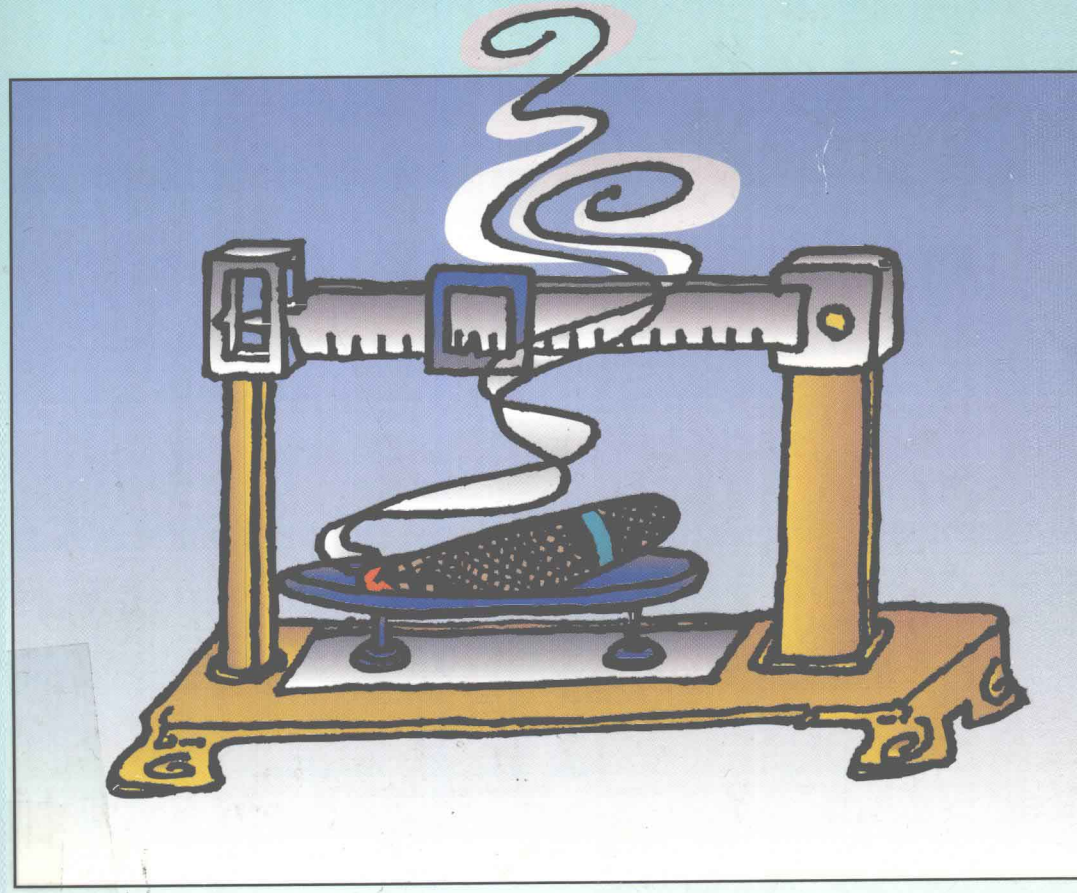
Conducting Research in Psychology

Measuring the Weight of Smoke



Brett W. Pelham

Conducting Research in Psychology

Measuring the Weight of Smoke

Brett W. Pelham
University of California, Los Angeles

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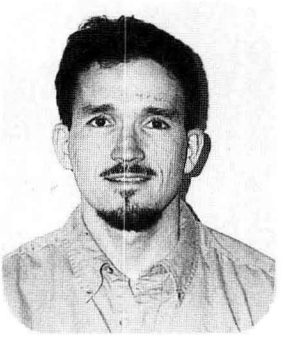
This book is dedicated to the spirit and memory of my mom,
Dottie Pelham.



About the Author

Brett Pelham grew up as the second of six children in the small town of Rossville, Georgia. Brett received his bachelor's degree from Berry College in 1983 and received his Ph.D. in social psychology from the University of Texas at Austin in 1989. He wrote this book while working as an associate professor of psychology at UCLA. He conducts research in the areas of person perception, stereotyping, social inference, and the self-concept. He has taught courses in social psychology, research methods, statistics, social cognition, and the self-concept. In his spare time, he greatly enjoys juggling, painting, sculpting, listening to music, cooking, playing basketball, watching movies, and hanging out with his wife, her two cats, and his friends. He doesn't enjoy running or weight-lifting, but he does them anyway on the assumption that they compensate for a diet rich in chocolate ice cream and Coca-Cola. Beginning in 1999, he and his wife, Joanne Davila, will join the faculty in psychology at SUNY Buffalo.

Preface

About ten years ago, I came to a very painful conclusion: Most undergraduate students dread courses in research methods. In one of my pre-course evaluations, one frank and articulate student summarized this sentiment by writing that "few things could be more boring, useless, intimidating, or impenetrable than research methods." I was disturbed by this sentiment because I had agreed to teach a course in experimental research methods. I was also shocked because I firmly believed that few things could be more interesting, useful, inviting, or intuitive than research methods. If this belief strikes you as strange, it will be my goal in this book to convince you that most people's distaste for research methods has a lot more to do with the way research methods are typically written about than it does with the nature of research methods *per se*.

To make this point in a different way: I suspect that, with a little effort, I could write a boring, useless, intimidating, and impenetrable book about skydiving, juggling, or romantic trysts. The key to doing so, I think, would involve a heavy focus on the *rules and technical details* of skydiving, juggling, or trysting without much focus on the *experience* of these inherently interesting activities. In my opinion, this common approach to writing about research methods is one of the major reasons that this topic has such a bad reputation. The approach adopted in this book is a hands-on, practical approach that should give you a feel for what it is like to actually conduct research in psychology. Perhaps more important, it should also allow you to apply some of your familiar intuitions to the topic of research methods. In other words, if you can choose an outfit for yourself, play a board game, or recommend a good restaurant, you probably have the capacity to become an expert in research methods. In fact, if you are one of those rare people who does *not* have these mundane skills, I suspect that it is because you have been reading too many books on research methods! Perhaps this book can help you translate your technical expertise into some simple skills you can use in your daily life. For the rest of you, the crux of the approach adopted in this book will be to help you translate your familiar but sophisticated life skills into the skills that can make you a proficient experimenter.

Because I happen to study social psychology, another important thing that I have tried to do in this text is to emphasize what is *social* about psychological

research methods. Being a good experimental psychologist requires the use of the same methodological rules that apply to all other scientific disciplines. However, the fact that people are social beings generates some practical dilemmas that are not likely to plague researchers in astrophysics, metaphysics, or psychophysics (a branch of perceptual psychology). The most ubiquitous of these problems is that when people know that their behavior is being studied, they often behave unnaturally. The challenge of experimental psychology is to study "natural" behavior in unnatural (laboratory) situations. It is the clever solutions psychologists have developed to deal with this problem that make experimental research methods in psychology a little different, and perhaps a little more interesting, than experimental research methods in general. My point is that good experimental psychology is not just good science; it is a combination of good science and good art. It takes a good scientist to generate tests of psychological theories, but it takes a good artist (and occasionally a good con artist) to translate these tests into laboratory experiences that are psychologically real to research participants. I hope that what you enjoy most about this book is learning how psychologists go about the difficult business of studying realistic behavior in unrealistic situations.

Acknowledgments

I am grateful to a great number of people for teaching me things that have made their way into this book. In chronological order, my dad first taught me to be a critical thinker, and my mom first taught me to be patient with my dad. During my high school years, Dennis Selvidge sparked my interest in the physical sciences, and during my early college years, Drs. Julian Shand and Robert McCrae inspired me to consider a career in science. Drs. David McKenzie, Daniel McBrayer and Edward Vatza were my primary undergraduate mentors. They introduced me to philosophy, to psychology, and to experimental research methods in psychology (in that order). Bill Swann and Dan Gilbert were my graduate mentors. They provided me with models of methodological and theoretical expertise and creativity that I have tried to emulate in my own research. More important, they each infected me with a contagious enthusiasm for social psychology.

For the past nine years, Paul Abramson, Shelley Taylor, and Bernie Weiner have all played the taxing threefold role of mentor, colleague, and social support agent for me at UCLA. Each has also inspired me by doing careful and intriguing research that has important practical as well as theoretical consequences. During the past few years I have also learned a great deal about research from my extensive discussions with my junior colleagues at UCLA: David Boninger, Curtis Hardin, John Hetts, and Heidi Wayment. During this same period I have also been inspired by the teaching and research skills I have observed in Traci Giuliano, Bob Josephs, and Alan Swinkels.

To move closer to the topic of this book, I have also learned a great deal from all of the people who have helped me teach experimental research methods at UCLA, namely, Khanh Bui, Tom DeHardt, Pam Feldman, Marie Helweg-

Larsen, Paul Mallery, Eve Rose, and Grace Woo. I am also grateful to the many undergraduates who have taken my courses in research methods at UCLA. They have taught me more about this topic than has anyone else. Because Curtis Hardin had the misfortune of moving to an office next to my own in the summer of 1997, he was forced to endure an endless stream of questions about this book throughout that long summer. He offered me gracious, expert, and sensible advice in response to them all. I am also greatly indebted to my wife, Joanne Davila, who (a) taught me a lot about research methods, (b) taught me a lot about people, and (c) endured the long summer of my intense preoccupation with this book.

Finally, Marianne Taflinger, senior acquisitions editor, not only convinced me to write this book but also gave me excellent advice about how to do so—at all stages of the book's development. I am also indebted to the outside reviewers of the manuscript on which this book is based, who all made insightful and constructive suggestions that allowed me to improve the content and presentation of this book: Bernard C. Beins, Ithaca College; Brian C. Cronk, Missouri Western State College; Joel S. Freund, University of Arkansas–Fayetteville; Thomas E. Nygren, Ohio State University; and Carl Scott, University of Saint Thomas.

Brett Pelham

A Brief Note to Students

For both aesthetic and pedagogic reasons, I have not included any definitions in the margins of this text. However, to help you identify crucially important theoretical and technical terms, I have printed these terms in boldface (like **this**) throughout the text. In addition, you will notice that when introducing the crucial terms, I always provide an explicit definition, description, or summary of the term. These explicit definitions of key terms are summarized more formally in the Glossary that appears at the end of the book. Theoretical and technical terms that are important but secondary to the crucial terms are typically printed in italics (like *this*), and they, too, are almost always accompanied by an explicit definition. Finally, to help you organize your knowledge of research methods, I have organized the material in each chapter of the text by using major and minor headings. Paying attention to these headings should help you to organize your knowledge around the major themes I have suggested in each chapter.

TO THE OWNER OF THIS BOOK:

I hope that you have found *Conducting Research in Psychology: Measuring the Weight of Smoke* useful. So that this book can be improved in a future edition, would you take the time to complete this sheet and return it? Thank you.

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