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Performance safety: conceptualising psychological safety when errors have consequences

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ABSTRACT

Psychological safety is a concept of considerable interest in sport. However, varying conceptualizations and definitions often present conflicting meaning. Recent literature has questioned the transferability of the performance-based dimensions of psychological safety to high performance and selective sport settings. While athletes need to make errors to learn, they must also perform in environments where errors are consequential. In this article, we address critiques of the transferability of psychological safety to high-performance and selective sport contexts, whilst acknowledging the essence of psychological safety as having value for sporting contexts. To contribute constructively, we expand on the "dual effect" of psychological safety and its impact on voice behavior and the perceived consequences of errors. We propose a theoretical adaptation using the concept of Performance Safety: a temporally dynamic perception emerging from individual–environment interactions, specifically concerning the perceived consequences of error. By introducing this differentiation, we aim to distinguish between the ability to express oneself verbally and the implications of performance-based consequences.

Lay Summary: In this article, we suggest a theoretical adaptation to enable transferability of psychological safety to high-performance and selective sport. We introduce the differential concept Performance Safety as a time bound perception concerning perceptions of consequence from error, to delineate between speaking up and perceptions of consequence from error.

IMPLICATIONS FOR PRACTICE

- Athletes require errors to learn, however they perform in environments where errors carry significant consequences. The article addresses concerns regarding the transferability of psychological safety to high-performance and selective sport settings.
- Separating a climate of voice from the ability to make errors, we suggest Performance Safety as a temporally dynamic perception emerging from individual-environment interactions, specifically concerning perceptions of consequence from error.
- We suggest that coaches, psychologists, and athletes deliberately manipulate perceptions of performance safety to optimize skill learning and preparation for competition.

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In recent years, psychological safety has become a topic of increasing interest in the sport psychology literature. Psychological safety is a concept with a long history in the organizational literature (Edmondson & Lei, 2014). It originally conceptualized as a shared belief that people can speak up without interpersonal risk and that making mistakes will not lead to punitive consequences (Edmondson, 1999, 2018). Most recently, psychological safety has been considered "a state of reduced interpersonal risk" (Edmondson & Bransby, 2023, p. 55) with the outcome being that "in psychologically safe environments, people believe that if they make a mistake or ask for help, others will not react badly" (Edmondson, 2018, p. 15).

In their 50 year review of literature, Edmondson and Bransby (2023) showed an exponential growth of psychological safety research, predominantly conducted in organizational behavior, business, and psychology. Their analysis suggested performance, leadership, culture/climate, learning, creativity, and communication to be the most researched topics. The evidence predominantly suggests that psychological safety has an adaptive impact on performance, learning and job satisfaction. Additionally, that attention has been focused on the antecedents and outcomes of psychological safety. Commonly identified antecedents include leadership behaviors (Castro et al., 2018; Han et al., 2019), organizational norms and practices (Carmeli & Gittell, 2009), interpersonal dynamics (Itzchakov & DeMarree, 2022), learning orientation (Frazier et al., 2017); and inclusivity (Woods et al., 2024). At the individual level, greater task performance (Newman et al., 2017), heightened voice behavior (Lee & Dahinten, 2021), and improved learning behavior (Carmeli et al., 2009) have all been reported as outcomes for individuals within psychologically safe environments. At the group level, similar outcomes have been found alongside improved team response to conflict (Bradley et al., 2012), creativity, innovation, problem solving (Carmeli et al., 2014), and promoting team reflection (Kolbe et al., 2020).

Shifting conceptualizations

Given its empirical robustness in organisational contexts, psychological safety has recently attracted research interest aimed at understanding the concept within sport settings (Fransen et al., 2020; Jowett et al., 2023; Smith et al., 2023). Across different levels of sport, recent research suggests that psychological safety can lead to a range of adaptive outcomes. These have included the fostering of greater trust, respect, and cooperation between athletes and coaches (Jowett et al., 2023). It also seems that greater psychological safety allows for more optimal team functioning (Fransen et al., 2020), providing a foundation for communal coping (Crawford et al., 2024) and facilitating constructive navigation of conflict (Wachsmuth et al., 2022). Yet even within environments perceived to be psychologically safe, certain issues may still be considered unsafe to discuss (Hoult et al., 2024). The consequent suggestion being that external parties may be needed to support the debriefing of issues such as individual and team setbacks (Szabadics et al., 2025).

Despite this increasing interest, Taylor, Collins, et al. (2022) raised concerns about the holistic transferability of psychological safety in high-performance (HP) sport and, more broadly, in selective sport settings. Specifically, concerns were raised regarding

contrasting definitions of psychological safety, subsequent conceptualization, and varying applications. These concerns have intensified as definitions of psychological safety within the sporting literature have diverged significantly, to the point where the term is being used to describe entirely different phenomena. Yet, despite apparent barriers to the contextual application of psychological safety, there have been limited efforts in the sport psychology literature to address this nuance (an exception being Cooke et al., 2024b). In this article, we briefly review literature that conceptualizes psychological safety in sport. In addition, reviewing the limited empirical data in HP and selective sport settings. We follow this with a discussion of literature pertaining to the role of error in skill learning and point to future directions in research and application.

In the sporting literature, definitions of the phenomenon range from "a climate in which people are comfortable expressing and being themselves" (Smith et al., 2023, p. 1009), to "the perception that one is protected from, or unlikely to be at risk of, psychological harm in sport" (Vella et al., 2024, p. 15). Others suggest differential outcomes regarding the specific ability to encourage discussions about mental health in elite sports contexts (Pilkington et al., 2025; Rice et al., 2022) and are directly contrasted with "win at all costs" culture (O'Connor et al., 2024, p. 609). Whereas Fransen et al. (2020) suggest that "in psychologically safe environments, team members are genuinely interested in their teammates, have positive intentions to one another, and express mutual respect for each other's competence even when mistakes are made" (p.2).

Meanwhile, other scholars have chosen to retain the definition underpinning much research in organizational contexts: "a shared belief that the team is safe for interpersonal risk taking," a belief that "must characterize the team rather than individual members of the team, and team members must hold similar perceptions of it" (Edmondson, 1999, pp. 354–355) along with the associated seven factor items (Cooke et al., 2024a; Gosai et al., 2023; Jowett et al., 2023; Smittick et al., 2019; Taylor, Ashford, et al., 2022). These factor items include both voice and performance-based elements, such as "members of this team can bring up problems and tough issues" and the reverse scored item: "if you make a mistake on this team, it is often held against you" (Edmondson, 1999, p. 382). Increasingly, there is recognition that differing definitions of psychological safety are leading to the measurement of distinct phenomena as psychological safety "encompasses not just the awareness and communication of mental health states but also the ability to perform without fear of negative consequences, the freedom to express concerns, and the confidence that team dynamics support each individual's well-being" (Şenel et al., 2025, p. 20). These definitions of psychological safety can also be contrasted with other forms of safety identified in the sporting literature including the notion of cultural safety, which "refers to the deliberate engagement in practices that challenge traditional power dynamics and injustice, and enhance equity" (Kochanek & Wright, 2024, p. 954). Or alternatively, a safe space which "refers to experiencing safety and comfort within an environment" (Washington et al., 2025, p. 19).

In addition to these definitional differences, psychological safety has also been conceptualized differently based on "where" it is. The original work of Kahn (1990) suggested psychological safety was an individual-level construct. Latter work variously suggesting a team/group (Gosai et al., 2023; Hauser et al., 2024), mental skill (Vealey, 2024), environment (Hoult et al., 2024; Şenel et al., 2024; Walton et al., 2024), or

climate (Edmondson, 2018) based construct. In a review article, Edmondson and Bransby (2023, p. 70) suggested:

> Whether or not individual perceptions should be aggregated to a group-level measure is a matter of remaining consistent with the context. For stable teams, it is likely sensible to aggregate and report a team-level measure; for individuals who collaborate with different people at different times and lack team stability, reporting individual-level measures of psychological safety might make more sense. Psychological safety can only be an emergent property of a group if there is a meaningful group being studied.

Outside of the organizational setting, psychological safety has been characterized "as occurring in individual←→contextual relations … lead[ing] the field to consider how individual and contextual characteristics work together to co-construct a moment that is perceived as psychologically safe or not" (Wanless, 2016, p. 7). This stance has also been reflected in more recent literature, with the suggestion that psychological safety is neither an individual nor emergent property of group interaction. Instead, the outcome of both preexisting dispositions related to speaking up and ongoing interactions in a particular context (Bransby et al., 2024). This acknowledges dynamic fluctuations over time (Newman et al., 2017) and that static measurements, or categorizations of environments as being "psychologically safe" lack necessary nuance (cf. Van Zyl et al., 2024). Moreover, whilst individuals bring prior beliefs to experience, their behavior will be influenced by their milieu, making psychological safety akin to an affordance-like property (cf. Friston, 2022). Affordances were initially conceptualized by Gibson (1979) as being the actions available to an individual based on the relationship between their capabilities and the properties of an environment. As such, presenting similar significant challenges for measurement (Tillas et al., 2017), but potentially greater pragmatic value. Importantly, this interactive conceptualization puts significantly greater weighting on affordances for speaking up, rather than earlier work related to the dual effect of speaking up and the absence of consequence for mistakes.

Whilst these conceptualizations are most applicable to workplace contexts that necessitate interdependence and collaboration, their application to HP and selective sport remains questionable. This is particularly the case given that athletes often navigate multiple environments with differing cultural norms (Bjørndal et al., 2017; Taylor et al., 2021), and individual perceptions of psychological safety will vary depending on whom they are speaking to and the nature of the disclosure (Hoult et al., 2024).

The high-performance sport context

One of the first empirical investigations specific to HP sport using Edmondson's (1999) conceptualization was conducted by Taylor, Collins, et al. (2022) who examined the extent to which matched groups of international and released professional rugby union players perceived psychological safety as an adaptive feature of their development. The data showed that players perceived a pervasive lack of safety to make mistakes; however, depending on the context, this was viewed as either performance-enhancing or detrimental. Reflecting these concerns, in July 2024, the United States pole vaulter Sandi Morris (2024) reflected on the nature of HP sport:

> Man, I have to be honest. One of the worst parts of being an athlete is having to see the world pick apart/evaluate your performances/career under a microscope and having to keep your mouth closed and eyes ahead because the only way forward is to perform.

Similarly, in a selective talent development context, Sweeney et al. (2025) found similar effects, whereby a lack of safety was an omnipresent feature of players' experience, predominantly driven by regular selection and deselection. Whilst this lack of safety was perceived to promote players' focus and attention to detail, it did not appear to impact players' ability to speak up or raise concerns.

Related to speaking up, Hauser et al. (2024) suggested significant overlap between psychological safety scale factors and established features of effective coaching practice, such as ongoing feedback processes, encouraging athletes to question and ask for help (Martindale et al., 2007). For example, social norms that silence athletes (Manley et al., 2016) or inhibit information sharing have been associated with maladaptive outcomes (Øydna & Bjørndal, 2023). Indeed, athletes having the ability to speak candidly would seem essential if coaching processes such as feedback are to be enacted (Mason et al., 2021; Taylor et al., 2021). There seems little benefit if athletes lack the safety to speak to their coach.

Learning from error

There is a wealth of evidence in motor learning, sport psychology, and coaching that learning from error is fundamental to performance enhancement (e.g., Ferguson et al., 2023; Metcalfe, 2017; Schmidt, 1975). This understanding is increasingly being augmented by theoretical perspectives such as Active Inference which suggest that learning or adaptation to increasing demands can be seen as benefitting from error to enable our model of the world to better fit environmental demands (Kiverstein et al., 2019). Too little error is synonymous with boredom, whilst increased prediction error can sometimes feel good, it can also lead to negative affect depending on whether the individual can reduce errors (i.e., the speed of learning; Kiverstein et al., 2019). How we feel depends on the predicted consequences of error (Clark et al., 2018). Consequently, learning from error is difficult due to heightened emotional disturbance (Eskreis-Winkler & Fishbach, 2022). Imagine a skateboarder learning to land a kickflip. Each failed attempt provides information, helping them enhance their balance, timing, and foot placement. However, how they perceive error plays a crucial role. If they expect to make errors, but are confident in their capacity to learn, they are more likely to use this information. If not, the same errors may prevent learning.

Although various concepts, have been generated to promote a more adaptive relationship with error, minimizing error in competition remains essential. One way of considering this difference is the explore-exploit trade off, fundamental to all human behavior (Friston et al., 2015). Exploratory behavior involves an expansion of options through risk taking and experimentation to find individually novel solutions to problems and genuinely creative action. Exploitative behavior, on the other hand, involves a process of refining and optimization of current skill. Distinguishing between exploratory and exploitative behavior can be understood in terms of error dynamics, or perceived prediction error reduction over time and our "grip" of the environment (Nave et al., 2020). Whilst the phenomena of challenge and subsequent affective response has been

examined extensively in the sport literature (e.g., Hodges & Lohse, 2020; Taylor & Collins, 2020), optimal engagement with an environment can depend on these perceptions of error dynamics.

Historically, psychological safety has been linked to learning in contexts that require complex, adaptive, and interdependent work (Sanner & Bunderson, 2015). In these contexts, learning behavior tends to be viewed as more exploratory, rather than the refinement of exploitative action. Perhaps as a consequence, contraindicative evidence for the performance enhancing value of psychological safety is in contexts where performance is more routine (Eldor et al., 2023). Across sport, athletes need to actively experiment and engage in exploratory movement behavior. Yet, also engage in routine tasks and practice that is not inherently enjoyable (Baker & Young, 2014). In this sense, the implicit view of learning used in the psychological safety literature, while contextually appropriate for "knowledge workers," does not capture the extent to which an agent updates its internal model, or beliefs about the world to minimize prediction error (Friston et al., 2016). That is, psychological safety seems to differentially apply based upon setting, timing, and context (Cooke et al., 2024a; Taylor, Collins, et al., 2022).

A constructive step forward

The issues outlined to this point are nuanced, especially for those seeking applied impact. As a consequence, there is an increasing discourse regarding the universal applicability of Edmondson et al.'s definition across HP/selective sporting contexts, particularly where athletes' performances are evaluated for selection purposes (Hauser et al., 2024). That is, when athletes are selected and deselected, or judged based on their performance, it seems somewhat unlikely that they can "[expect] to be given the benefit of the doubt" (Edmondson & Bransby, 2023, p. 57). Indeed, when one athlete is offered this benefit, it inevitably means it cannot be offered to another, non-selected athlete.

Thus, we argue that the existing conceptual framing of psychological safety lacks pragmatic value as a tool for practitioners in HP/selective sport contexts. It is perhaps for this reason that some scholars have suggested that differential conceptions are less important than the overall principle of reducing interpersonal risk in the workplace (Frazier et al., 2017). At a minimum, the ecological validity of Edmondson's original survey factor measures in high-performance and selective sport populations should be questioned. This should be contrasted with the physical activity or education setting, where the purpose is not enhancing competitive performance and where psychological safety may offer greater holistic transferability (Rossing et al., 2022; Storm et al., 2024; Vella et al., 2025). How we navigate the challenge posed by the manifestation of a dual effect (i.e., the ability to speak up and the lack of safety to make mistakes conferred by immutable norms like selection) seems fundamental. If psychological safety is a shared perception that enhances exploratory action (Richard et al., 2021), there is a need to consider a practical route forward.

Whilst some have approached this problem by redefining psychological safety (Vella et al., 2024), other critiques (e.g., Taylor, Collins, et al., 2022) are yet to present a direction for research and practice. Recognizing concerns regarding the dual effect of psychological safety; that people will not be rejected for saying what they think, and that

mistakes will not lead to negative consequences (Edmondson, 1999), there have been some well-reasoned suggestions that psychological safety could be considered both "on pitch" and "off pitch" (Cooke et al., 2024a). Whilst we see significant practical utility in this distinction, we suggest that this is less about the location of *where* to feel safe and more about *what* we are able to feel safe about. To move beyond this apparent impasse and meet the call for contingent application of psychological safety (Edmondson & Bransby, 2023), we propose formalizing a distinction between the voice and performance-based dimensions of psychological safety.

Performance safety

To address the difference between voice behaviour and the perceived safety to make errors without consequence, we propose the need to explicitly distinguish between psychological safety as a climate of voice (Jowett et al., 2023) and a related but distinct construct: performance safety. Performance safety is a temporally dynamic perception of the consequences of error, contextualized by interactions between individual and contextual factors. Application should be contextually bound in fields where individuals are judged based on their relative performance, whether through movement or other domains of expertise.

Higher performance safety suggests little perception of consequence from error, something that may encourage expansive or exploratory behavior (McKay et al., 2021) and may be especially important under conditions of change to well-established movement solutions (Carson & Collins, 2011). In contrast, lower performance safety involves a perception that errors carry meaningful consequences. This could be through the use of well-established training methods such as pressure training that evoke a level of fear and anxiety to help athletes prepare for competition (Kegelaers et al., 2020; Low et al., 2024). It can also emerge socially, through implicit or explicit competition for selection, a dynamic captured by England cricketer Chris Woakes in a media interview: "whether it be through form or injury, there is always someone knocking on the door or younger players ready to come in. That is part and parcel of being at the top of your sport" (Sky Sports, 2023). Low performance safety is evident in moments where success and failure hinge on a single act, such as a footballer taking a penalty at a major international competition where the weight of consequence intensifies demands (Jordet & Elferink-Gemser, 2012).

Despite the relative lack of performance safety in the above examples, this is not to suggest that the perception that athletes would not be able to discuss difficult issues with coaches and staff. Reflecting the suggested distinction between psychological and performance safety, contrast the above examples with the issues presented by Mohammad Amir the Pakistan cricketer who suggested that "the problem is that if a player musters the courage to say in Pakistan cricket that he wants rest, he is dropped, so players are now scared about speaking about it with the management" (Cricket.com, 2020).

Applied use of performance safety

As suggested by Edmondson and Bransby (2023), there is lack of understanding of specific interventions that can support increasing perceptions of psychological safety. If our conceptualization of performance safety holds domain validity, there is a need to

understand how performance safety can be deliberately manipulated to support the ongoing learning and the development of athletes. Given the explicit commitment in our conceptualization to the notion that performance safety is a temporally bound interaction between individual and contextual factors, there is little sense in referring to a "safe environment." The concept instead requires a practical and research commitment to understanding how contextual features interact with individual characteristics to moderate perceptions of performance safety.

One suggested approach in the organizational literature is the notion of generating a "safe container" which is a context in which fear of error is minimized through contracting and clarifying expectations prior to activity (Rudolph et al., 2014). If there is a need for an athlete to engage in prolonged expansive motor behavior, but do so within a selection context, role clarity as to the boundaries of the safe container will be required for athletes to be clear of expectations (Carson & Collins, 2016). At face value, the same may apply for those seeking to induce a level of anxiety and fear to support performance under similar conditions (Wood et al., 2015). Regardless of desired state, practically, this means coaches need to be aware of the internal states of the athlete through regular conversation and contracting. Perhaps ironically, our suggestion is that the co-creation of low performance safety requires candid conversation. Below, we frame performance safety based on practice activities in common use across sport (see Table 1).

Future research will be required to validate performance safety as a concept. A key question is whether individuals can simultaneously perceive the freedom to speak up while also feeling unable to make errors. If our proposal holds, this has important implications for how psychological safety is operationalised. A consequence of the delineation between psychological safety as the perception of a climate of voice and performance safety as perception of the consequences of error, being the need for a distinct analysis of factors related to voice and performance where Edmondson's (1999) survey items are used. Pursuing parallel lines of research related to both dimensions should enhance our understanding of athlete support.

In addition, we would recommend that greater attention should be paid to the short and long-term impacts of higher or lower performance safety, particularly for the purpose of skill acquisition and performance. As many of the examples in table one will be familiar in practice, it is notable that there is more evidence considering the lower end of the performance safety continuum. Accordingly, there is a need for future research to consider the impacts of higher or lower performance safety on movement (e.g., Sweeney et al., 2025).

Given the centrality of error to learning and performance, there is also a need for us to consider the types of error that are desirable. This moves us from the theoretical

Table 1. Practical examples of performance safety.

Higher performance safety	Exploratory practice where error is encouraged to maximize expansive and exploratory learning behavior
	Task constrained training to prevent consequence from errors (e.g., sparring with no counterattack, small sided games with no transition)
	Task constrained oppositional training (e.g., sparring with counter attacks)
	Use of games/races/competition in training with scores being kept
	Use of pressure training to induce a level of anxiety (70)
Lower performance safety	Competitive training against selection rival
	Competition
	Highly consequential competition (e.g., Olympic/Paralympic final, penalty shoot-out)

notion of prediction error, to a practical framing. Edmondson (2023) referred to a spectrum of the causes of error and the extent to which they might be praise worthy, offering greater subtlety than coaching vernacular that distinguishes between "effort errors" and "skill errors." These were labeled on a scale that includes sabotage, inattention, inability, challenge, uncertainty, and experimentation.

Being adapted for the sporting context, we might consider errors consequent from experimentation to be desirable under conditions of elevated-performance safety. That is, the interaction between performer and environment is deliberately cultivated to encourage experimentation and, subsequently, to promote error and reflection upon it. Similarly, if our intention is competitive training, it may be desirable to induce errors through higher functional task difficulty (Hodges & Lohse, 2022). However, under conditions of low performance safety, errors may be undesirable.

We also encourage investigation into the potential transferability of performance safety to coaches and support staff in the selective and HP sport context. Previous research in this regard would suggest greater domain appropriateness (e.g., Burns et al., 2024; Meckbach et al., 2023) and may enhance the help seeking behavior of staff (Hägglund et al., 2022). Whilst, it has long been recognized that coaches are subject to significant judgment and scrutiny (Norris et al., 2017), it should be recognized that the practice of support teams are increasingly unsafe (e.g., Pavlou, 2024).

Finally, given ongoing suggestions of a relationship between athlete mental health and psychological safety (Walton et al., 2024), it is essential to consider how athletes are prepared for conditions of low performance safety. It is also important to address the recovery needs of athletes resulting from the emotional disturbance associated with error when performance safety is low (Collins et al., 2018; Eccles et al., 2022). We state nothing novel in suggesting that athletes require progressive exposure to stressors (Sarkar et al., 2015), with accompanying psycho-behavioral skill development (Collins et al., 2016). There are also methods such as exposure therapy that show promise in helping athletes to perform during periods of high pressure (Brevers & Philippot, 2023).

In addition, if the athlete's coaching experience is caring (Cronin et al., 2020) and appropriately challenging (Moodie et al., 2023), more adaptive outcomes are likely. Given the wealth of literature that may inform this in a talent development context (cf. Hauser et al., 2024), there is a need for similar work in HP sport (e.g., Cruickshank et al., 2013).

Conclusion

In this article, we have reviewed some of the existing literature on psychological safety in HP/selective sport settings. Recognizing the existing conceptual confusion and challenges with transferability, aiming for a constructive contribution, we propose Performance Safety as a property of individual-environment interaction. This concept aims to help practitioners and researchers in these contexts distinguish between the "dual effect" of current psychological safety conceptions.

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