Let the Discussions Continue: A Reaction to Locke’s Comments on Weinberg and Weigand

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In 1991, Locke published an article in the *Journal of Sport & Exercise Psychology* in which he noted seven problems with the goal-setting research conducted in sport and exercise settings (focusing on methodological and procedural issues) and offered some solutions to deal with these perceived limitations and problems. We (Weinberg & Weigand, 1993) responded to Locke’s critique by providing data from 22 experiments (over 1,200 participants) that called in question several of Locke’s specific critiques. Specifically, although we agreed with Locke that there are definitely methodological and procedural manipulations that goal-setting researchers in sport and exercise should utilize to enhance the internal validity of their experiments, we also argued (using data from the above-cited studies) that the special setting in which sport and exercise takes place, the type of tasks utilized, and the motivational properties of the participants also account for the differences in findings between industrial/organizational settings and sport and exercise settings.

We are pleased that Locke (1994) responded to our reaction (Weinberg & Weigand, 1993) to his critique of the goal-setting research in sport and exercise. In his response, he stated that he disagreed with the substance of our comments and focused on five main points, including the areas of subject motivation, goal setting in the do-best condition, feedback in the do-best condition, personal goals, and goal difficulty. Although he makes several valid points, we certainly believe that the discussions on this topic should continue. Therefore, we would like to address the five areas he discusses concerning the goal setting–performance relationship in sport and exercise settings.

**Participant Motivation**

In our first reaction paper (Weinberg & Weigand, 1993), we argued that participants may be more motivated in sport and exercise studies than in industrial/organizational settings.
Weinberg and Weigand

organizational psychology studies since the former have volunteered for the classes in which they are tested. Locke sees this argument as dubious, stating that “industrial/organizational experiments are virtually all conducted with students who volunteered to be subjects in return for extra course credit” (Locke, 1994, p. 212). Despite this clarification on Locke’s point, we still do not see the equivalence of the two research situations. Specifically, in the sport psychology goal-setting research studies, participants chose to take a specific physical activity class (e.g., conditioning) as an elective course. Thus, they would presumably be motivated to improve their physical fitness and work hard to achieve their goals (e.g., increase the number of sit-ups). In the industrial/organizational goal-setting experiments, however, participants volunteered in order to receive extra course credit; thus, there was little continuing personal involvement. In essence, we argue that the improvement of one’s personal fitness on a continuing basis would typically elicit higher levels of effort, motivation, and commitment than would merely volunteering for some sort of extra credit for an academic class.

Goal Setting in the Do-Best Condition

Locke (1994) argues that specific goal setting in do-best conditions is a known confound, indicating that the experimental condition was not successfully manipulated. In addition, Locke states that this confound is of known relevance because participants with specific, challenging goals perform differently than those with do-best goals. Locke thus states that a careful experimenter will want to prevent this problem from occurring.

We would agree that sport psychology researchers would like to prevent this confound from occurring. However, Locke ignores the empirical evidence we presented that calls into question the relationship between goals and performance in sport and exercise settings. Specifically, a number of studies contradict Locke’s conclusion that goal-setting differences between do-best and specific goal conditions occur only when participants in do-best groups do not set specific goals (e.g., Hall & Byrne, 1988; Weinberg, Bruya, Garland, & Jackson, 1990). However, the more relevant point here may be that although it is important for researchers to try to control spontaneous goal-setting in do-best conditions, it may be even more important to understand the effects of this spontaneous goal-setting. That is, because it is the natural tendency for individuals participating in sport and exercise settings to set specific goals for themselves (as seems to be the case in most of our goal-setting studies, as well as those of other researchers), it may be important for us as researchers to understand this phenomenon and its impact on performance rather than simply trying to design experiments to prevent it from occurring. Although the latter process might gain us some internal validity, the former can help advance our understanding of the role of goals in sport and exercise contexts.

In essence, we believe that it is certainly important for researchers in the goal-setting area to design their research studies in ways that will maintain high internal validity since cause and effect can then be more readily determined. However, it is equally important for researchers to understand the processes that underlie goal setting by sport and exercise participants. Furthermore, we argue that quantitative and qualitative methodologies should be utilized to help us