

# The two meanings of meaning: An empirical differential basis for Brazilian studies on grief

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### Abstract

This article stems from the need for empirical support for a conceptual distinction between the two terms used to translate the concept of meaning in Brazilian studies on grief. The objective was to assess the general population's opinions and understanding regarding the terms *significado* and *sentido*. Forty-nine adults ( $M = 40$  years;  $SD = 11.9$ ) from 11 different states across the country participated in the study. After reading a vignette about a grief case, participants answered a questionnaire, and part of their responses was used to generate word clouds through the Wordle program. According to the majority of participants (77.6%), *significado* and *sentido* cannot be considered synonyms. The analysis of the word clouds suggested that *significado* is linked to aspects of understanding the history of the loss, whereas *sentido* relates to engaging in activities that provide pleasure and satisfaction in life. These differences suggest that Brazilian Portuguese speakers tend to reproduce the vocabulary distinction observed in other languages and endorse theoretical proposals found in both Brazilian and international scientific literature.

**Keywords:** bereavement, meaning, sense, qualitative research, public opinion

### SIGNIFICADO VERSUS SENTIDO: UMA BASE EMPÍRICA DIFERENCIAL PARA OS ESTUDOS BRASILEIROS SOBRE O LUTO

#### Resumo

Este artigo parte da necessidade de suporte empírico para uma distinção conceitual entre os dois termos utilizados como tradução do conceito de meaning em estudos brasileiros sobre o luto. O objetivo foi avaliar a opinião e compreensão da população geral acerca dos termos significado e sentido. Participaram da pesquisa 49 adultos ( $M = 40$  anos;  $DP = 11,9$ ) de 11 diferentes Estados do País. Após a leitura de uma vinheta sobre um caso de luto, os participantes responderam a um questionário, e parte das respostas foi utilizada para gerar nuvens de palavras por meio do programa Wordle. Na opinião da maioria dos participantes (77,6%), significado e sentido não podem ser considerados sinônimos. Pela análise das nuvens de palavras, depreendeu-se que significado é ligado a aspectos da compreensão sobre a história da perda, e sentido é relacionado à realização de atividades que proporcionam prazer e satisfação na vida. Essas diferenças permitem presumir que os falantes de língua portuguesa tendem a reproduzir a distinção vocabular verificada em outros idiomas e a endossar propostas teóricas encontradas nas literaturas científicas brasileira e internacional.

**Palavras-chave:** luto, significado, sentido, pesquisa qualitativa, opinião pública

### SIGNIFICADO VERSUS SENTIDO: UNA BASE EMPÍRICA DIFERENCIAL PARA LOS ESTUDIOS BRASILEÑOS SOBRE EL DUELO

#### Resumen

Este artículo parte de la necesidad de contar con un respaldo empírico para una distinción conceptual entre los dos términos utilizados como traducción del concepto de meaning en estudios brasileños sobre el duelo. El objetivo fue evaluar la opinión y comprensión de la población general sobre los términos significado y sentido. Participaron en la investigación 49 adultos ( $M = 40$  años;  $DE = 11,9$ ) provenientes de 11 diferentes estados del país. Tras la lectura de una viñeta sobre un caso de duelo, los participantes respondieron a un cuestionario, y parte de las respuestas se utilizó para generar nubes de palabras mediante el programa Wordle. Según la opinión de la mayoría de los participantes (77,6%), significado y sentido no pueden considerarse sinónimos. Del análisis de las nubes de palabras se infiere que significado está vinculado a aspectos relacionados con la comprensión de la historia de la pérdida, mientras que sentido se relaciona con la realización de actividades que brindan placer y satisfacción en la vida. Estas diferencias permiten suponer que los hablantes de lengua portuguesa tienden a reproducir la distinción léxica observada en otros idiomas y a respaldar propuestas teóricas presentes en las literaturas científicas brasileña e internacional.

**Palabras clave:** duelo, significado, sentido, investigación cualitativa, opinión pública

The growing and significant interest of psychological science in the concept of meaning over the past hundred years has not been accompanied by the establishment of a consensus regarding the definition of the term. Despite advances in this direction, it is only possible to identify a few points of convergence in the literature on the subject, such as the multidimensionality and relevance of this construct (Leontiev, 2016a). The difficulty in integrating different theoretical perspectives on meaning hampers the development of a unified research paradigm, but it does not necessarily imply an insurmountable incompatibility (Medlock, 2015).

The fact that this construct “eludes” a single, definitive psychological operationalization is related to the peculiar nature of the object of study. Meaning is not exclusively a trait, nor a state; it does not consist solely of an idea or narrative; it is both objective and subjective in nature; it cannot be fully grasped through either a cognitive or an affective lens alone; it may be socially and culturally imposed, constructed, or discovered (Leontiev, 2016b). Additionally, it can relate to two fundamental perspectives: (1) understanding or (2) the purpose/significance of something (Dezelic, 2016).

This, consequently, is reflected in clinical practice. Given that certain assumptions about meaning are virtually unverifiable, it is recommended that professionals be aware of their own stances regarding the nature and definition of this construct. It is essential to clearly define the epistemological and ontological principles, for example, that guide the development of the clinical competencies deemed necessary (Vos et al., 2019).

In the field of interventions with bereaved individuals, the fruitful development of theories on meaning cannot be denied—especially since it is considered a crucial variable in the process of adapting to loss. However, grief theories that focus on the importance of meaning inherit the challenges involved in conceptualizing this construct (Davis et al., 1998; Davis et al., 2000; Hibberd, 2013).

One of these challenges is linguistic in nature, as the term “meaning” lacks an implicit and obvious understanding for both laypeople and specialists, despite its frequent use by both. Especially in the English language, the word “meaning” can be used to refer to different, not necessarily equivalent, phenomena. In other languages, there are often different words for different things, such as the German pairs *Sinn* (sense) and *Bedeutung* (meaning), and the Russian terms *smysl* (sense) and *znachenie* (meaning). This contributes to the difficulty in translating meaning from English into other languages (Leontiev, 2004, 2013).

In Brazilian studies on grief, *significado* and *sentido* are often used interchangeably to refer to meaning, in an indiscriminate yet apparently distinct manner. In the research report by Santos et al. (2019, p. 6), the authors state that “the experience of parents losing a child in the hospital is filled with *significados* and *sentidos* [our emphasis] that intertwine throughout the grieving process”. In the theoretical framework of Luna (2020, p. 2), it is proposed that the grieving process both “concerns a network of relationships that produce *significados* [our emphasis] around suffering” and “involves a complex intersubjective and self-organizing construction of narratives and *sentidos* [our emphasis] about the experienced loss”. Meanwhile,

the studies by Campos et al. (2020) and Bezerra et al. (2022) aimed to investigate simultaneously the *significados* and *sentidos* of maternal grief experiences.

Given the lack of explicit definitions for these terms, Nascimento (2023, p. 1011) proposed a conceptual differentiation, describing *significado* as “the result of reflecting retrospectively on the history of the loss and the relationship between the bereaved and the deceased”, and *sentido* as “the process of identifying and realizing possibilities for self-configuration within the relationship between the bereaved and the lived world”. Considering that this proposal was not accompanied by empirical support, the objective of the present study was to assess the general population’s opinions and understanding regarding the terms *significado* and *sentido* in the context of grief processes.

### Method

This was an exploratory qualitative study utilizing a vignette, which consists of a short story about a hypothetical person and scenario (Murphy et al., 2021). In this case, the vignette was followed by open-ended questions aimed at capturing the participants’ opinions and definitions regarding specific phenomena presented in the scenario (Gray et al., 2017).

### Sample and Procedures

Participant recruitment took place between September and December 2023 through posts shared on the instant messaging app WhatsApp and the social media platform Instagram. No paid promotion methods were used, and the Instagram account used for dissemination was set to public (i.e., accessible to anyone). The invitation was directed exclusively to adults (aged 18 or older). The study was accessible following the reading and acceptance of an informed consent form and was conducted via an online questionnaire hosted on the Google Forms platform.

The research was conducted in two phases. The first phase consisted of a pilot study with purposive sampling, aimed at evaluating the comprehensibility and adequacy of the vignette and questions, as well as suggesting improvements if necessary. This phase included eight participants aged between 25 and 67, all with higher education or postgraduate degrees, residing in four Brazilian states (*Mato Grosso, Minas Gerais, Distrito Federal, and Bahia*); only one of the participants was male. Half of them were psychologists, and all reported having experienced a grieving process.

In the second phase, recruitment was carried out through snowball and convenience sampling, and the sample size was limited by the recruitment period. Table 1 shows the characteristics of the 49 participants ( $M = 40$  years;  $SD = 11.9$ ) in the second phase.

The study was approved by the Ethics Committee of the University of Cuiabá under approval number 6.278.333. Prospective participants were informed in advance that participation would involve reading a hypothetical case describing the emotional and behavioral reactions of a woman following the death of her husband from cancer, in order to minimize the potential for emotional distress among those who may have had a similar experience. Nevertheless, at the end of the study, contact information was provided for two public emotional support services: one

specifically aimed at bereavement support; and the other one aimed at a psychologist with specialized training and experience in working with grieving individuals.

**Table 1**  
*Sample Characteristics*

Characteristic	N (%)
<b>Age</b>	
18 to 19	1 (2)
20 to 24	3 (6.1)
25 to 29	5 (10.2)
30 to 34	9 (18.4)
35 to 39	4 (8.2)
40 to 44	11 (22.4)
45 to 49	5 (10.2)
50 to 54	6 (12.2)
55 to 59	1 (2)
60 to 64	3 (6.1)
70 to 74	1 (2)
<b>Sex/gender</b>	
Cisgender woman	37 (75.5)
Cisgender man	10 (20.4)
Transgender woman	1 (2)
Non-binary	1 (2)
<b>State of residence</b>	
Mato Grosso	14 (28.6)
São Paulo	9 (18.4)
Rio de Janeiro	6 (12.2)
Paraíba	6 (12.2)
Pernambuco	5 (10.2)
Bahia	3 (6.1)
Minas Gerais	2 (4.1)
Distrito Federal	1 (2)
Ceará	1 (2)
Maranhão	1 (2)
Paraná	1 (2)
<b>Religion</b>	
Catholic	15 (30.6)
None (No religion)	13 (26.5)
Evangelical	8 (16.3)
Spiritism	7 (14.3)
Umbanda, candomblé or other Afro-Brazilian religions	2 (4.1)
Atheism	2 (4.1)
Judaism	1 (2)
Other	1 (2)
<b>Education level</b>	
Graduate degree	30 (61.2)
Undergraduate degree/College degree	17 (34.7)
High school	2 (4.1)
<b>Marital status</b>	
Single	23 (46.9)
Married or in a stable union	20 (40.8)
Divorced, legally separated, or judicially separated	4 (8.2)
Widowed	2 (4.1)

**Table 1**  
*Sample Characteristics*

Characteristic	N (%)
<b>Race/color</b>	
White	32 (65.3)
Brown (Pardo)	11 (22.4)
Black	5 (10.2)
Indigenous	1 (2)
<b>Population category</b>	
Psychologist	25 (51)
Non-psychologist	24 (49)
<b>Have you ever experienced a grieving process?</b>	
Yes	46 (93.9)
No	3 (6.1)

**Instruments**

***Vignette***

The vignette used in this study (fully reproduced in Table 2) was developed through a free translation and adaptation of the hypothetical case presented by MacKinnon et al. (2013) in a publication discussing the implications of theories centered on the construct of meaning for psychotherapy with individuals grieving the death of a loved one due to cancer. In the pilot phase, the vast majority of participants indicated that the language used in the vignette and in the questions about the case was sufficiently clear and appropriate for individuals over the age of 18. No significant modifications to this instrument were suggested. In the second phase, participants were informed that they could return to the vignette at any point during the study whenever needed.

Table 2

Vignette

Joana is a 30-year-old white woman, heterosexual, and comes from a family with a Catholic background. She currently lives in a very busy city in the state of São Paulo. Joana has a college degree and has been working as a dentist for 10 years. Last year, Joana's husband died after living with a prostate cancer diagnosis for two years. They had been married for five years. Recently, Joana sold the house she had shared with her husband and moved into a smaller apartment. Following her husband's death, Joana took a three-month leave from work, but has since returned to her full-time job. Four months after his passing, she sought therapy with a psychologist in private practice. According to the professional's assessment, Joana demonstrated preserved intellectual functioning and emotions appropriate to her situation. She described the transition to widowhood as stressful and, at times, unbearable. She reported mood fluctuations, with alternating moments of happiness and despair. Joana shared that she has struggled to reintegrate into life following her husband's death; for instance, she finds little pleasure in activities that she used to enjoy. Additionally, she reports difficulty forming and maintaining connections with people and activities that feel meaningful to her. Joana stated that she is well supported by a network of family and friends, yet she continues to feel isolated and disconnected, expressing that "no one understands" her loss and the changes in her life. She also feels pressure from others to "move on", although she does not agree with the advice. Joana turns to her faith in an attempt to make sense of her loss, but she remains confused by her recent experiences and dissatisfied with the way she is coping. After an initial evaluation, Joana's psychologist understood that her difficulties could be framed in two ways: a lack of *significado* and a lack of *sentido*.

Questionnaires

Before reading the vignette, participants completed a questionnaire to collect personal information, as presented in Table 1. After reading the case, participants were asked whether they believed *significado* and *sentido* could be considered the same thing in the context of a person's grieving process. Three response options were provided: (A) disagree; (B) neither agree nor disagree; and (C) agree. Next, they were asked to indicate the extent to which they agreed with the suggestion that the character in the vignette was dealing with a lack of *significado* and/or *sentido*, using a 5-point scale: 1 – strongly disagree; 2 – partly disagree; 3 – neither agree nor disagree; 4 – partly agree; 5 – strongly agree. Table 3 shows the percentage of responses given by participants in this first part of the questionnaire.

Participants were then asked to respond to the following open-ended questions: (I) In your opinion, which aspects of the case help to understand that Joana may be dealing with a lack of *significado/sentido*?; (II) What do you think may have contributed to the lack of *significado/sentido* in Joana's grieving process?; (III) What do you think will have changed in Joana's case once there is no longer a lack of *significado/sentido*?; (IV) Which aspects of the case contributed to your opinion that Joana is not dealing with a lack of *significado/sentido*?

**Table 3**  
*Descriptive statistics of the questionnaire – N (%)*

"In the grieving process, <i>significado</i> and <i>sentido</i> can be considered the same thing."	
(A) Disagree	38 (77.6%)
"To what extent do you agree with the suggestion that Joana is dealing with a lack of <i>significado</i> ?"	
Strongly disagree	8 (21.1%)
Partly disagree	8 (21.1%)
Neither agree nor disagree	2 (5.3%)
Partly agreed	7 (18.4%)
Strongly agree	13 (34.2%)
"To what extent do you agree with the suggestion that Joana is dealing with a lack of <i>sentido</i> ?"	
Strongly disagree	4 (10.5%)
Partly disagree	3 (7.9%)
Neither agree nor disagree	1 (2.6%)
Partly agreed	10 (26.3%)
Strongly agree	20 (52.6%)
(B) Neither agree nor disagree	7 (14.3%)
(C) Agree	4 (8.2%)
"To what extent do you agree with the suggestion that Joana is dealing with a lack of <i>significado/sentido</i> ?"	
Strongly disagree	0 (0.0%)
Partly disagree	3 (27.3%)
Neither agree nor disagree	2 (18.2%)
Partly agreed	4 (36.4%)
Strongly agree	2 (18.2%)

**Analysis Procedures**

Word clouds were generated using the Wordle software (Feinberg, 2009) based on clusters of responses to the open-ended questionnaire items. A word cloud is a type of text visualization in which the most frequently used words are highlighted. In qualitative research, comparing word clouds can be useful in identifying differences in ideas across various texts or interview transcripts, for example (McNaught & Lam, 2010).

Prior to generating the word clouds, each textual corpus underwent grammatical and spelling revision. Only punctuation marks—such as ellipses, quotation marks, hyphens, slashes, parentheses, colons, and question marks—were removed. The software was configured to display a maximum of the 50 most significant words, following the procedure adopted by Vilela et al. (2020).



## Results

The majority of participants (77.6%; n = 38) disagreed with the statement that, in the context of grief, *significado* and *sentido* can be considered the same. Within this group, only 21.1% (n = 8) and 10.5% (n = 4) completely disagreed with the idea that the vignette character was dealing with a lack of *significado* and *sentido*, respectively. Furthermore, a greater number of participants totally or partially agreed (78.9%; n = 30) with the suggestion that the character was experiencing a lack of *sentido*, compared to those who totally or partially agreed (52.6%; n = 20) that she was experiencing a lack of *significado*.

Figure 1 presents the word cloud generated from the combined responses of this group to questions I, II, and III, specifically referring to *significado*. The prominence of words such as understanding (*compreensão*), acceptance (*aceitação*), death (*morte*), and religion (*religião*) suggests that, according to participants, the lack of *significado* is associated with confusion and the search for understanding—particularly through religion—regarding recent experiences related to the loss.

**Figure 1**

Word cloud related to the term “significado”



Figure 2, in turn, illustrates the word cloud generated from the combined responses of this group to questions I, II, and III referring specifically to *sentido*. With the prominence of words such as *activities* (*atividades*), *pleasure* (*prazer*), *mood* (*humor*), and *connections* (*conexões*), it can be inferred that participants' views on the lack of *sentido* are related to difficulties in performing activities and engaging in interpersonal interactions that were previously pleasurable and/or meaningful.



## Discussion

Within the scope of the Brazilian scientific literature on grief, there are two alternatives for translating the term meaning, namely *significado* and *sentido*. Given the historical lack of clarity regarding the use of these terms and the differentiation so far only theoretical between them, this study aimed to analyze the general population's perception of *significado* and *sentido* in grief processes.

When prompted to elaborate on these concepts through a vignette involving a bereavement situation, most respondents agreed that these are two concepts that cannot be considered synonymous. This was further supported by their tendency to refer, on the one hand, to aspects of understanding death when discussing *significado*; and on the other hand, to aspects of engaging in pleasurable activities and interpersonal relationships when referring to *sentido*, as inferred from the analysis of the word clouds in Figures 1 and 2. The differences identified in the thematic analysis of participants' opinions suggest that, as observed in expressions in other languages, Brazilian Portuguese speakers tend to reproduce a lexical distinction when referring to different phenomena which, in English, are aggregated under the term meaning.

These findings are in line with the conceptual distinction proposed by Nascimento (2023), insofar as they confirm the pertinence of using the term *significado* with respect to the history of the loss experienced by the bereaved, and of using the term *sentido* regarding the possibilities of self-configuration in the bereaved's relation with the world. They also converge with the results of the conceptual analysis by Skaggs and Barron (2006), in which a literature review on the term meaning resulted in grouping it into two categories: global meaning and situational meaning. While the former encompasses a person's elements and representations in relation to the world (beliefs, values, goals, purpose, and sense of coherence) that provide life direction, the latter concerns the person's interpretations of a particular event or situation, including contextual circumstances and how they are affected and cope with the resulting stress.

In summary, the role of the construct meaning in grief contexts pertains not only to how the bereaved interpret and learn to cope with their loss, but also to how they come to evaluate themselves and the world in the absence of a loved one (Smid, 2020).

According to Hibberd (2013), the various ways in which the construct meaning is operationalized in grief theories can be understood as representations of different aspects of the same process. Each represents the bereaved's attempts to answer important questions following a loss: "Why did this happen, and why did it happen to me?", "Is there anything positive in this experience?", and "What now matters in my life?". However, the author emphasizes that these dimensions, although distinct, are related and mutually influential, and can never truly be separated.

Moreover, Lichtenthal et al. (2019) argue that differentiated domains of meaning in grief—such as understanding the story of a loss and modes of reengagement with life in a post-loss world—have substantial overlap, which may help explain why change in one tends to positively affect the other.

This coherence is reflected in the opinions summarized in the word cloud in Figure 3, insofar as it can be interpreted as representing a combination of restructuring narratives about the loss (*significado*) and recovering interests and motivations allied with recognition of the value of one's own life (*sentido*). Otherwise, the word cloud generated by the group for whom *significado* and *sentido* are the same phenomenon would likely resemble one of the others.

It is worth noting, however, that the high educational level of participants in this study may limit the generalizability of conclusions to the general population. On the other hand, it is important to recognize the relevance of evidence based on a research sample that included a balanced proportion of psychologists and laypeople across a broad age range, living in different regions of the country, and most of whom had experienced a grieving process.

The use of word clouds as the sole analytical tool also represents a significant limitation, since treating each word as a unit of analysis requires caution in semantic interpretations. Nevertheless, this method is considered appropriate given the preliminary and exploratory nature of the study. Thus, future research is expected to expand sample sizes and diversify methods in an effort to verify the reproducibility of the results discussed here.

Despite these limitations, the present investigation contributes to a first empirical foundation known to support the consolidation of an important terminological distinction for Brazilian grief studies. Once the differences between *significado* and *sentido* are established, it is likely that researchers in the field will be able to foster more consistent dialogues based on diverse studies.

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**Raul Bruno Tibaldi Nascimento:** Conceptualization, data curation, formal analysis, investigation, methodology, writing.

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