

# **Performance psychology: Being the best, the best you can be, or just a little better?**

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It's getting pretty crowded on the performance psychology bandwagon as more and more practitioners jump on board. For many psychologists looking from the outside, however, the basic questions about the field remain very pertinent and perhaps largely unanswered. What is performance psychology and what do performance psychologists do? Where did it come from and where is it heading? As I sat down to write a supposedly authoritative paper on this specialist area of our profession, I was immediately struck by just how difficult it is to establish the boundaries of performance psychology. Reflecting on my own experiences as a performance specialist over the past 25 years, mainly in the world of international sport, I realised that although the field is ostensibly about the study of factors that either contribute to or impede performance, the list of variables relevant to performance is almost endless. Therefore, to help bring such a diffuse and multi-faceted area into sharper focus I turned to those operating in the field on a daily basis, canvassing the opinions of several prominent Australian and overseas practitioners, which I sought to weave into my own commentary.

## **So what is performance psychology?**

According to the Wikipedia entry on the subject, performance psychology is:

The branch of psychology that studies factors that allow individuals, communities and societies to flourish. Most recently, performance psychology has included the study of the psychological skills and knowledge necessary to facilitate and develop peak performance guidelines into best practice for sport, business, fitness and the performing arts.

The practitioners that I spoke to generally accepted this as a fair summary of the area, but had somewhat divergent opinions when it came to identifying exactly what constitutes *performance*, who are the most relevant client groups, and what are the most appropriate methods to be used.

The term 'performance psychology' is stereotypically applied to high-end performers who want to be the best in their field, be that sport, business, performing arts, military settings, or any other domain with a performance component. However, the term could be applied legitimately across the complete spectrum of human endeavour from the most mundane elements of daily functioning and interpersonal relationships to the most dramatic of awe-inspiring challenges. At one level, everyone 'performs' on a daily basis in everything they do, and therefore any technique or strategy that can be applied to enhance effectiveness or a sense of wellbeing could be placed under the heading of performance psychology.

So does that mean that everyone in our profession is a performance psychologist? Dr Sandy Gordon, senior lecturer at the University of Western Australia and a world renowned performance psychologist who worked with the Australian cricket team during their successful World Cup campaign of 1999, thinks not. "The term psychology almost obliges people to think about problems," Sandy argues, "but to be effective, performance psychologists must coach clients to move beyond problems, to identify their 'signature strengths' and to stay solution-focused. Ultimately, performance psychology can be seen as applied positive psychology."

Taking this Seligman-esque perspective one step further, Sandy makes a clear distinction between performance psychology and other, more clinically-oriented branches of the

profession. "I see the role of a performance psychologist as helping to move a client from 0 to +5 on a performance scale rather than from -5 to 0. However, performance is in the eyes of the client and I start by identifying their perspective of performance, which could range from winning the World Cup to getting out of bed in the morning."

Others have a rather narrower perspective on the subject. One of my colleagues at the University of Southern Queensland, organisational psychologist Dr Jeff Patrick, believes that performance psychology lends itself to some situations but not to others. "In some types of organisations such as public listed companies, where competition is a key feature, performance psychology provides a perfect fit, almost a marriage made in heaven; but performance psychology has yet to prove itself in organisations whose primary goal is cooperation or the provision of services." Quite naturally, different practitioners place emphasis on different aspects of the role of performance psychologist, but they certainly seem to agree that it is not a narrow 'one-size-fits-all' type of activity and that there is plenty of room for diversity of approach.

### **What do performance psychologists do?**

Dr Gene Moyle, a Brisbane-based psychologist and former professional dancer, is typical of a new breed of practitioner working seamlessly across several performance domains including sport, performing arts, and big business. Gene divides her time between delivering cognitive-behavioural safety programs in far-flung parts of the country for the mining and resource industry, acting as Psychology Coordinator for the Queensland Academy of Sport, home to many of the world's premier athletes, teaching performance psychology to ballet and contemporary dancers, and supporting two of Australia's Winter Olympic sports. She sees the common thread in these varied activities as "helping the individuals, groups and organisations concerned to work towards becoming the highest versions of themselves that they can be".

Of the individuals to whom she provides support in the industrial world, Gene says "Whatever role they play, be it as manager or just an average guy, their challenge is to be the best they possibly can. This might involve organisational, cultural and personal change, managing processes better, and working towards outcome goals via process goals. There is always an element of competition, be it between different managers and sites for production targets, between the organisation that I work for and their main rivals, or simply within the individuals concerned to establish personal progress."

In some respects, performance psychologists are the chameleons of the practitioner world, having to adapt to very different performance domains and address a wide array of factors that impinge upon the performance of any given individual or group. Practitioners in performance psychology often identify an inevitable crossover in their work where focus vacillates between individual, group and organisational issues. To function effectively in such an environment demands a wide range of professional and interpersonal skills, a 'big bag of tricks' so to speak. Typically, performance psychologists have supplemented their specialist postgraduate training, usually in sport, organisational or clinical psychology, with further skills-based training in niche areas such as hypnotherapy, biofeedback, or life coaching.

From a commercial perspective, it appears to be extremely advantageous to be able to offer solutions to performance issues that perhaps other practitioners cannot. In a few instances, however, the evidence base for some of the interventions used does not always match the hype, with anecdotal evidence and testimonials filling in for more compelling empirical support. For the most part, however, performance psychologists can legitimately point to a very well established tradition in their field of having produced high quality research aimed at providing scientific evidence in support of the interventions that they utilise.

Most practitioners seem to appreciate that the language and examples used in a performance psychology context will determine the perceived relevance of the material to the client. Gene Moyle highlighted this from her work with performing artists. “Just using the term ‘performance’ psychology creates a very strong sense of recognition from my dancers. Performance is *their* language, *their* identity. It really helps to contextualise the support I’m providing into *their* world. If I used examples from other performance domains they would not see my work as having the same degree of relevance.”

The corporate world often uses sport as an analogy for the competitive environment in which most businesses operate. Perhaps this is why sport psychologists have a long history of eventually departing the relatively poorly-paid practitioner world of supporting athletes and coaches to justifiably ‘cash in’ their skills in the boardrooms of the nation, where incremental improvements in performance translate into many millions of dollars. This metaphorical trading-in of tracksuit for a pinstriped number is nothing new but has become vogue over the past decade or so.

One of the best examples of this transition has been the meteoric rise of the Lane4 organisation, which saw Loughborough University sport psychologist Professor Graham Jones and Olympic champion swimmer Adrian Moorhouse join forces in 1995 to establish a performance development consultancy in the United Kingdom that now has a network of associates across the globe. Its name derives from the allocation of the fourth lane in a swimming final to the fastest qualifier, and hence the lane most likely to produce champions ([www.lane4performance.com](http://www.lane4performance.com)). Lane4’s approach is to address five key areas of performance – leadership, team dynamics, individual performance, coaching, and the performance environment – to help develop the performance capability of an organisation.

Principal consultant of Lane4 Australasia, Mr Jeffrey Bond, who previously spent 22 years as Head of Psychology at the Australian Institute of Sport and has worked at nine Olympic Games as a performance specialist, emphasised the eclectic nature of the field. “I don’t like to pigeon hole myself. I work holistically in different ways across a wide range of performance settings. Even though the context and the language vary considerably, the performance principles remain consistent.” Jeff, who is soon to take up a position as general manager for learning and development at Richmond Football Club, feels that his general psychology training gave him the necessary broad base of knowledge but his specialist training in sport psychology narrowed his focus onto issues of performance and developed the required expertise. He, and others interviewed, also highlighted the key role of continuing professional development in broadening their performance-related skill set. “Further professional training in hypnosis, workshops on eating behaviours, and a range of therapeutic interventions has provided additional strings to my bow”, Jeff acknowledged.

University of California professor, Dr Ken Ravizza, is another practitioner who accumulated vast experience in the world of elite sport in professional baseball and American football plus a host of Olympic teams before applying this knowledge successfully in other performance environments (see [www.KenRavizza.com](http://www.KenRavizza.com)). Ken has applied his skills in the world of medical science, transferring performance enhancement techniques from the baseball diamond to the operating theatre with a renowned team of heart transplant surgeons in the United States. The basic principles of performance enhancement that Ken espouses have proven equally relevant in the medical setting but his mantra for playing baseball, “one pitch at a time”, has become “one *stitch* at a time” in the new environment. Such crossover has also been noted by others in the medical community responsible for the training of surgeons. For example, Tribble and Newburg (1998) reported on how mental training techniques derived from high performance sport had been integrated successfully into surgical training at the University of Virginia.

## **The evolution of performance psychology**

Performance psychology may be popular but it is not new. Generally seen to have grown out of the realms of sport psychology, it therefore dates back at least to the era of University of Illinois psychologist Coleman Griffiths (1893-1966), who is attributed as having established the first American laboratory dedicated specifically to investigating the psychological aspects of sport performance in the 1920s.

For my own part, I was applying skills that I had learned in my training as a sport psychologist with other types of performers – musicians, dancers, business executives – more than two decades ago. However, it is certainly during the past decade that the field has started to gather greater momentum. In 1998, Canadian Dr. Terry Orlick (see [www.zoneofexcellence.ca](http://www.zoneofexcellence.ca)), who has been a hugely influential pioneer of performance psychology for more than 30 years, established *The Journal of Excellence* as the first journal that had performance excellence as its sole focus. While about half of the articles featured in the journal since its inception have focused on the psychology of sport performance, other performance domains that have featured include medicine, opera, music, acting, television presenting, education, space exploration, Mount Everest expeditions and a growing number of articles on business excellence.

The roots of performance psychology lie in a tradition of psycho-educational approaches coupled with various cognitive-behavioural therapies. Probably, most prominent performance specialists still adopt these approaches although it seems clear that many have recognised the benefits of implementing alternative therapeutic approaches from other fields of psychology. In many ways, the performance psychology world has become a melting pot for clinical, counselling, organisational and sport psychologists to come together to exchange ideas and techniques for getting the very best out of people.

The Australian Institute of Sport (AIS) has traditionally been regarded as an international benchmark for applying scientific principles to performance enhancement. The AIS employs performance psychology specialists to provide a range of services to its own athletes and coaches and more broadly to external sporting agencies. These services augment the typical mix of psychological profiling, mental skills training, individual consultations, and support at training and competitions, with web-based performance enhancement training, adventure-based team building, and what the AIS terms “action servicing” whereby ad hoc evidence-based projects are established to address specific coach and athlete requirements.

The military domain, perhaps the ultimate competitive environment, is another performance setting that has embraced performance psychology. For example, the United States Military Academy’s Center for Enhanced Performance at West Point, Virginia has established a systematic performance enhancement program that focuses on five key elements of applied psychology – cognitive foundations, goal-setting, attentional control, stress management and imagery training – that are oriented towards military applications such as marksmanship, combat diving and parachuting, in addition to academic and athletic excellence. Like most similar programs, it follows a psycho-educational rather than a clinical model and has been attributed with producing significant gains to self-reported coping skills and optimism (see Zinsser, Perkins, Gervais, & Burbelo, 2004).

Dr Lydia Levleva, a lecturer at the University of Technology, Sydney and Chair of the APS College of Sport Psychologists, brings a range of perspectives to her work as a performance psychologist. She often uses a psychodynamic approach for ‘data gathering’ in advance of establishing clear behavioural goals with clients using acceptance and commitment therapy (see Harris, 2006) alongside a conventional CBT paradigm. “My approach is based on a few simple principles. For example, I work from the premise that you cannot change what you cannot accept or are not aware of. I explore how past challenges have led to current state of

mind, highlighting how inner strengths have developed as a result, as well as blind spots that lead to weaknesses. Through this process, one often discovers that many weaknesses are merely strengths out of control.” Lydia uses a range of self-regulation and mindfulness techniques in her approach, and agrees that performance psychology provides a wide range of benefits. “It’s not only about taking functional people to a higher level, a performance psychology approach works well with dysfunctional clients.”

### **What the future holds for performance psychology**

If the past has taught us anything it is that the future will be different from today and that the rate of change will accelerate. A likely characteristic of the future is that margins between successful and unsuccessful performances, however they might be measured, will become ever smaller while the potential rewards of success will become greater. In my interview with him, Jeffrey Bond used the phrase “performance psychology is useful for anyone who wants to be better tomorrow than they are today”. As the difference between success and failure gets smaller and the rewards grow, people in sport, business and any other high performance domain will increasingly seek out those who have the skills to help them be just that little bit better tomorrow than they are today.

There will also likely be a continued move towards greater specialisation of performance expertise. Already there are many performance specialists who work exclusively, or almost exclusively, in one narrow performance domain. You will find performance psychologists who travel the professional golf circuits almost year round, or work only with tennis players, or with cricketers, or ballet dancers, and others who focus only on a particular corporate environment. It seems likely that as the field develops further and as client expectations inevitably grow, a greater level of domain-specific knowledge and previous directly-relevant experience will be required.

Also, in these days of increased accountability, it seems almost certain that agencies that might fund the work of a performance psychologist will justifiably demand a very solid evidence base for any interventions that are proposed. Compared to some other areas of psychology, performance psychology can rightly claim that it already has a pretty strong evidence base – it is after all more straightforward to demonstrate improved performance against the clock in sport than, say, show that an organisation is functioning more harmoniously or that a person is happier in a relationship – but I would predict that the imperative to demonstrate the effectiveness of interventions will strengthen further into the future.

Notwithstanding the inevitable challenges that the psychology profession as a whole may be confronted with in Australia – in terms of continuing to forge its many identities in the face of national healthcare accreditation, Medicare issues, and tackling the mental health crisis in this country – it is hard to be anything other than very optimistic about the future prospects for the burgeoning field of performance psychology.

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