Since January 2020 Elsevier has created a COVID-19 resource centre with free information in English and Mandarin on the novel coronavirus COVID-19. The COVID-19 resource centre is hosted on Elsevier Connect, the company's public news and information website.

Elsevier hereby grants permission to make all its COVID-19-related research that is available on the COVID-19 resource centre - including this research content - immediately available in PubMed Central and other publicly funded repositories, such as the WHO COVID database with rights for unrestricted research re-use and analyses in any form or by any means with acknowledgement of the original source. These permissions are granted for free by Elsevier for as long as the COVID-19 resource centre remains active.
“Languishing” in critical perspective: Roots and routes of a traveling concept in COVID-19 times

Sarah S. Willena,b,*

a Department of Anthropology, University of Connecticut, Storrs, CT, USA
b Research Program on Global Health & Human Rights, Human Rights Institute, University of Connecticut, Storrs, CT, USA

ARTICLE INFO

Keywords:
Languishing
COVID-19
Journaling
Medical anthropology
Positive psychology
Flourishing
Pandemic Journaling Project

ABSTRACT

As the COVID-19 pandemic entered its second year, the New York Times published a column offering readers a name for its negative impact on mental health and well-being: “languishing.” Originally developed by positive psychologists, the term was designed to capture a sense of distress involving feelings of emptiness, stagnation, and lack of motivation that fall short of clinical significance. The column struck so strong a chord with readers that it was designated the most-read NY Times story of 2021. In this article, I examine how the concept of “languishing” traveled into U.S. popular discourse and consider the term’s emerging cultural valences and interpretive dynamics. I also examine key gaps and discrepancies between operationalized and vernacular usages of the term. Analysis focuses on a set of weekly journals created as part of the Pandemic Journaling Project, an online journaling platform and research study launched in May 2020. The journals show how a “psy” concept, once unmoored from its origins as a research construct, can become (re)invented as a cultural resource available to help people narrativize distress and, in some cases, name and confront injustice. Yet the popular appeal of “languishing” also raises urgent questions—in particular, about the growing role of positive psychology in both public and policy discussions about health and well-being. The field’s emphasis on individual-level behavior change tends to neglect the structural factors, ideological contexts, and relations of power that predispose some people to languish, and others to flourish, in the first place. While the language of “languishing” may prove helpful to some, its individual-level focus risks distracting us from another urgent need: to confront the root causes of today’s profound and wide-reaching mental health burden—a burden that may not have been precipitated, but certainly has been exacerbated, by the ongoing pandemic.

For some reason, I feel like languishing means I should wear a fancy dressing robe and recline on a velvet chaise, gazing through a giant window at an English garden. But I’m not. I go to work, come home, take care of cats and chores, read the news, get my stuff ready for work the next day, and go to sleep. I can’t even languish right.

- machine operator in her 50s in Kansas

In April 2021, as the COVID-19 pandemic entered its second year, the New York Times published an article offering readers a name for the pandemic’s negative impact on mental health and well-being: “languishing.” Originally developed by positive psychologists interested in disentangling the dynamics of mental health from those of mental illness (Keyes, 2002), the concept is reinterpreted in the newspaper article, penned by organizational psychologist Adam Grant, for a broad audience (Grant, 2021b). Languishing, he writes, stands at the midpoint between “depression” and “flourishing.” It is “the neglected middle child of mental health”—and, quite possibly, “the dominant emotion of 2021.” Grant’s article attracted vast interest and over 1,300 reader comments. A wave of follow-up conversation ensued in print, radio, and electronic media—including a July 2021 TED talk by the author that garnered 2.5 million views in its first six months online (Grant, 2021a). As the year drew to a close, Grant’s essay was declared “The most-read New York Times story of 2021” (NY Times Staff, 2021).

How can we explain the strong popular appeal of the idea of

1 Keyes distinguishes between two separate but complementary endeavors: “prevent and treat cases of mental illness,” on one hand, and “understand how to promote flourishing in individuals otherwise free of mental illness but not mentally healthy,” on the other (Keyes, 2007, 95; see also Keyes, 2002).

2 See, for instance, (Abrams, 2021; Neuhaus, 2021; Organ, 2021; Simon, 2021; Young and McMahon, 2021).
“languishing” during this tense moment of unfolding global crisis? What kinds of personal and cultural “work” (Obeyesekere, 1990; see also Hollan, 1994; Chapin, 2008) might it facilitate? And what happens when a psychological concept becomes unmoored from its origins and taken up as a popular idea and explanatory frame? How might it change in the process? In this brief article, I engage these questions by tracing one episode in the social life of “languishing” as it traveled swiftly from the academic field of positive psychology into U.S. popular discourse near an early pandemic peak in the United States.

Building on medical and psychological anthropology approaches to other traveling “psy” (i.e., psychological or psychiatric) concepts—for instance, contemporary notions of depression (Behrouzan, 2016; Kitakaka, 2012), anxiety (Zhang, 2020), trauma (Abramowitz, 2014; Alexander, 2004; Erikson, 1995; Lewis, 2019), and schizophrenia (Jenkins, 2015; Metzl, 2009), as well as older categories like neurasthenia (Kleinman, 1982), hysteria (Gilman et al., 1993), and madness (Reyes-Foster, 2016)—the article has three aims. First, it explores how the idea of languishing entered public discourse and, for some, became useful as a way of narrativizing (Kirmayer, 2000; Mattingly, 1998; Mattingly et al., 2008; Mattingly and Garro, 2000)—i.e., naming and framing—the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on their everyday lives and emotional landscapes. Like other psychological and psychiatric concepts, the notion of languishing has become vernacularized as it travels, accruing different kinds of meaning, value, and cultural significance as it becomes detached from its scholarly origins. A second aim is thus to explore the emerging cultural valences and interpretive dynamics of this traveling concept. Finally, I reflect critically on the gaps and discrepancies between what positive psychologists and ordinary people mean when they use the term and consider the stakes and implications of these differences. My principal aim is not to elevate one understanding of “languishing” over another, but rather to explore both the definitional slippage and the cultural work that take place when psychological and psychiatric concepts glide out of the academy and into the public sphere.

In closing, however, I pull back from questions of discourse and meaning-making to raise a different kind of question that demands attention: What does it mean to suggest that “everyone is languishing,” as the NY Times article implies, precisely at a moment when the profound, and profoundly uneven, mental health consequences of a global pandemic are becoming increasingly clear?

1. Methods

To address these questions, this essay analyzes a set of online weekly journals (n = 30) created between Spring 2020 and Fall 2021 in which journalers mentioned the word “languish” or “languishing” in reflecting on the social, emotional, material, and existential reverberations of COVID-19 in their lives. These journals were created as part of the Pandemic Journaling Project (PJP), an online journaling platform and research study, launched in May 2020, which I created together with Katherine A. Mason and an interdisciplinary team of researchers and students. We designed PJP as a digital space where anyone in the world (age 15 or older) could use writing, audio, and/or images to create a weekly chronicle of the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic in their lives and, at the same time, preserve their experience in a historical archive (see (Wurtz et al., this issue; Willen et al., 2020)). By May 2022, nearly 1,850 people in 55 countries had contributed nearly 27,000 journal entries in writing, audio, and/or photographs. The majority of entries contributed via PJP’s bilingual English and Spanish interface are in English, with a smaller number in Spanish and a handful in other languages, including Portuguese and Chinese. While the PJP archive was not designed to involve a representative sample, it does include a significant amount of demographic diversity in terms of gender, age, race/ethnicity, educational level, and other factors, as demonstrated by responses to a baseline survey included with the initial set of journaling prompts (see Table 1 in Wurtz et al., this issue).

The journals analyzed for this paper comprise a narrower subset of the overall PJP dataset (see Table 1). Of the participants represented here, a handful had been contributing journal entries to PJP for fewer than four weeks when the dataset was created. Most, however, had contributed for 11 weeks or more, including six who had been journaling for over 60 weeks by that point (see Table 2). Nearly all journalers in this subset identified as women holding a college degree or higher. Most lived in the United States, with one each in Canada, Portugal, and the United Kingdom. Journalers ranged in age from under 30 to over 70, with reported household incomes ranging from under US$30,000 to over US$150,000 per year. Most identified as white, with two each identifying

| Race/Ethnicity | Full Sample |
|---------------|-------------|
| White         | 24 (80%)    |
| Hispanic/Latino| 2 (7%)      |
| Asian-American/Pacific Islander | 2 (7%) |
| Unknown       | 3 (10%)     |

| HH Income       | Full Sample |
|-----------------|-------------|
| Less than $50,000 | 8 (27%)    |
| $50,000-$99,999  | 8 (27%)    |
| $100,000-$149,999| 6 (20%)    |
| $150,000+        | 5 (17%)    |
| Don’t know/prefer not to say | 3 (10%) |
| Total            | 100%       |

Table 1: Journalers’ demographic characteristics.

Table 2: Frequency of journalers’ participation in the Pandemic Journaling Project, in weeks.
as “Asian or Asian-American” and “Hispanic or Latino,” including one who identified as Latina and white. The demographics of this subset correspond roughly to those of PJP overall, with a few notable differences: members of this subgroup were more likely to identify as women (97% vs. 80% in the overall sample), white (80% vs. 49%), and highly educated (93% with a BA or higher vs. 61%). In addition, they tended to be older, with 10% under 30 (vs. 25%) and 40% over 60 (vs. 16%).

Analysis began by reading all individual journal entries in which languishing was mentioned and, using NVivo, open coding to identify key themes. The term appeared in 30 journals, which were then analyzed in full, again open coding to identify themes and patterns, and to clarify where invocations of languishing fit into journalers’ overall accounts of their pandemic experiences. In addition, journals were analyzed in conjunction with participants’ biweekly responses to quantitative survey questions about their mental and emotional health.4

2. Languishing: the research construct

Before turning to the journals themselves, it is first helpful to clarify how languishing has been defined and operationalized in the field of positive psychology. In contrast to terms like depression and anxiety, languishing is not a clinical or diagnostic term. It is not viewed as a mental disorder per se, and it appears nowhere in the leading diagnostic manuals (e.g., the DSM-5 TR and ICD-11). Rather, it is an analytic construct used by research psychologists to classify people according to quantitative responses to survey items, and to explore associations at the population level, typically using large-scale studies or existing data sets. In these population-level analyses, the construct of languishing is used to capture the “absence of mental health” and related limitations in social and emotional functioning, including associations “with poor emotional health, with high limitations of daily living, and with a high likelihood of a severe number (i.e., 6 or more) of lost days of work” (Keyes, 2002, p. 217). In addition to these limitations on psychosocial functioning, languishing also is associated with a cluster of (quantitatively measured) affective sensations, including “feelings of emptiness, stagnation, feeling hollow” (Heffron, 2013, p. 4).

In his piece for the NY Times, Grant glosses these definitions in simple and accessible terms with a personalized, clinical spin. “In psychology,” he explains, “we think about mental health on a spectrum from depression to flourishing. Flourishing is the peak of well-being: You have a strong sense of meaning, mastery and mattering to others. Depression is the valley of ill-being: You feel despondent, drained and worthless” (Grant, 2021b). In between is languishing, “the void between depression and flourishing—the absence of well-being” (ibid.).

Despite Grant’s characterization of languishing as a “void” between categories, population-level analyses do suggest a strong association between the analytic construct of languishing and diagnoses of depression. In a nationally representative U.S. survey, for instance, adults who scored as “languishing” were twice as likely to have experienced a major depressive episode in the past 12 months as people with “moderate mental health,” and six times as likely as those who scored as “flourishing” (Keyes, 2002, p. 207). On the basis of such findings, positive psychologists stake claims to clinical relevance, concluding for instance that “languishing might be as debilitating as major depression” (Hefferon, 2013, p. 5), citing (Keyes, 2002); see also (Keyes, 2007).

Another area of languishing research hinges on the creation of statistical categories of “languishers” and “flourishers,” and the investigation of systematic differences between the two groups, based on quantitative survey data (Schotanus-Dijkstra et al., 2016; Wissing et al., 2021). For instance, Wissing and colleagues suggest—in a manner that risks reification of analytic categories—that “languishers” tend to be motivated by “hedonic values such as [their] own happiness” and show “an inward subjective focus, orientated towards personal need fulfillment and personal well-being.” “Flourishers,” they continue, tend to express “eudaimonic orientations, such as doing things for the greater good” (Wissing et al., 2021, pp. 598–99).

Do everyday understandings of languishing accord with these quantitative assessments? What should we make of languishing’s non-diagnostic status—from an experiential, therapeutic, and/or policy standpoint? As the qualitative findings presented below suggest, the slipperiness of this concept, like that of other traveling “psy” terms, involves hidden risks that demand scrutiny.

3. “Languishing” as lived experience

Let us now turn to the voices of PJP journalers themselves, and to the travels and translational dynamics of this psychological term during the COVID-19 pandemic. Of particular interest here is the kind of “work”—individual/subjective as well as collective/cultural—that the concept of languishing appears ready to support. The notion of “work,” borrowing here from Obeyesekere, involves the “work of culture”: “the process whereby symbolic forms existing on the cultural level get created and recreated through the minds of people” (1990, p. xiii). As Hollan explains, Obeyesekere’s “concept of ‘work’ is analytically useful for several reasons”—including the fact that “it focuses our attention on how specific individuals use cultural beliefs and symbols to make sense of their experience (Hollan 1988b; 1989)” (1994, p. 74; emphasis in original). Examining the cultural work accomplished by the notion of languishing can help us understand not only how “psy” concepts become both “sticky” and polyvalent in a particular socio-cultural setting and historical moment, but also the “political economy of idea circulation”5 more broadly.

3.1. Learning about “languishing”

Most journalers in this subset of PJP journals used the terms “languish” or “languishing” in a manner more or less consistent with the explanation offered in the NY Times. One third specifically mentioned that venue, which itself is unsurprising for a rather unusual reason: the Pandemic Journaling Project itself had recently been featured in the NY Times (Carey, 2021), leading to a wave of both subsequent media attention and, notably, new project participants.

A retired university administrator in her 60s in New Jersey, for instance, explained that, “The New York Times recently ran a piece about ‘languishing’. Apparently I’m not the only one not flourishing.” Others were less precise in pinpointing where they had encountered the term, among them a university professor in her 50s in Connecticut who mentioned “an article that said the word for what we were all feeling was ‘languishing’ and I thought, yeah, that’s about right.” A recent college graduate in her 20s in Illinois similarly “read an article this week about ‘languishing,’ a kind of in-between, not-happy not-sad feeling that seems to be dominating a lot of people’s mental state throughout the pandemic. I have been having that languishing feeling especially strongly this week for some reason.”

Some journalers encountered the term indirectly, including a Canadian church leader in her 40s who heard it in the online “Covid Wellness Group” she had been leading at her church for over a year: “So many folks feeling so much. Languishing was the word offered today. I think it was on the news or something but when it was mentioned, there was a large response from those on the zoom screen. People are reallllllly tiring of all of this.”

3.2. Articulating distress

In most cases, journalers invoked the term as a way of articulating

---

4 For the full survey instrument, see the Appendix to (Wurtz et al., this issue).

5 Thanks to an anonymous reviewer for this apt phrase, and for the invitation to put the concept of languishing in dialogue with Obeyesekere’s classic work.
their own intense feelings and, in some cases, the feelings of those around them as well. A retired educator in her 60s in Connecticut appears to have
looked up a dictionary definition upon encountering the word: ‘Lan-
guishing. I finally heard a word to help describe my feelings. Languid
(adj); without vigor or vitality. Languish (vi) to become weak or droop; to
long or to pine. Yes, that term helps to define where I am at this point.’
A retired information technology (IT) professional in her 60s in Oregon
wrote that, “My moods are all over the place—mainly, a cloud of mild
depression over everything. Interesting article a friend sent, discussing
‘languishing’—seems to fit.” And the machine operator in Kansas
explained that, ‘Emotionally, I am ‘languishing.’ I think it was a New
York Times article that described it as a state between depression and
enthusiasm.”

For her, among others, the term served as a richly evocative meta-
phor, but not necessarily in a helpful way. Recall the image it conjured
for her, introduced in the opening to this essay: a fancy dressing robe, a
velvet chaise, an English garden—and a sense of failure (“I can’t even
languish right”). Similarly, a Massachusetts woman in her 50s explained
that she is “definitely ‘languishing’ “, noting that “The medical pro-
essionals chose the perfect word to describe it.” Yet for her, the term
evoked a different image altogether: “Played out, with no definite end in
sight. My motivation for my job is down to about nil. And I like my job.
It’s hard to keep caring though, when life is stagnant. Mosquitoes will
start breeding in it.” For these journalers, the concept of languishing took
on a discursive life of its own, tapping into personal imaginings that
strayed far from the tightly operationalized construct designed by re-
searchers with measurement as their goal. In their journal entries, we

3.3. What “languishing” feels like

As the concept of languishing enters the public sphere, many features
of the positive psychology definition are retained: lack of motivation,
exhaustion and fatigue, feelings of hollowness and emptiness. An un-
deremployed chaplain in her 30s in the U.K., for instance, also felt her
motivation had taken a nosedive as a result of the pandemic: “Needless
to say, it’s not going well. I just feel like a sloth with no motivations.” And
yet, like many other journalers who used the term, she does not fit Wissing
and colleagues’ characterization of languishers as people who are
“inwardly focused” on their own happiness and well-being to the neglect
of others. Elsewhere in her journal, she wrote at length about her many
concerns: for family and friends near and far, for her new marriage, for
her career and her ability to put her skills as an educator and pastoral
counselor to good use.

A woman in her 20s in Portugal similarly registered deep concern for
others while simultaneously articulating her own sense of languishing.
She was grateful that her parents had recovered quickly after contracting
COVID-19, but lamented that, “It has been hard to go through the days. I
absolutely lack motivation to do daily tasks in my job, which makes me
tired due to the mental load I accumulate. I procrastinate during the day
and often end up working at night, which makes me even more tired due
to the physical effort. I miss having hobbies. I miss having energy. I miss
having purpose.”

Another common theme involved feelings of being trapped or stuck,
sometimes in an inescapable cycle. For the retired IT professional, “It’s
the most odd feeling—as if I am energized, but also can’t move—like an
engine at 2000 rpm, with the emergency brake on, or the transmission in
‘Park’.” The underemployed chaplain described herself as “just going
through the motions. Somehow it is always Thursday again. Time is
moving away, and nothing is changing.” For a retired software engineer
in her 60s in Maryland, “the image that best represents how I feel now is
of living through a wave that rises and crashes down on me and upends
my life. I’m submerged and being rolled around with no way of saving
myself. Then just as I feel I’ve adequately recovered after the most recent
wave has passed, another wave is approaching and it all starts over
again.”

3.4. “Languishing,” loneliness, and luck

Social isolation, loneliness, and disconnection from others were
particularly prominent themes in this subset of journals, especially in the
period before vaccines were widely available, when much of the globe
was still in lockdown. For a graduate student in her mid 20s who lived on
her own in an apartment in Illinois, for instance, the pandemic quickly
became deeply isolating: “I have become really consumed with loneli-
ness. To combat the problem, I have periodically spent a week or so back
at home with my parents. This helps to an extent … But what I’m really
longing for is connection with people my own age.” She explained how
even a glimmer of social interaction could make an enormous difference:
“I had a 3-min conversation with the nurse who gave me my vaccine
earlier this week, and even just that little bit of interaction with a stranger
boosted my mood for hours afterward. I realized that I have not inter-
acted with anyone outside my family and a few close friends for months.”

As Parsons (Parsons, 2022); see also (Granovetter, 1973) suggests,
everyday interactions involving “weak ties” and casual interactions like
this one can have a significant impact on mental health and well-being.
For many, the disappearance of such opportunities during periods of
COVID lockdown contributed to a palpable sense of both isolation and
loneliness.

For some journalers, experiences of “languishing”—understood in
terms of fatigue, loss of motivation, emptiness, stickiness, and lone-
liness—co-occurred with a strong sense of gratitude, and sometimes an
accompanying sense of guilt. For instance, the retired educator in Con-
necticut explained that, “I’ve pushed through months of the pandemic
using extra energy to be positive, and it has worked. I’ve supported
friends and family and have found ways to brighten each day. … The cup
is half full in so many ways, yet I still long for my usual enthusiasm and
energy.” Similarly, the Connecticut university professor in her 50s
described “a sense of hollow existing with no real joy,” explaining that,

I try to remind myself all the time that I am so lucky because I never
got sick, my family and friends never got sick, I had a job I could do
from home and financially we did not have to struggle. … intellec-
tually [I] know I have nothing to complain about but honestly inside
I just feel empty, like I’m trapped in place and there is nothing to hold
onto that means much to me right now.

For these journalers, as for numerous other PJP participants, the
pandemic tipped many aspects of everyday life off-kilter—feelings, en-
ergy level, relationships, one’s sense of time and space, one’s sense of self
and purpose—even without losing any loved ones to, or ever testing
positive for, COVID-19.

4. Vernacularization and its discontents

The richly textured journal entries analyzed here shed light on a sig-
nificant moment in the social and cultural life of the concept of “languish-
ing” near an early peak in the U.S.’s encounter with COVID-19. In that
moment, the concept was entering popular discourse as a common-sense
way of explaining the deeply disruptive, painful, and distressing re-
verberations of the pandemic in journalers’ own lives and on those around
them. For some, the term also took on meaning as a way of discursively
capturing a broader sense of collective “mood” (Throop, 2017, 2022).

4.1. The value of naming and framing

Several things become clear as we dive into the role languishing plays
in the PJP journals analyzed here. First, journalers provide illustrative
glimpses of the subjective feelings and sensations that coalesced around
this concept in a moment of profound global crisis. In their words, associations, and metaphors, we hear how they, like so many others around the globe, struggled to make sense of an unfolding disaster whose scope, scale, and implications were unprecedented in their lifetimes. We hear real-time reflections on what it is like, and how stressful it is, to be stuck in a state some anthropologists and psychologists describe as “subjunctivity”—a sense of living in the middle of an unfolding story, but without knowing which story, or perhaps even which kind of story, one is in ((Bruner, 1986; Good, 1994; Good et al., 1994; Whyte, 2002); see also (Lang, 2020; Wolf-Meyer and Callahan-Kapoor, 2017)). Are we in a joyful story or a tragic one? Near the beginning, middle, or end? Or is the plot still unfolding, the dramatic tension still rising?

Second, we see how under uncertain, “subjunctive” conditions, journals themselves can become a space not only to vent emotions and chronicle the everyday, but also to corral the messiness of everyday lived experience—ranging from major milestones to the most mundane details of quotidian life—into some semblance of narrative form. We see how the idea of languishing can become helpful as a way to name and frame ruptures created by the pandemic in the world as a whole, and in individuals’ lives in particular. Journalers occasionally expressed an explicit sense of relief, or even gratitude, in stumbling upon the term, like the retired educator in Connecticut who “finally heard a word to help describe my feelings.”

For some journalers, the social and relational qualities of the term themselves were especially important. Languishing crops up as a “word for what we were all feeling,” or that prompts “a large response from those on the zoom screen.” We learn how the notion of languishing can circulate via social channels—as a resource passed among friends, or shared in an online religious group. And we see how within these everyday spaces of communication, the idea can help create tendrils of identification, connection, and perhaps even community among those who find in it a meaningful way of articulating their distress.

4.2. “Languishing” as a cultural resource

As these invocations make clear, the notion of languishing appears to hold value not only at the individual level, but also in broader, collective terms—at least for some in the U.S.—as a new “cultural resource” (Kirmayer, 2000), or a new tool in a “communal toolkit” (Bruner, 1986), for creating meaning and narrative order out of experiential disorder.

What does it mean to describe languishing as a cultural resource? First, the journal entries analyzed here remind us of the profoundly idiosyncratic, and irrepressibly metaphorical, qualities of language itself. For some, the circulating term simply feels ‘right’. It can be narratively tried on for size in the anonymous space of an online journal, perhaps with a borrowed gloss or a dictionary definition tucked in for context or confirmation. For others, the term activates a personal association, or web of associations, that lends narrative scaffolding to unfamiliar, and unwelcome, emotional dynamics: A scene evoking a 19th century Romantic novel, albeit with something amiss. A malfunctioning car spinning in overdrive. A stagnant pool that invites breeding mosquitoes.

In these subjective forms of cultural “work,” the sociocultural origins of the concept itself matter. Here we must remember not only its ivory tower origins, but also its path into the domain of public discourse—via a newspaper article in a national paper whose target readership is significantly older, more highly educated, wealthier, and whiter than the nation for which it purports to be the newspaper of record. After the article’s publication, the term gained even wider circulation through a subsequent TED talk studded with personal anecdotes about the author’s own pandemic experiences and those of his family and friends—anecdotes that reflect a set of sociocultural coordinates close to those of the NY Times’ modal readers. This path into the public domain raises important questions: For whom do Grant’s diagnosis—or, for that matter, his prescription—resonate as comfortable and familiar narrative frames? Whose cultural worldview might they best reflect—and whose might they occlude, exclude, or simply fail to capture?

Given this discursive trajectory, it comes as no surprise that the concept of languishing seems to have caught on, at least initially, among journalers likely to be cushioned by privilege from COVID’s worst effects. Yet it is not necessarily divorced from the lived struggles of those facing disadvantage and heightened risk. A public health researcher in her 30s in California, for instance, reveals how this term—like other “psy” concepts in other times and places—can evoke the damage wrought by social and political inequities on society’s core structures and institutions, and on the global political economy writ large. She characterizes her own experience of languishing in terms of “grief and rage [that] goes in waves,” noting explicitly that these powerful feelings include her rage at the U.S. Centers for Disease and Prevention (CDC) for easing masking requirements before it felt safe. Writing “as a person of color who has taken the pandemic very seriously this entire time,” she anticipated that, “this new direction from the CDC is only going to exacerbate disparities in COVID-19 infections and death. This new policy change will hurt communities of color, especially families like my own who are comprised of mostly essential workers and whose family has been significantly impacted by COVID-19.”

Like the idioms of anxiety in China (Zhang, 2020), depreshen in Iran (Behrouzan, 2016), and trauma in Liberia (Abramowitz, 2014), the vernacular idiom of languishing can signal powerful interconnections among subjective and broader collective concerns and perform meaningful, often highly particular forms of cultural “work.” Such signals of entwinement remind us how the vernacularization of “psy” idioms can prove double-edged. On one hand, they may create important opportunities to confront, narrativize, and potentially heal from—or even actively destigmatize—mental distress. On the other hand, we must pay attention to, and be wary of, potential gaps, elisions, or slippages between analytic and everyday understandings. In this case, research psychologists’ analytic construct of languishing takes a tight internal and psychological focus and aims to measure languishing in quantitative terms. This approach cannot account for the cultural “work” performed by the concept itself, including its potential value as a narrative cultural resource. Defining languishing in exclusively internal, psychological terms also risks obscuring, or deflecting attention from, the broader social, political, and economic origins of distress.

4.3. Diagnosing “languishing”?  

Furthermore, this analytic construct can blind us to the “work” of biomedical culture, which has a tendency to medicalize suffering in ways that can distort, mislead, and even cause harm (see (Fox, 2005; Good et al., 2003; Kleinman, 1996) as well as (Obyesekehare, 1985)). Of course the possibility that languishing might lead to the unwelcome medicalization of distress is a curious one since, as noted earlier, it is neither a diagnostic nor a clinical term. Unlike other “psy” concepts with vernacular social lives—anxiety, depression, and trauma, for instance—languishing originates in the world of population-level research rather than clinical practice. Yet in popular discourse, the gaps between scholarly, clinical, and popular conceptions of languishing disappear, with varying effects. Recall, for instance, the journaler in Massachusetts who writes gratefully that, “The medical professionals chose the perfect word to describe it.”

Here we might wonder: Would those who describe themselves as languishing fit diagnostic criteria for depression or other forms of mental illness, as some studies suggest (Heffron, 2013; Keys, 2002, 2007)? While PJP was not designed to test the degree of fit between different “emic” and “etic” understandings of languishing, the project’s mixed-methods design does point toward one meaningful insight: journalers in this subsample reported disparate states of mental health at the time they invoked the term. In the week they used it, fewer than half rated their mental or emotional health as “fair” or “poor”—and, in fact, over half rated their mental or emotional health as “good,” “very good,” or “excellent.” While these data must be interpreted with caution, we are left with the hypothesis that strong cultural resonance in a community sample is not the same as predictive or diagnostic value in clinical terms.
5. Conclusion: “languishing” in critical perspective

In moments of collective crisis, psychological and psychiatric concepts often hold appeal in individual and shared struggles to manage subjective experiences of distress. This article has explored how one such concept—the construct of languishing developed by positive psychologists—entered the domain of public discourse in early 2021 and came to serve as a meaningful cultural resource for some people who were struggling to name and frame the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic in their lives and, in some cases, in their communities more broadly. The online COVID-19 journals analyzed here provide insight into the “stickiness” of this newly popularized term, and they show how some people found it valuable as a cultural and personal resource in their own meaning-making efforts. In some cases, naming one’s experience as “languishing” helped contextualize unwelcome changes in mood or mental state, or understand hard-to-articulate sensations. For many, the term had the added benefit of affirming that they were not alone in their struggles to maintain an even keel in the wake of COVID-related risk, fear, disruption, and grief.

In broader terms, analysis of these journals helps us see what can happen when a “psy” concept becomes unmoored from its origins as an operationalized research construct and accrues new forms of narrative and cultural meaning upon gaining currency as a popular idiom of distress. We see how psy concepts can take on figurative and metaphorical qualities as they travel, and how they can activate personal memories, associations, and motives for sociocultural or political critique. In such instances, psy terms can be (re)invented as “cultural resources” with the capacity not only to help narrativize distress, whether individual or collective, but also to name and confront injustice.

An analytic focus on the cultural work facilitated by the concept of languishing can also help us map, and interrogate, the political economy of psychological ideas—in this case, of an idea with origins in a field that seeks explicitly to appeal to popular audiences. Looking forward, and as this newly popularized concept gathers momentum, it will be important to track, historicize, and critique its travels, as scholars have begun to track other positive psychology concepts such as “happiness” (Ehrenreich, 2010; Horowitz, 2018) and “flourishing” (Willen, 2022). These are not mere academic exercises, nor are they tasks we can relegate to intellectual historians of the future. We must think critically about the popular appeal of ideas from positive psychology, the unspoken assumptions they entail, and—in particular—the role they may end up playing in our collective search for both clinical and policy solutions to the massive mental health burden imposed by COVID-19, now and into the future.

The popular appeal of this concept raises an urgent question: What might be the risk, or even danger, in suggesting that everyone is languishing, as the NY Times piece seems to imply, precisely as the differential impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on communities facing different levels of exposure and risk becomes increasingly clear? We can best answer this question by taking a hard look not only at Grant’s definition of languishing as “the void between depression and flourishing,” but also, and especially, at the remedy he proposes. Like the concept itself, Grant’s proposed antidote is drawn from positive psychology, which looks to behavior change as the locus of intervention for efforts to improve wellbeing. One can combat languishing, he suggests, by pursuing activities involving “flow” (Csikszentmihalyi, 2009), understood as “that elusive state of absorption ... where your sense of time, place and self melts away” (Grant, 2021b). He offers an array of suggestions that are deeply particular to his personal biographical coordinates, if not his personal biography—even as they are presented as holding universal value: puzzles, word games, meaningful conversations, uninterrupted work time. In the wake of this widely read article, the NY Times leaned into positive psychology ‘solutions’ to the urgent ‘problem’ of languishing by publishing an online “flourishing quiz” along with an article outlining steps individuals can take to promote their own flourishing ((Blum, 2021); see also (VanderWeele, 2019)). This series of journalistic moves propelled both languishing and, to a lesser extent, flourishing into circulation as cultural models for thinking about mental health and well-being in the long wake of COVID-19 and beyond.

From the medical anthropology standpoint advanced in this article and in this collection more broadly, these moves, and the psychological concepts they advance, urgently demand critical scrutiny for various reasons—above all because they sidestep broader questions about why some people are more likely to languish, and others more likely to flourish, in the first place. In this late pandemic moment, we are seeing a strong wave of interest in the possibility that research constructs from positive psychology might offer compelling answers to ‘wicked’ policy problems in the domains of both individual and population health (Templeton World Charity Foundation, 2020, 2021; VanderWeele, 2017; VanderWeele et al., 2019). This wave of interest is accruing massive research investment, and it will likely have powerful implications for health research and policy in the years to come. Yet it involves troubling blind spots—including, above all, a worrying inattention to the ways in which structure, power, and inequity affect who gets to flourish, who is likely to languish, and who our social structures and institutions, as currently designed, are—and are not—designed to help recover from hardship (Willen, 2022; Willen et al., 2022; Cole et al., 2021).

From this standpoint, two take-homes are clear. The language of “languishing,” with the pursuit of “flow” as proposed antidote, may help some NY Times readers manage their pandemic experiences—as may journaling, either on one’s own or with an online platform like PJP. Yet individual-level behavioral interventions are a risky bet if our broader goal is to confront the root causes of today’s profound and wide-reaching mental health burden—a burden that may not have been precipitated, but certainly has been exacerbated, by the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic.

CRediT authorship contribution statement

Sarah S. Willen: Conceptualization, Methodology, Data analysis, Data curation, Project administration, Funding acquisition.

Declaration of competing interest

The authors declare that they have no known competing financial interests or personal relationships that could have appeared to influence the work reported in this paper.

Acknowledgments

This paper analyzes data from the Pandemic Journaling Project (PJP), which was founded in May 2020 by Sarah S. Willen and Katherine A. Mason as a joint initiative of the University of Connecticut and Brown University. The project was developed with support from Abigail Fisher Williamson and Alice Larotonda. The author is grateful to all participants in the Pandemic Journaling Project; to the PJP Research Consortium; to past and present members of the PJP Core Team, including Katherine A. Mason, Heather Wurtz, Salma Mutwafy, Jolee Fernandez, Ana Perez, Sofia Boracci, Lauren Deal, Imari Smith, Emily Nguyen, Becca Wang, and Kiran McCloskey; and to Sebastian Wogenstein and two anonymous reviewers for valuable input on earlier drafts. PJP is supported by multiple sponsors at the University of Connecticut and Brown University, including each university’s Office of the Vice President for Research as well as UConn’s Global Affairs, Human Rights Institute, and Humanities Institute and Brown’s Population Studies and Training Center. More information about the Pandemic Journaling Project can be found at https://pjp://pandemic-journaling-project.chip.uconn.edu/.

References

Abramowitz, S. A. (2014). Searching for Normal in the Wake of the Liberian War. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press.

Abrams, A. (2021). Languishing in the time of Covid. Psychology Today, 3 May. https://www.psychologytoday.com/us/blog/nurturing-self-compassion/202105/languishin-g-in-the-time-covid.
