the sense of normalcy, pandemic safety behaviors created a sense of disconnection. Participant 5 described her experiences of fighting the disconnection as a cyclical experience of “connecting and reconnecting and loneliness”. Most women described an inability to be themselves; they had to give up physical interactions with others, stopped touching hands and hugging friends, Participant 1 recalled,

I had, we had our masks at that particular time, we were wearing masks and made masks and things of that nature or whatever people were selling that looked cute, but then you found out those weren't really what you needed. So then you found yourself distancing more and more away. And for myself, I realized that I just rather just stayed inside. So it really created a, it just decreased that sense of belonging. Because you end up in a bubble, and then if you just accidentally see someone, as you're running to and pro very early in the morning. Oh my goodness! I have really just separated myself.

Participant 4 also reported the disconnection from her American self: "And during that time, it was very, very hard to hold on to that sense of Americanness or that sense of who I grew up as, as opposed to who I grew into". Participant 5, who was a singer, was missing her professional self, performing and singing for people and among people: "And

so I would say I also felt proof, at least for that side of my life that had taken place, I'd had for almost 30 years, if I dare say, and one decision that was, that was gone".

All participants were deeply affected by disconnection from family in the United States. They were missing opportunities, life events, and were not there to support their relatives. Participant 2 had a mother suffering from dementia; she had experienced difficulties organizing professional help, which resulted in feelings of anger, frustration, and helplessness. Participant 4 missed the funeral of her grandfather,

And during this time, he [the grandfather in the US] got really sick and actually passed away. So I wasn't able to go home ...for the funeral. So, I was self-isolating at home and completely away from my entire family during the death. So I remember getting ready for work, the one morning; and I was able to watch the funeral online. But still, it's quite difficult to be stuck here, you can't go anywhere, you can't do anything. And also to miss something quite big...

Furthermore, participants mentioned the protective measures in Germany that required limiting interactions beyond the household. For them, this meant staying isolated within a family unit: maintaining minimal contact with the outside world, brief encounters with others, and lacking meaningful conversation and deeper connection, which heightened feelings of social and relational loneliness.

Some participants described self-isolation procedures when coming home from work or from attending public spaces. Keeping distance from family members seemed to protect against a virus, but it also increased loneliness. Participant 4 reported,

At home, I had to self-isolate because I had so much contact with people. Our oldest daughter has asthma. So, there was very much a fear of infecting her should I get sick, so I did a lot of self-isolation from my family to make sure that the exposure in the beginning wasn't as big. So I would come home and see my family from a distance in our house, but also retreat to make sure that we dial down the exposure factor. So, I was coming home, but I was very self-isolated for the benefit of all of us and that made it quite difficult. ...So it's very much just retreating into my own space. And when you or when I lose contact like that, I tend to retreat in myself. I'm very introverted. It is just for my nature. So, it fell back to this, this feeling of being separate within a unit.

***Emotion of Disconnection: Sadness and Grieving***

The pandemic was associated with a change in the natural way of connecting with people; families were physically disconnected, and children within one household had to maintain distance from each other. Participants 1 and 6 described feelings of sadness and grieving that resulted from such disconnection.

Missing death, dying, passing away, and funeral gave a feeling of irreparable loss, of missing “something quite big” (Participant 4). Participant 2, Participant 4 and Participant 6 had to cope with illness, death, and funerals of close relatives. Participant 4 could not participate in the funerals in the United States,

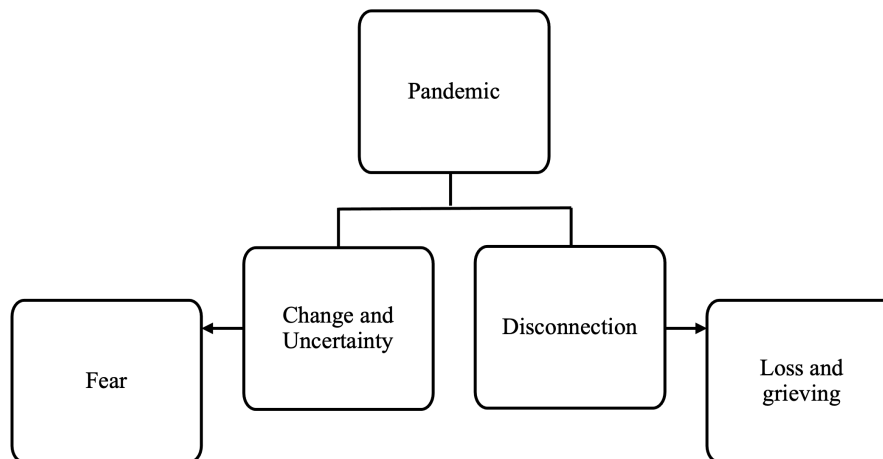
Normally you, you're able to, to go through the grieving process through, through phases or steps. So there's the passing and then there's the funeral, which is a way of closure. But I missed all of that. So, around the time when my grandfather

passed away, my grandmother started showing signs of dementia. So, I lost in a very short period of time two very important people. And there was, there was no way to go and be there and be comforted with my family, or when you're there, it feels like it's less of a crisis or less of a big situation because you feel like you're contributing somehow. So, I felt quite helpless that I could literally do nothing but say I'm sorry. And what can I do from here?

Furthermore, during the funeral, Participant 4 had to stay in self-isolation away from her daughters and husband as a part of protection of other members of household. She had to experience the passing and grieving by herself, helpless, and traumatized by the absence family coregulation and mutual feeling of support.

Participant 6 had a different experience. When her father died, she was able to organize the funerals, communicating with her brother virtually. Furthermore, she was able to fly to the United States and stay there with her family and the grieving community for 10 days. Being able to share the experience with her family, she experienced joyful and peaceful moments in a heavy life transition: “But then it worked out so amazingly that I could be with family. So, I wasn't lonely because I could go grieve with them and then come back and be with our daughter and still have a long time”.

The pandemic altered the experience of self in relation to others, particularly in close family relationships, friendships, identity, and professional relationships. The relational dimensions of the self were temporarily disrupted.

**Figure 6***Emotional Appraisal of the Pandemic***Transnational Family During the COVID-19 Pandemic**

As discussed in Chapter 2, transnational families are those where members are separated by the borders of nation-states. The absence of common ground for family reunions, events, and rituals makes such families imagined communities (Bryceson & Vuorela, 2020; Skribis, 2008). The sense of familyhood is maintained through emotional work and longing, including taking care of family members, family visits, and co-presence. Below, I describe the transnational family process through the eyes of the research participants.

***Emotional Work and Longing***

All participants described missing and longing to be with a family in the United States. Participant 3 said: "I wanted to see my parents, but on the other hand, I had my husband and my son". She described choosing between her parents, her husband, and an underage son, keeping in mind safety regulations, travel bans, and the financial situation of her family. Participant 2 spoke repeatedly about missing her mom, who was getting

increasingly cognitively impaired, reporting sadness, anxiety, and pain of physical separation.

Participant 1 described longing to see her family as a positive experience, You know, it's something that is really the highlight, is something that I look forward to, you know, whenever I can do it. And it brings me great comfort, just excitement, and I look at it...really as a gift each time that I'm able to do it.

Longing is both realizing the pain of separation in the present and imagining the joy of reunion in the future, and this emotional process keeps the imaginary family connection alive.

### *Care*

Care is central in transnational families. According to Participant 2, one of the main reasons for coming to Germany was to provide care for her husband's elderly parents. During the Pandemic, her mother in the United States, who suffered from dementia and was dependent on help from others, lost some cognitive capacity and speech. Participant 2 was not sure her mother received proper medication and care from her stepfather, who would leave his disabled wife her unattended for many hours a day,

Here in my house and being in Germany, it was like, okay, yeah, I can't go to restaurants, I can't meet up with friends at parties or whatever. But it didn't really bother me as much as the ... like not being able to get to someone who I love that needed help.

Helplessness and inability to control the provision of care at a distance evoked feelings of loneliness and devastation. In contrast, small acts of care represented affection

and emotional support between family members who were separated during the pandemic. Participant 1 received mindfully prepared packages from her family in the United States, which represented acts of care and connection with her relatives. These packages, both in their content and smileys on the outside, created the bridge to home.

### *Disturbed Mobility and Family Visits*

One of the essential themes for transnational families was the difficulty of traveling. Travel ban, "unexpected and sudden" (Participant 1), variety of regulations, different times in which the corona-related protection measures were put in place by governments of different countries turned into "a barrier that I was not able to surpass" (Participant 3). For members of such families, mobility —whether planned or spontaneous —impacted family cohesion. Participant 2 remembered how neither she nor her half-sister was able to come to care for her mother in the United States,

And my other half-sister, who is their biological daughter, she was in South America at the time as an English teacher and she couldn't get out. Like she literally would have to get on a consulate flight to get out. And I couldn't get out, like there was different points [in time between US and Germany] where the US had cut their [shut down the boundaries], I don't know if you remember this, but the US cut their capacity for people to come in because they got hit by the virus very early and very hard. And Germany was still minorly open for travel. But then I think by March [2020], Germany shut its gates. And then there were different points where travel was blocked at different times from one to the other. And then all of the vaccinations and what paperwork you had, whether you could go one

way or the other. I was really stuck almost for a year and a half with FaceTime as the only method.

All participants reported that routine visits, visits during Christmas and Thanksgiving, and participation in significant family events were impossible for one or two years. Among the reasons were “fear of making someone sick” (Participant 3), missing “courage to fly” (Participant 3), and absence of flights. Travel bans isolated German-based participants from their US families. With travel bans in action the distance between the two countries was "farther, more distant" (Participant 5). In stressful times, participants were more sensitive to connection and disconnection with their close ones, which increased emotional suffering.

Participant 6 was the only participant who had a child away for part of the pandemic; the other four women reported staying in one household with their husbands and children. One woman was childless, and resided with her husband. Participant 6 remembered,

And our daughter was in the US. She was a junior in college, and we had planned in April to be, flying there. And of course, we couldn't. Cause we were going to, we're going to see one of her plays[their daughter's plays], and for the first time ever, we were going to get to see it and everything. And so it was very disappointing. And so, so she, um, she ended up staying with a friend and because she couldn't go home, because we're overseas. And so that was a major hard time during that time.

According to Participant 6 not being able to reunite with her daughter felt "like a cutoff" and though she did not call it loneliness at that line of the interview, she defined loneliness as "being cut off from people".

### *Copresence and Coexperiencing*

Due to travel restrictions, virtual connections replaced in-person encounters. All participants found virtual connections with friends to be beneficial; however perspectives regarding online connections with families were divided. Given the time difference of 6-9 hours between the United States and German, online communication with family members, particularly those who continued to work regular working hours, was a challenge. Participant 4 said: "I felt even more isolated, because of the distance, because of the time difference".

For Participant 1, as well as other participants, there was no substitute for virtual video communication. Participant 1 and Participant 6 reported that they became intentional in establishing the contacts with others: "So I found myself doing a lot of checkups, thinking about other people and reaching out" (Participant 1).

Participants undertook an effort to arrange a regular communication routine with their family members overseas. Zoom became a new opportunity to experience and be present at significant family events: most of interviewees spoke about birthdays, Thanksgiving, and Christmas celebrations. With travel bans in place some of these occasions, if they had taken place in person, would have been missed.

However, not all family members were in a good mental state or had a good command of technology to proceed with virtual communication. The parents and

grandparents of Participant 4 were not "the most technologically savvy" people; phone was a better means of communication (Participant 4). The grandmother of Participant 4, mother of Participant 2, had dementia, which made it challenging to continue online conversations as the illness progressed.

Virtual communication was not deep enough or close enough to allow for a deeper connection and replace in-person participation. Participant 5 reported that, being physically absent from her hometown during the pandemic, she was unable to share the experience of being there. She felt helpless and hopeless, as having the information about the event did not replace physical contact and interaction with her family,

I ... missed just being able to share that experience with them there, because I knew they were going through, that they were, you know. Having their experience and what was going on in my home state, and that that was different than what was happening here. But there's a..., you know, similar issues, but very different things that people face there than what I was facing here. I think at times, there's a sense of, and is it helplessness? Yeah, simply realizing, no, I can't change. There's no... I can't change this.

At the same time, Participant 6 indicated that the pandemic had some uniting influence; both countries she was connected to were going through a similar process. She explained,

I think what I said before, about being for them, I didn't have to explain what was going on, because they also.... It was more like 'what level of craziness are you experiencing' and 'what's going on'? And so it was actually increased the

belonging, because I felt like I was more a part of what was going on with them, and they were also a part of what was going on with me.

Interviewee 6 and her friends and family in the United States were engaged in similar experiences that fostered a more profound sense of understanding and mutual participation.

The context, described by participants, contributes to the exploration of loneliness and belonging during the COVID-19 pandemic. The initial themes of loneliness identified through the study were indirectly supported by thick descriptions of the contexts of loneliness, even when participants did not identify themselves as lonely in words. The Pandemic was a time of disconnection from family in the United States and even core family units in Germany. In words of participants, loneliness emerged as a sense of disconnection from people and experiences, marked by lack of active participation and the shared experiencing of both positive and challenging moments. Loneliness was understood as the loss of meaningful interaction and deeper communication and was experienced as pain and suffering. The contextual conditions fostered loneliness at intimate, relational, and collective levels, therefore increasing distress.

Research participants defined belonging as a relationship with people, communities, and geographical places. A sense of belonging could be natural or created. Examples of natural belongings included attachments to family or to the home country, and tended to be more enduring and did not dissipate so easily: “With family, is like with old friends, it's like no time has passed. You just can pick up where you left off last time”

(Participant 3). Newly established relationships required regular effort to be sustained. In contrast, belonging to a new country was cultivated through the formation of multiple attachments to smaller groups and communities in the place of current residence. During the lockdown and coronavirus-related restrictions, relationships with local communities in Germany were diminished or temporarily suspended.

Belonging served as a foundation for identity, providing safety to be oneself while offering meaning and purpose. Nonbelonging was experienced as emotionally challenging; it often rendered participants socially invisible: they were accounted for, but their specific situations were ignored or disregarded. Research participants had recently developed a sense of belonging in Germany, which was more susceptible to loss if not actively maintained. Simultaneously, attachment to their country of birth ceased to serve as a primary source of belonging for Participant 3. Participants 1, 3, 4, and 5 described experiencing multiple belongings that were situational, often shifting depending on the context or social group with which they interacted. Participant 6 was undergoing another transitional phase in adjustment; she planned to repatriate. In contrast, Participant 2 had been unable to establish a sense of belonging in Germany beyond her immediate family unit, both prior to and during the pandemic.

Belonging was conceptualized as a reciprocal relationship, reinforced by feedback, copresence, and primary sustained through interaction, mutual engagements, meaningful contributions, and commitments. By restricting activities outside households, cutting the possibility of engagement in Germany, limiting travel, and reducing the chance to reconnect with home countries and families during a crisis,

pandemic-related policies disproportionately increased disconnection and suffering among ITTs.

### **Discrepant Cases**

Discrepant cases in qualitative research refer to individuals whose experiences deviate from the patterns reported by the majority of research participants (see Booth et al., 2013). Having identified such a case, I analyzed the contextual factors that might have caused this experience (see Booth et al., 2013). Although all participants reported disliking isolation and social distancing, Participant 2 disclosed enjoying isolation as a break from the everyday pain of confronting the German community in her place of residence in Germany and from the sense of nonbelonging. Case 2 highlighted that childhood experiences of disconnection, vicarious trauma associated with racism and abuse, and absence of steady childhood belongings, may have influenced the capacity to connect with others and tolerance of negative opinions. Participant 2, though having resided in Germany for 9 years before the pandemic, was still struggling to form attachments with local communities. In this regard, her experience regarding social embeddedness diverged from that of most other participants, whose connection to local people and communities appeared more stable and consistent. Closer attention to this case helped me identify other hidden precursors of social disconnection, such as attachment and social anxiety, and develop a deeper understanding of loneliness and belonging.

## Summary

The purpose of this qualitative study was to understand the experiences of loneliness and belonging among US-born female migrants with transnational family ties during the COVID-19 pandemic in Germany. I interviewed six participants in Zoom using a semistructured interview with three groups of questions: belonging, loneliness and coping. For the research question “How did US-born female migrants with transnational family ties experience loneliness and belonging during the COVID-19 Pandemic in Germany?” six group themes (GETs) emerged: GET 1: belonging and identity; GET 2: relational nature of belonging; GET 3: interactional nature of belonging; GET 4: loneliness is a tribulation of disconnection and nonbelonging; GET 5: coping with loneliness through belonging and engagement; and GET 6: emotional appraisal of the pandemic. By focusing on these cases, I gained insight into the lived experiences of the individuals with transnational family ties, paying attention to their belonging, loneliness, and coping.

In Chapter 5, I discuss the interpretation of the findings within the context of theoretical and conceptual frameworks, as well as the literature findings. I also address the limitations of the study, potential applications of the results, and their impact on positive social change.

## Chapter 5: Discussion, Conclusions, and Recommendations

### Introduction

The purpose of this IPA study was to understand the experiences of loneliness and belonging among U.S.-born female migrants with transnational family ties during the COVID-19 pandemic in Germany. Previous research has mainly focused on loneliness within national borders (Wickens et al., 2021). At the beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic, loneliness researchers focused their attention on elderly citizens (Robb et al., 2020), and health care professionals (Conversano, Marchi, et al., 2020; Romero et al., 2020); later studies identified that women and younger generations were at a greater risk of loneliness (Wickens et al., 2021). According to Lim et al. (2020), migration was a risk factor for loneliness: for example, in a study of Ten Kate and colleagues (2020) migrants were lonelier than local Dutch citizens. Allen and Furlong (2021) suggested that integrating the concept of belonging into studies of loneliness may deepen understanding of loneliness concept. I conducted a study among U.S.-born female migrants with transnational family ties, using the IPA methodology, to understand the experiences of loneliness and belonging during the COVID-19 pandemic in Germany.

I collected rich data from six female participants who were born in the United States and had resided in Germany at some point before and during the COVID-19 pandemic. Based on in-depth analysis and interpretation, I discovered five GETs that corresponded with a research question of the study: (a) belonging and identity; (b) relational nature of belonging; (c) interactional nature of belonging; (d) loneliness is a tribulation of disconnection and nonbelonging; (e) coping with loneliness through

belonging and engagement; and (f) emotional appraisal of the pandemic. These GETs were discussed in detail in Chapter 4.

In this chapter, I interpret the findings from Chapter 4 and discuss how they relate to the current literature presented in Chapter 2 of this study. Furthermore, I explain how the data relates to the theoretical and conceptual framework. Finally, I describe the limitations, conclusions, and implications of the findings for positive social change.

### **Interpretation of the Findings**

In Chapter 2, I provided a detailed literature review on belonging and loneliness in the transnational family context, as well as on loneliness and belonging during the COVID-19 Pandemic. In addition, I described the theory of stress appraisal (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984), the dual continuum model of loneliness and belonging (Lim et al., 2021), and the ETL (Cacioppo & Cacioppo, 2012; 2018a) to develop a framework for scientific inquiry.

The research filled the gap in understanding loneliness through the lens of disconnection at different levels of belonging among women with family ties across various geographical regions, within the context of the worldwide stressful situation of the COVID-19 Pandemic. This study offers further insight into the emotional, physical, and relational aspects of loneliness experiences of women during the Pandemic and their coping with disconnection on different levels.

#### **GET 1: Belonging and Identity**

In GET 1, all participants agreed that a sense of community, fostered by a sense of belonging, gave them a sense of safety to be themselves, which corresponds to the idea

of Lähdesmäki and colleagues (2016), who described that belonging provided space and the capacity to become self. The safety manifested itself in feelings of being rooted, connected, and grounded. This finding is supported by Le Bourdon (2021), who reported that belonging created sensory pathways of trust and safety, and by Umphrey et al. (2020), who found that a sense of belongingness led to greater connection to self, self-compassion, and hope.

Research participants associated non-belonging with a threat to self and own identity, revealing feelings of awkwardness, self-doubt, insecurity, depression and anxiety, which aligns with Dean and colleagues (2019), who reported increased perception of harm and danger among students in low belonging contexts; and Dell et al., (2020), who revealed that stress of non-belonging could result in bodily reactions, such as pain and insomnia. Muradoglu et al. (2022) also found that a low sense of social belonging was likely to increase a sense of inadequacy among women, particularly minority women.

All participants were aware of feelings of non-belonging and described them as emotional suffering. Apart from heavy emotional experiences, participants reported that non-belonging led to perceptions of being dismissed, disregarded, and unseen. According to participants, people who do not belong often exist beyond societal awareness, are being overlooked by communities and societies, with their health and interests frequently taken for granted (Participant 3), or even reduced to food and shelter (Participant 2) on Maslow's pyramid, which are the levels below belonging (see Maslow, 1962). In current research, these feelings and perceptions are often reported in studies on illegal

immigrants (Bendixsen, 2020), showing that individuals with legal residency status are also subject to these emotional conditions.

Most participants spoke about how knowledge of the local language contributed to a sense of belonging, and how a lack of German proficiency affected their communication with locals at work or in the community. This finding aligns with Sobtian (2022), who stated that language increases the sense of agency and improves the likelihood of engaging with the community. Mosanya and Kwiatkowska (2021) also emphasized the importance of language and a global mindset in influencing intercultural adaptation.

## **GET 2: Relational Nature of Belonging**

All participants agreed that belonging was a natural or created relationship to people, communities, and places. Another finding was that belonging was maintained by feedback and reciprocity. The most important relationship that provided a sense of belonging was family. The participants identified their nuclear family in Germany, including husbands and children, and the extended family in the United States, which encompasses parents, siblings, aunts, and uncles as sources of intergenerational family belonging. This corresponds with Albert's (2021) findings that higher levels of family cohesion between parents (first-generation migrants) and children (second-generation migrants) in a transnational context provide intergenerational belonging and serve as a resilience resource in crisis situations.

Friendships, peer relationships, colleagues, and relationships to compatriots represented another source of social belonging. Participants 5 and 6 identified a

relationship to God as essential for a sense of belonging in the world and with people of the same ideology. According to Slavich et al. (2022), social belonging was one of the essential psycho-social strategies for psychological resiliency. This corresponds to the findings of Craig et al. (2022), who highlighted that both maintaining predisaster groups and relationships and creating new postdisaster group memberships positively correlated with posttraumatic growth and psychological well-being after crisis situations.

Participants spoke of territorial belonging, including the nature, country of birth, places of residence, and homes of parents and relatives. They identified the importance of homemaking in Germany, and their attachment to a city and/or a community where they live as a place of belonging. This aligns with Doroud's (2018) findings, which suggested that physical space can create opportunities for being, doing, becoming, and belonging, thereby supporting emotional balance and mental health. Sonn et al. (2017) described leaving and losing one's home, then reestablishing a new home through homemaking in a new country, as part of the migration process. Klingenberg et al. (2021) also stressed that migrants needed a dual belonging that included both previous places of residence and the places where they lived at the time of the interview.

According to the participants, a sense of belonging in a relationship is based on positive feedback from the environment, which provides a feeling of mutual acceptance and welcomeness (P1). Participant 4 was receiving this feedback from her colleagues and clients at work. Others, with no job or a job with no outside contacts, felt they belonged less. The negative feedback or lack of it diminished a sense of belonging. Participant 2 reported an increase in negative feedback on the community level during the pandemic in

Germany, which she attributed to her being born in another country. This aligns with research by Wamsler et al. (2022), which reported activation of ethnic belonging, negative affect, and polarization in relation to migrants in European countries, including Germany.

The relational nature of belonging is grounded in reciprocity. Participants indicated that, in addition to their need to belong, they also needed the environment to recognize their existence and to communicate their needs (the needs of the environment) to involve them in the family or societal process. Furthermore, participants discussed the depth and meaningfulness of such relationships in contrast to being ‘reduced to food and shelter’ recipients on Maslow's pyramid (see Maslow, 1962).

Belonging can be natural or created. According to Ariely (2020), natural belonging was based on ancestry, place of birth, and language acquisition at the national level. All participants mentioned that belonging to the family of origin and to the country of birth were natural. In Germany, in the absence of natural national affiliation, participants as other people with migration biography were creating relationships by participating in activities related to both cultures (Berry & Hou, 2019), by being active in smaller groups with understandable number of participants (Mosanya & Kwiatkowska, 2021), by strengthening belongings to religious groups (Berry & Hou, 2019).

Belonging is not a static concept; it is rather a constant process (Lähdesmäki et al., 2016). Some participants identified belonging to both cultures and countries; however, they were more likely to identify with Europe or the city they lived in rather than Germany, which corresponds with other studies on migration, such as Simonsen

(2018) and Donnalaja and McAvay (2022). Participants also pointed out that the years spent abroad, away from their birth communities, as well as COVID-19 restrictions and the inability to travel, had altered their sense of belonging to their home country.

Additionally, safety measures and social distancing had impacted their sense of belonging to the host country. This finding corresponds with Berry and Hou's (2019) description of multiple belongings among migrants and their benefits for the mental health and well-being of people with migration biographies. The nature of belonging is changing over time and across migration biographies; if not sustained, it disappears over time (Klingenberg et al., 2020).

### **GET 3: Interactional Nature of Belonging**

In GET 3, participants deepened their understanding of belonging, incorporating an interactional perspective. The sense of belonging is the ability to participate, get involved, and contribute to the family and community. According to Participant 6, coexperiencing similar hardships and coping with the novel coronavirus as the family across the ocean, fostered greater understanding, support, and a stronger sense of connection between them and their family members in the United States and Germany. Similarly, having the opportunity to unite with family and friends online to celebrate and grieve during significant transitions, such as birthdays (P 1, 3, 5) and funerals (P 4, 6), contributed to a feeling of belonging despite physical separation. These findings are consistent with the literature on transnational families, which indicates that copresence virtually, in presence, or by proxy protects family cohesion and belonging (Baldassar et

al., 2014; Bryceson, 2019; Merla et al., 2020). The current research suggests that this praxis contributes to a strengthened feeling of national and community belonging.

At the same time, a merely virtual connection lacked the quality and depth described in GET 2. This finding is also consistent with the literature on transnational families, where physical presence is more effective than other forms of coexperiencing (Baldassar, 2008). The inability to be present during critical family situations, such as provision of care, or farewell, and society events, such as police violence against African Americans, resulted in feelings of helplessness, disconnection, and despair. According to various research, helplessness, numbness, rage, and grief were standard reactions to disconnection and diminished belonging (Mutamba et al., 2022).

Many free virtual workshops and lectures in English created a foundation for co-experiencing and participating in something meaningful for participants. Learning together contributed to self-growth and did not require physical presence. However, most participants reported that such events increased their sense of belonging to the United States and, according to Participant 1, increased the number of international friends with whom they are still in touch. This corresponds with the findings of Barros and Albert (2020), who suggested that first-generation migrants are more likely to feel culturally and emotionally attached to their countries of origin. When such deeper attachments exist, it is easier to maintain them through a virtual connection.

On the other hand, helping WhatsApp groups in German was short-lived and superficial, and assisting relationships did not bring satisfaction to most participants, as illustrated by Participant 3 in Chapter 4. This corresponds with findings of Spagnuolo

(2022) that a sense of connectedness diminished after the first lockdown, which, in the context of individuals with migration biography and transnational family ties, can additionally be explained by a lack of cultural contact with the receiving society (Ward et al., 2020). Most participants also mentioned the difficulties in virtual communication with German speakers at work or in communities. Apparently, without physical presence and nonverbal support, the communication in the German language, which is not a mother tongue for the participants, was more challenging than rewarding.

Participant 6 reported using small help packages for neighbors as a strategy to get to know the new German community where they moved to shortly before the pandemic. This is consistent with other studies on transnational families that describe practices of copresence by proxy, for example, small gifts, as manifestations of relational intent (Baldassar et al., 2014; Bryceson, 2019; Merla et al., 2020). Participants used transnational modes of connection to cultivate relationships to neighbors in Germany.

In line with Allen et al. (2021) and Baumeister and Leary (1995), belonging requires interactive measures to maintain its quality. The restrictions associated with COVID-19 safety measures, such as isolation, limited contact, virtual work, travel bans, reduced interactions, and diminished opportunities to sustain levels of belonging. At the same time, a novel situation created new opportunities for connection.

#### **GET 4: Loneliness is a Tribulation of Disconnection and Nonbelonging.**

When describing loneliness, all participants described it as a suffering characterized by physical symptoms and negative emotions. Participants expressed feelings of sadness, despair, depression, and grief, as well as pain, throat, and stomach

problems. Multiple studies on mental (Bu, Zaninotto, & Fancourt, 2020; Golaszewski et al., 2022; Loeffler & Steptoe, 2021; Smith et al., 2020) and physical health consequences of loneliness support the findings (Domènech-Abella et al., 2019; Gizdic et al., 2022; McDonald et al., 2022; Ward et al., 2023).

One of the findings in this study was that perceived loneliness caused a shift in the view of self. Participants P1, P2, and P3 perceived the lonely self as weak, helpless, and insecure, whereas participants P5 and P3 viewed the lonely self as lacking energy and self-efficacy. This finding shows a connection between a ‘lonely self’ and a ‘migrant self’, and it is supported by previous research that reported a shift in view of self, and its further renegotiation during the course of migration among migrants (Chantah et al., 2025; Marschall, 2017; Narhal, 2007). Given that migration is a vulnerability factor for loneliness (Regenmortel, 2022; Ten Kate, 2020), future research might examine shifts in self-perception regarding loneliness among locally born and migrant populations.

For all participants, loneliness was associated with disconnection: from self, from family and friends, from people, and from meaningful roles and activities. These findings align with McKenna-Plumley et al. (2023) and Franklin and Tranter (2021), who view loneliness as a state of disconnection from people and environments. Also, research on migration reported these types of disconnection among people with migration biography: disconnection from a sense of self (Narhal, 2007), increased loneliness and distress when separated from families and living alone (DeWitte & Van Regenmortel, 2022; Groake et al., 2020; McDonald et al., 2022).

According to participants, COVID-protective measures forced a massive disconnection at all levels of loneliness on the dyadic and relational level, separation from parents, grandparents, who were living in the United States, or the daughter, who was studying abroad. Two participants described a self-isolation from their nuclear family when coming home from work as loneliness. Since this type of connectedness requires affinities made through sensory kinesthetic signals, such as touch, voice, smell, and sound, they cannot be replicated on a virtual level. Disconnection from the family of origin and extended family in a critically dangerous situation, when natural family dynamics forced families to keep together, increased the urge for physical proximity and can explain the sense of emotional pain, bitterness, and helplessness described by participants (Simola et al., 2023).

Disconnection from experiences and meaningful activities may result in collective loneliness (Cacioppo & Cacioppo, 2012) and may occur among migrants and people undergoing life-changing transitions. Cultural ties and workplace relationships promote prosocial behavior and cooperation, and prevent this type of loneliness (Albert, 2021; Cacioppo & Cacioppo, 2012, 2018a; DeWitte & Van Regenmortel, 2022). Previous research has prioritized migrants' kin, interpersonal, and social networks as potential antidotes to loneliness (Ten Kate et al., 2020). Current research outlines the failure of meaningful contributions and interactions with the environment as a source of loneliness during the pandemic. This is the area where a sense of loneliness intersects with a diminished sense of social belonging.

### **GET 5: Coping with Loneliness through Belonging and Engagement**

This study was grounded in the stress appraisal theory (see Lazarus & Folkman, 1984; Park & Folkman, 1997; Smith & Lazarus, 1990), examining experiences through the lens of appraisal and coping with stressful situations, and the evolutionary concept of loneliness (see Cacioppo & Cacioppo, 2012, 2018a). According to the stress appraisal theory, when individuals faced the threat of the COVID-19 pandemic and associated safety measures, they first assessed their social connections (see Schmidt et al, 2010), then they proceeded with primary appraisal of relevance of the situation, and secondary appraisal of coping and future expectation (see Schmidt et al, 2010; Smith & Lazarus, 1990). Participants reported that assessing belonging and social contacts constituted the initial step in developing coping strategies during the pandemic.

Previous research repeatedly showed that migrants were lonelier than their local counterparts, and this was dependent on migration-related contextual factors, such as integration into a new culture and the formation of new relationships (De Witte & Van Regenmortel, 2022). In current study, all six participants reported a connection between loneliness and a low sense of belonging. At the same time, participants did not experience loneliness when alone in situations where they felt a sense of belonging. This finding corresponds with Albert (2021), who suggests that belonging is a protective factor against loneliness. Below, the researcher discusses how belongings helped alleviate feelings of loneliness.

The participants employed various coping strategies that could be divided into three groups: (a) coping through physical contact and connection, (b) coping through

virtual connection and (c) coping through imagined and remembered connection. The first group included seeking support from attachment figures and offering support to family members, developing new games, revisiting traditional board games, teaching children cooking skills, and preparing old family recipes within their nuclear families. Cuddling with pets played a positive role in emotional regulation. For some participants, work, physical visits to the office, and communicating with colleagues were sources of belonging and coping with social loneliness. The participants also tried to stay connected to communities and neighbors in Germany, they were helping older neighbors and buying food from local vendors. Both community engagements and work provided positive feedback, enabled contributions, and gave a sense of meaningfulness.

Most connections with their extended families and home countries were sustained virtually. It provided opportunities to participate in events they would otherwise miss. Some participants attended English-speaking prayer groups, which gave a feeling of community and a deeper connection. This finding aligned with other research on the crucial role of technology during the COVID-19 pandemic among both local and migrant populations (Pandey et al., 2021; Shah et al., 2020). The command of language and communication in English gave some of the participants a sense of connection with their home country. Several participants reported being members of migrant organizations that connected people who spoke a similar language and shared similar experiences.

The third subtheme was coping through imagined or remembered contact. Participants described imagined connections as healing and self-regulating moments. Own spirituality and contact with God, imagining contact with family members who

were far away, and longing to see them, walking through the landscape of one's own childhood, knowing it would always be there, created an intensive positive impact and played an essential role in coping with loneliness and other stressors of the COVID-19 Pandemic. These findings aligned with research on transnational families, revealing that missing and longing were used to maintain family relationships (Baldassar, 2008). Further research conducted during the pandemic showed that imagined interactions, or communicating with an imagined counterpart, served to maintain relationships and compensate for their absence in situations of physical distancing (Sealy, 2021).

#### **GET 6: Emotional Appraisal of the Pandemic**

The COVID-19 pandemic, from 2020 to 2023, presented a context for studying loneliness and belonging. In line with the stress appraisal theory (see Lazarus & Folkman, 1984; Park & Folkman, 1997; Smith & Lazarus, 1990), the participants made the primary appraisal and evaluated the Pandemic. Participants described the pandemic as a drastic change that brought uncertainty, fear, disconnection, loss and grieving. The change affected the self, professional existence, children, relationships, and connections with the family and the home country. The characteristics of the novel virus and shifts in social functioning generated higher levels of uncertainty and fear about getting sick, infecting close people, children catching the virus, distant relatives, and one's own inability to provide help and care. These perceptions correspond with many studies that investigated the COVID-19 related stressors. Other studies reported elevated levels of uncertainty during the COVID-19 Pandemic and its relationship to fear (Gullo et al., 2023; Rettie & Daniels, 2021). The increased fear of COVID was also observed in other

studies; for example, a meta-analysis of 44 studies by Luo et al. (2021) revealed heightened pandemic-related fears, especially among females. Contextual factors indirectly explain loneliness and perceptions of belonging and non-belonging.

During the COVID-19 pandemic, ITTs in Germany felt double pressure due to disconnection from their home countries and limited local connections. The pandemic fractured established transnational family structures and the support systems they rely upon. Virtual connections worked when a sense of belonging was already established; newer or weaker connections required more effort and eventually copresence and active engagement. As established in research studies, the emotional burden of non-belonging was increased both by minority status in the receiving communities and countries (Albert, 2021; Bendixsen, 2020; Sonn et al., 2017) and by pandemic-related disconnection from home cultures and countries (Lewis et al., 2022; Spagnuolo, 2022).

### **Discrepant Cases**

While most research participants described the emotional pressures associated with loneliness and disconnection, one participant offered a more ambivalent account, reporting both a sense of burden and a sense of relief when she was not required to engage with the local community—a community in which she had struggled to integrate and belong. This discrepant case suggested that, for this participant, the distress associated with non-belonging outweighed the suffering linked to loneliness. Her experience, therefore, illuminated a deeper set of conditions under which the general relationship between loneliness and belonging may have operated, indicating that the pain of social exclusion can, in some contexts, supersede the discomfort of solitude.

### **Limitations of the Study**

Although the study provided insight into the experiences of loneliness and belonging among women with migration biographies and transnational ties during the COVID-19 pandemic, it had some limitations. As noted in Chapter 1, a significant limitation was the selection of research participants. The small sample size of six participants diminished the generalizability of the study's findings to broader populations. It limited their transferability to people with other socioeconomic positions, migration status, or educational status. This limitation was particularly salient given that the study focuses on middle-class women. This view contrasted with the dominant focus of much prior research, which tended to examine more socioeconomically deprived migrant populations.

Additionally, the researcher encountered difficulties in finding research participants ready to take part in the interview study and had to publish the invitation on social media twice. The subjective nature of the qualitative methodology introduced another limitation stemming from the researcher's bias (see Morse et al., 2002). The researcher undertook efforts to eliminate unintentional bias and increase confirmability at various stages of the research process through journalling (see Ahmed, 2024; Edwards, 2023). Dependability was enhanced through methodological documentation and the audit trail (Ahmed, 2024).

### **Recommendations**

Most pandemic studies investigated belonging within nation-state boundaries; for example, Saiz, González-Sanguino, et al. (2021) in Spain, Brance et al. (2022) in Greece,

and John et al. (2021) in the United Kingdom. A similar pattern was observed in studies on loneliness: Li & Wang (2020) examined loneliness in the UK, Wickens et al. (2021) in Canada, and Lepinteur et al. (2022) in Germany. Very few studies have examined individuals with migration biographies, considering both countries and cultures, as well as loneliness or disconnection within their respective societies and groups (see Albert, 2021). Findings of the present study advanced current knowledge by exploring different levels of loneliness and multiple dimensions of belonging among participants with migration biographies. The results demonstrated that individuals with transnational ties often held multiple belongings, highlighting the interactional and relational nature of belonging across intimate, relational, and collective domains.

### **Recommendations for Future Research**

Future studies should examine the nature of the relationship between loneliness and belonging more systematically, with attention to specific categories of loneliness—such as intimate, relational, and collective forms (Cacioppo & Cacioppo, 2012, 2018a)—and corresponding types of belonging, including dyadic, social/intergenerational, and collective/cultural/national belongings. Additionally, research could be extended to other populations undergoing major life transitions or crisis-related disruptions, such as widowhood, divorce, job loss, retirement, or relocation to a new geographic area. Exploring how trajectories of loneliness and belonging intersect and are being maintained in such contexts could offer valuable insights into the protective role of belonging during periods of instability.

## **Practice Recommendations**

Given the adverse effects of loneliness and unbelonging, the outcomes of the study may support the design of community-based programs and targeted interventions to prevent specific types of loneliness and strengthen belonging among migrant populations, for example, by promoting the development of small substitute groups to foster belonging and reduce disconnection. Another implication was to raise societal awareness of how the pandemic and similar measures doubled the nonbelonging and suffering during the pandemic.

## **Implications**

### **Positive Social Change**

The goal of psychological science is to promote desirable social outcomes such as healthy self-esteem, well-being, positive social functioning, and mental health (see Kitlinger & Wilkinson, 2004). Having highlighted the experiences of loneliness and belonging, the study contributed to the knowledge of how individuals perceived and experienced changing environments during the COVID-19 pandemic and during the migration process, and how they coped with these societal changes in the past, and what direction the coping should take in the future to achieve desirable social outcomes. The findings illuminated the belonging and connection as building grounds of a socially stable and mentally healthy self; furthermore, the research showed how thwarted belonging and nonbelonging increased a sense of disconnection and impacted certain levels of loneliness. The findings highlighted the importance of belongings in a multi-faceted world. Overall, the study contributed to positive social change by demonstrating how

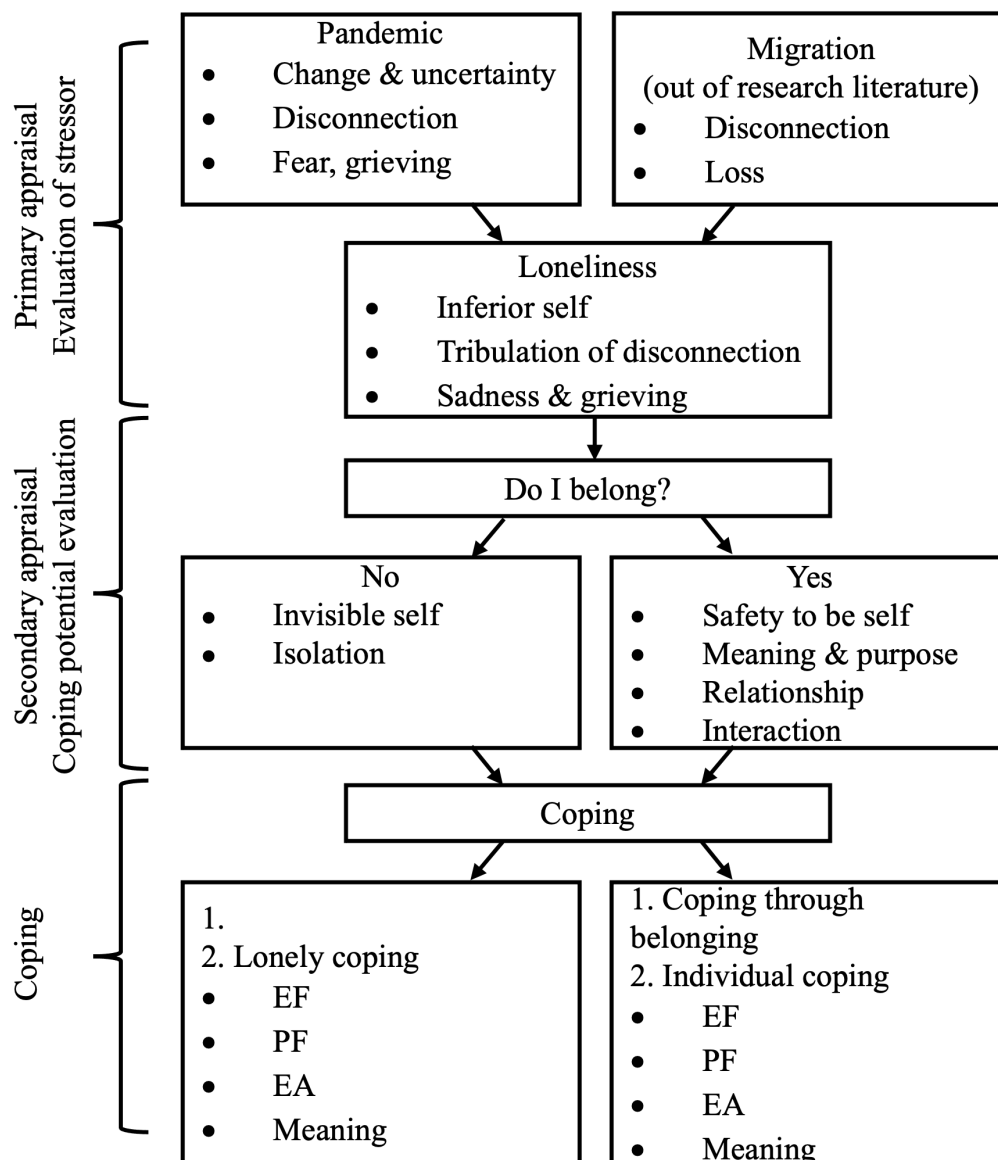
belonging can support positive social outcomes in migration, social crises, future pandemics, disasters, and the growing issue of loneliness (see Demarinis, 2020). In addition to migrants, these findings can be applicable to other individuals in life transitions. In the event of future pandemics, it is advisable to strengthen belonging by increasing relationships and interaction within groups and communities, rather than limiting them. Belonging may be an effective way to cope with stress and loneliness.

### **Theoretical and Conceptual Implications**

Lazarus and Folkman's (1984) Stress Appraisal Theory, along with its later extensions and applications, provided the conceptual foundation for this study (Austenfeld & Stanton, 2004; Park & Folkman, 1997; Smith & Lazarus, 1993). The COVID-19 pandemic presented a threat to well-being and social connections of participants (primary appraisal), migration biography as a stressor had a similar disconnecting impact, leading participants to many sufferings including loneliness; during the secondary appraisal participants reviewed the coping resources that included social embeddedness (belonging) and individual coping capacity; the third stage was the coping with the use of social connection, and personal or lonely coping, when social coping was not available.

**Figure 7**

*COVID-19, Loneliness, Belonging: Theoretical Implication*



When investigating the relationship between loneliness and belonging, I was unable to employ the dual continuum model of loneliness and belonging (Lim et al., 2021). According to the model, loneliness and belonging coexisted; loneliness was associated with both higher and lower levels of belonging; and belonging was related to both higher and lower levels of loneliness. However, the findings align better with Cacioppo and Cacioppo's (2012) dimensions of loneliness and levels of belonging that correspond to these types: (a) dyadic or emotional belonging, (b) social belonging (intergenerational and peer), and (c) collective belonging (nation, culture, larger groups). The findings of this study emphasize the relational and interactional nature of belonging across these levels. The research showed that individuals who are well connected at one level, for example, the dyadic level, can still experience relational or collective loneliness. The exact nature of connection requires further investigation.

### **Conclusion**

The purpose of this IPA study was to understand the experiences of loneliness and belonging among women with migration biography and transnational ties during the COVID-19 pandemic in Germany. I chose the stress appraisal theory (see Lazarus & Folkman, 1984; Smith & Lazarus, 1990) to explore the experiences through the lens of appraisal and coping with a stressful situation. Theory guided the development of the interview schedule. I chose IPA methodology primarily because it provided the framework to understand the experiences of a particular group in a given context (see Motta & Larkin, 2023). The phenomenological analysis resulted in six GETs: (a) belonging and identity; (b) relational nature of belonging; (c) interactional nature of

belonging; (d) loneliness is a tribulation of disconnection and nonbelonging; (e) coping with loneliness through belonging and engagement; and (f) emotional appraisal of the pandemic.

The study's key findings revealed that belonging encompassed both a relationship with oneself and others, as well as an interaction with them. Loneliness, on the other hand, was characterized by a painful experience of disconnection from oneself and others, resulting from or preceding the feelings of nonbelonging. Furthermore, the study highlighted the importance of coping with loneliness by enhancing feelings of belonging and social connectedness. The study addressed the gap in understanding the complex nature of women's experiences of loneliness and belonging in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic, through migration biography and transnational ties. Collectively, the findings of this study suggest that emotional, relational, and collective dimensions of loneliness are intertwined with multiple levels of belonging: it was possible, for example, to be surrounded by people in one situation and yet experience loneliness and a sense of non-belonging in others.

The findings indicated that in the context of prolonged crises, women with transnational ties experience a "double burden" arising from disconnections in both their countries of origin and their countries of residence. This insight remains underexplored in the existing literature. The results of the study further emphasized how physical, virtual, and imagined coping strategies could foster resilience in the face of these intersecting disconnections. By understanding the complex interplay among various forms of loneliness and belonging, this research illuminated the psychological experiences of

transnational populations in contexts of sustained disruption and provided a basis for developing population-based measures for prevention and intervention.

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## Appendix A: Screening Instrument

Dear Participant, thank you for agreeing to participate in the research.

Please fill in the data below:

1. Age:
2. Gender:
3. Marital status:
4. Country of birth:
5. Country of current residency:
6. Year(s) of arrival to and residency in Germany:
7. Did you have family members residing in Germany during COVID-19 Pandemic? (Dec. 2019 – May 2023)
  - a. If yes, please list (please use family roles, such as “sister”)
8. Did you have family members residing in the USA during COVID-19 Pandemic?
  - a. If yes, please list (please use family roles, such as “sister”)
9. Did you feel lonely during COVID-19 Pandemic? (Hughes et al, 2004).
  - a. hardly ever or never
  - b. some of the time
  - c. often

Respondents answering (b) or (c) will be invited to take part in the future investigation.

## Appendix B: Interview Schedule

## A. Primary appraisal: importance and relevance of belonging as a context for loneliness.

1. Could you, to begin with, describe belonging to me in your own words, please?
  - a. What does it feel like to belong?
  - b. How do you know you belong?
  - c. Where do you belong?
2. What is nonbelonging?
  - a. Are there places/groups/situations you think you need to belong, but you don't?
  - b. Describe nonbelonging.
  - c. What do you think about yourself when you don't belong?
3. Please describe your experience of belonging/unbelonging during the COVID-19 Pandemic.
  - a. Did anything/anyone increase your sense of belonging? Who/what was in charge?
  - b. Did anything/anyone decrease the sense of belonging? Who/what was to blame?
  - c. How did your sense of belonging change during the Pandemic?
    - i. to your country of residence?
    - ii. to your country of origin (Prompts: what about close relationships: spouse, partners, close friends; social connections, such as friends and extended family, school or workplace, ethnic and cultural

peers; what about community, institutions, meaningful place in the society)?

4. How did being a member of a transnational family (having family members in the US and Germany) during the COVID-19 pandemic affect how you see yourself concerning belonging? (Do you feel more German, American, both, or neither—nor?)

B. Secondary appraisal and appraisal outcome.

1. Could you describe loneliness to me in your own words, please?
  - a. How does it feel to be lonely? (In your body, in your mind)
  - b. What do you do or not do when you feel lonely?
  - c. Does this change over time?
  - d. How do you understand why you feel lonely?
2. How would you describe yourself as a lonely person?
  - a. What would sum you up?
  - b. How do you think/feel about yourself when you are lonely?
3. Tell me about your experiences of loneliness during the COVID-19 Pandemic in Germany.
  - a. How did the Pandemic affect the quantity, quality, and frequency of relationships and contacts with individuals, social groups, and communities?
  - b. What/who were you missing? Who/ what was there instead?
  - c. What/who were you longing for?

4. In which situations/ contexts did you feel lonely: family, peers, work, community, extended family, within country, across countries
5. How did having your family in different countries influence or didn't influence your being lonely?
6. In which way do you think loneliness was connected to belonging in your life experience during the Pandemic?

#### C. Coping - Translation of Action Tendency into the Coping Activity

1. How did you deal with loneliness and belonging experiences during the COVID-19 Pandemic in Germany?
  - a. Did anything/anyone make you feel less lonely? Who/ what was in charge?
  - b. Did anything/anyone make you feel more lonely? Who/what was to blame?
2. What did you do to belong?
  - a. To your family?
  - b. What did you do to maintain belonging in Germany?
  - c. What did you do to maintain belonging in the USA?
3. How did the sense of familyhood change or not change during the COVID-19 Pandemic? (Prompt: What did you do, how did you keep connected, and what was new during the Pandemic?)
4. How was it to be you (to be in your place) during the COVID-19 Pandemic? (Did something change, or stayed the same?)

Before we move on to the final section of our interview, is there anything you want to add?