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Article

The Meta Pets Method: A Card-Based Narrative Inquiry Approach for Community-Based Qualitative Research in Collectivist Cultures

Running Head: Meta Pets Method for Narrative Inquiry

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Abstract

Background: Traditional qualitative interview methods often face limitations when applied to low-literacy, collectivist, rural communities where verbal articulation of internal experiences may be culturally unfamiliar or uncomfortable. There is a pressing need for culturally appropriate qualitative methods that facilitate narrative elicitation through accessible, non-threatening modalities. **Method Description:** This paper introduces the Meta Pets Method, a novel card-based narrative inquiry approach designed for community-based qualitative research in collectivist cultures. The method employs a deck of illustrated cards featuring archetypal animal characters ("Meta Pets") that serve as projective stimuli and narrative prompts. Participants select cards, project personal meanings onto the symbolic imagery, and co-construct stories that reveal inner experiences, values, and perspectives. The method integrates theoretical foundations from narrative inquiry, projective techniques, arts-based research, and visual methods. **Application Context:** We describe the method's development and application with rural artisan weavers in Rajasthan, India—a low-literacy, collectivist population. The Meta Pets Method facilitated rich narrative data collection where traditional interviews might have been less effective, enabling participants to externalize emotions, explore identity, and share experiences through metaphorical storytelling. **Implications:** The Meta Pets Method offers qualitative researchers a culturally responsive tool for narrative inquiry in diverse contexts. It addresses methodological gaps in cross-cultural research by providing an accessible, visual, and playful approach that honors collectivist values, accommodates low literacy, and reduces power differentials between researchers and participants. The method has potential applications in community-based participatory research, health research, social work, education, and international development.

Keywords: narrative inquiry; card-based methods; visual methods; arts-based research; projective techniques; cultural adaptation; low-literacy populations; collectivist cultures; community-based research; methodological innovation

Introduction

Qualitative research has long relied on interviews and focus groups as primary data collection methods. However, these conventional approaches can encounter significant limitations when applied across diverse cultural contexts, particularly in low-literacy, collectivist, rural communities where Western-style verbal introspection and direct self-disclosure may be culturally unfamiliar or uncomfortable. Researchers working in non-Western settings increasingly recognize the need for methodological innovation that honors local epistemologies, communication styles, and literacy levels while maintaining research rigor.

This paper introduces the Meta Pets Method, a novel card-based narrative inquiry approach designed to address these methodological challenges. The method employs illustrated cards featuring archetypal animal characters that serve as projective stimuli and narrative prompts, enabling participants to externalize internal experiences, co-construct meaningful stories, and share perspectives through metaphorical rather than direct discourse. By integrating visual, symbolic, and narrative modalities, the Meta Pets Method offers an accessible and culturally responsive alternative to traditional interview techniques.

The Challenge of Cross-Cultural Qualitative Research

Qualitative researchers working in collectivist, rural, and low-literacy contexts face multiple methodological challenges. First, traditional semi-structured interviews assume participants are comfortable with introspective verbal articulation—a skill that may be less developed in communities where oral traditions emphasize collective storytelling over individual psychological disclosure. Second, power differentials between educated researchers and marginalized community members can inhibit authentic expression. Third, literacy barriers limit the use of written prompts, surveys, or text-based elicitation techniques. Fourth, cultural norms around emotional expression, particularly in collectivist societies, may discourage direct discussion of personal struggles, making it difficult to access participants' lived experiences through conventional questioning.

Recent scholarship has called for methodological pluralism and cultural adaptation in qualitative research. Kahlke et al. (2024) conducted an integrative review of innovative elicitation techniques, finding that methods incorporating visual, tactile, or creative elements often yield richer data and enhance engagement with diverse participants. Similarly, Bhatta (2024) demonstrated how culturally grounded narrative methodologies—such as the Dohori poetic dialogue tradition in Nepal—can elicit stories, emotions, and tacit knowledge that traditional interviews fail to access. These studies underscore the importance of developing qualitative methods that align with participants' cultural communication patterns and cognitive styles.

The Promise of Visual and Card-Based Methods

Visual and arts-based methods have emerged as powerful tools for qualitative inquiry, particularly in cross-cultural and community-based research. Mignone et al. (2019) introduced the Life Story Board, a graphic and tactile data elicitation tool that facilitates co-constructive narrative processes through visual mapping. Their research demonstrated that visual methods can overcome linguistic, cultural, and social barriers, proving especially effective with marginalized populations including immigrants and Indigenous communities. Similarly, Brent et al. (2021) explored card-sort activities for eliciting authentic narratives, showing how card-based techniques help individuals organize information and make choices in ways that reveal underlying values and priorities.

Card-based methods offer several advantages for qualitative research. They provide concrete, tangible stimuli that ground abstract discussions, reduce cognitive load for participants with limited literacy, and create a playful, non-threatening research environment. Cards can serve as projective techniques—allowing participants to project their internal states onto external symbols—thereby bypassing psychological defenses and facilitating deeper self-disclosure. As Olszewska (2023) demonstrated with multilingual arts-based methods, visual and material elements can humanize data collection processes and center participants' voices in multimodal ways.

Theoretical Foundations: Narrative Inquiry and Projective Techniques

The Meta Pets Method draws on rich theoretical traditions in narrative inquiry and projective psychology. Narrative inquiry, as articulated by scholars such as Clandinin and Connelly, posits that humans make sense of experience through storytelling. Narratives are not merely reports of events but meaning-making structures through which individuals construct identity, interpret experience, and communicate understanding. In therapeutic contexts, narrative approaches—such as White and

Epston's narrative therapy—help individuals "re-author" problematic life stories by externalizing difficulties and highlighting personal agency and resilience.

Projective techniques, rooted in psychodynamic psychology, use ambiguous stimuli to elicit unconscious thoughts, feelings, and conflicts. Classic projective methods include the Rorschach inkblot test and Thematic Apperception Test (TAT), where individuals interpret ambiguous images, revealing their inner psychological landscape. Contemporary applications of projective techniques in qualitative research include metaphor cards, photo-elicitation, and drawing exercises. These methods recognize that symbolic and metaphorical expression can access dimensions of experience that direct questioning cannot reach.

The Meta Pets Method synthesizes these traditions by using archetypal animal imagery as projective stimuli within a narrative inquiry framework. Participants select cards, interpret symbolic meanings, and construct stories that externalize internal experiences—a process that facilitates both self-discovery and rich qualitative data generation.

Purpose and Scope of This Paper

This paper serves three primary purposes. First, we provide a comprehensive description of the Meta Pets Method, including its theoretical grounding, design principles, and implementation protocol. Second, we illustrate the method's application through a case example from community-based research with rural artisan weavers in India. Third, we discuss methodological considerations including strengths, limitations, cultural adaptation principles, ethical issues, and trustworthiness criteria. Our aim is to equip qualitative researchers with practical guidance for implementing the Meta Pets Method in their own contexts while contributing to broader conversations about culturally responsive research methodologies.

Theoretical Background

Narrative Inquiry as Epistemology and Method

Narrative inquiry represents both an epistemological stance and a methodological approach. Epistemologically, it assumes that human experience is fundamentally narrative in structure—we understand our lives as unfolding stories with characters, plots, conflicts, and resolutions. Methodologically, narrative inquiry involves collecting, analyzing, and representing stories as primary data. Unlike methods that fragment experience into themes or codes, narrative approaches preserve the holistic, temporal, and contextual nature of lived experience.

Contemporary narrative inquiry has evolved beyond simple story collection to emphasize the co-constructed nature of narratives. Researchers and participants jointly create meaning through dialogic interaction, with the researcher's questions, responses, and interpretations shaping the stories that emerge. This relational dimension makes narrative inquiry particularly well-suited to participatory and community-based research, where power-sharing and collaborative knowledge production are valued.

Narrative methods have proven especially valuable in health research, social work, education, and community development. They enable researchers to understand how individuals make sense of illness, trauma, identity transitions, and social change. Narrative data captures complexity, ambiguity, and contradiction in ways that structured interviews or surveys cannot, providing rich insights into subjective experience and meaning-making processes.

Arts-Based Research and Visual Methods

Arts-based research (ABR) encompasses methodologies that use artistic processes—including visual arts, music, drama, dance, and creative writing—as primary modes of inquiry and representation. ABR challenges traditional assumptions about what counts as data and how knowledge should be communicated, arguing that artistic expression can reveal truths inaccessible through conventional scientific discourse.

Visual methods, a subset of ABR, employ images, drawings, photographs, and other visual media in data collection and analysis. Photovoice, for example, invites participants to photograph aspects of their lives and then discuss the images, using visual stimuli to prompt reflection and dialogue. Drawing methods ask participants to create visual representations of experiences, relationships, or concepts, with the creative process itself generating insights. Collage, mapping, and other visual techniques have been successfully applied across diverse populations and research contexts.

Archibald (2022) argues that arts-based methods are particularly powerful for knowledge translation, as artistic representations can communicate research findings to broader audiences in accessible and emotionally resonant ways. Olszewska (2023) demonstrates how arts-based approaches humanize research relationships, treating participants as creative collaborators rather than passive data sources. These methods align with decolonizing and participatory research paradigms that seek to redistribute power and honor diverse ways of knowing.

Projective Techniques in Qualitative Research

Projective techniques originated in clinical psychology as tools for personality assessment and psychotherapy. The fundamental principle is that when presented with ambiguous stimuli, individuals "project" their internal psychological states—including unconscious thoughts, feelings, conflicts, and desires—onto the external material. This projection reveals aspects of the psyche that might be hidden from conscious awareness or difficult to articulate directly.

In qualitative research, projective techniques have been adapted as elicitation methods that facilitate deeper self-disclosure and richer data. Metaphor cards, for instance, present images that participants interpret and relate to their own experiences. The ambiguity of the images allows for multiple meanings, enabling participants to find personal relevance while reducing the threat of direct questioning about sensitive topics.

Research on metaphoric associative cards demonstrates their effectiveness in accessing unconscious emotions and facilitating self-expression. Karnieli-Miller et al. (2017) found that illustrated metaphor cards enriched narratives in mental health rehabilitation programs, helping participants articulate feelings that were hard to put into words. The cards functioned as projective techniques that surfaced unspoken concerns and values. Similarly, research on therapeutic card decks shows they can trigger self-healing processes by externalizing internal conflicts and enabling creative problem-solving.

Archetypal Psychology and Symbolic Meaning

Carl Jung's analytical psychology introduced the concept of archetypes—universal symbols and patterns residing in the collective unconscious that shape human thought, emotion, and behavior. Archetypes include figures such as the Hero, the Caregiver, the Shadow, the Wise Elder, and the Trickster. These symbolic patterns appear across cultures in myths, fairy tales, dreams, and art, suggesting they tap into fundamental aspects of human psychology.

Jungian therapy uses archetypal imagery to facilitate psychological integration and growth. By engaging with archetypal symbols through active imagination, dream analysis, or creative expression, individuals can access disowned aspects of themselves and move toward wholeness. Joseph Campbell's work on the Hero's Journey further developed archetypal narrative structures, showing how transformation stories follow universal patterns of departure, initiation, and return.

Contemporary applications of archetypal psychology in personal development and therapy include card decks and exercises that help individuals identify their dominant archetypal patterns. Pearson (1991) outlined twelve common archetypes and developed tools for archetypal self-assessment, demonstrating that recognizing one's archetypal patterns can illuminate motivations, strengths, and growth edges. This approach validates the use of archetypal imagery in accessible formats for self-reflection and personal growth.

The Meta Pets Method draws on archetypal psychology by using animal characters as archetypal symbols. Animals have served as symbolic figures across human cultures, representing qualities such as courage (lion), wisdom (owl), cunning (fox), and gentleness (dove). By presenting archetypal animals rather than human figures, the method creates psychological distance that can make self-disclosure feel safer while still engaging deep symbolic resonance.

Cultural Considerations in Method Design

Developing qualitative methods for cross-cultural application requires attention to cultural epistemologies, communication styles, power dynamics, and practical constraints. Collectivist cultures, which emphasize group harmony, interdependence, and social roles over individual autonomy and self-expression, may find Western interview methods culturally discordant. In such contexts, indirect communication, storytelling through metaphor, and group-based activities may be more culturally congruent than one-on-one introspective interviews.

Low-literacy populations require methods that do not depend on reading or writing skills. Visual, oral, and tactile modalities become essential. Additionally, research methods must be sensitive to power differentials between educated researchers and marginalized community members. Participatory approaches that position community members as co-researchers and knowledge holders, rather than passive subjects, can help address these power imbalances.

Recent methodological innovations demonstrate successful cultural adaptation. Bhatta (2024) developed Dohori narrative methodology for Nepalese grandmothers, adapting an indigenous poetic storytelling tradition for research purposes. Rieger et al. (2021) used digital storytelling guided by the Medicine Wheel with First Nations women, creating culturally safe spaces that integrated Indigenous knowledge systems. Dutton et al. (2019) employed biographical collage in Inuit community-based participatory research, using visual methods appropriate for the cultural context. These examples illustrate that effective cross-cultural methods honor local traditions, communication patterns, and values while maintaining research rigor.

The Meta Pets Method: Description and Design

Overview and Core Principles

The Meta Pets Method is a card-based narrative inquiry approach designed for community-based qualitative research, particularly in collectivist, low-literacy, and rural contexts. The method employs a deck of illustrated cards featuring archetypal animal characters—the "Meta Pets"—that serve as projective stimuli and narrative prompts. Participants engage with the cards through selection, interpretation, and storytelling processes that externalize internal experiences and facilitate co-constructed meaning-making.

The method is grounded in five core principles:

1. **Accessibility:** Visual and symbolic modalities accommodate diverse literacy levels and cognitive styles, making the method accessible to populations who might struggle with text-heavy or verbally demanding research approaches.
2. **Cultural Responsiveness:** Metaphorical and indirect communication through animal symbols aligns with collectivist communication norms and reduces the discomfort of direct self-disclosure about personal struggles.
3. **Playfulness:** The card format creates a game-like, non-threatening research environment that reduces anxiety and power differentials, encouraging authentic participation.
4. **Projection and Externalization:** Ambiguous archetypal imagery allows participants to project internal states onto external symbols, facilitating access to unconscious or difficult-to-articulate experiences.
5. **Co-Construction:** The method emphasizes dialogic interaction between researcher and participant, with meaning emerging through collaborative interpretation rather than researcher-imposed analysis.

The Meta Pets Cards: Design and Content

The Meta Pets deck consists of illustrated cards featuring archetypal animal characters, each representing different psychological qualities, life situations, or emotional states. The design draws on cross-cultural animal symbolism while allowing for culturally specific interpretations.

Card Categories and Archetypal Themes:

The deck is organized around archetypal themes that resonate across cultures:

- **Strength and Courage:** Lion, Bear, Elephant—representing inner strength, bravery, resilience, and the ability to face challenges
- **Wisdom and Insight:** Owl, Turtle, Elephant—symbolizing knowledge, patience, deep understanding, and life experience
- **Playfulness and Joy:** Dolphin, Monkey, Butterfly—embodying lightness, creativity, transformation, and the capacity for happiness
- **Nurturing and Care:** Mother Bird, Elephant, Deer—representing compassion, caregiving, gentleness, and protective love
- **Vulnerability and Healing:** Wounded Bird, Small Mouse, Caterpillar—acknowledging pain, fear, fragility, and the healing process
- **Community and Connection:** Ants, Bees, Wolves—emphasizing cooperation, belonging, collective effort, and social bonds
- **Transformation and Growth:** Butterfly, Phoenix, Snake (shedding skin)—symbolizing change, renewal, rebirth, and personal evolution
- **Shadow and Challenge:** Fox (trickster), Crow, Snake—representing cunning, complexity, hidden aspects, and moral ambiguity

Visual Design Principles:

The cards are designed with several key features:

- **Simple, Clear Imagery:** Illustrations are stylized but recognizable, avoiding cultural specificity that might limit interpretation
- **Vibrant Colors:** Engaging visual appeal that attracts attention and creates positive emotional associations
- **Minimal Text:** Cards include only the animal name (in local language if appropriate), allowing for flexible interpretation
- **Culturally Neutral Styling:** Artistic style avoids Western-centric aesthetics, using universal visual language
- **Appropriate Size:** Cards are large enough for group viewing but portable for field research

Symbolic Flexibility:

Critically, the Meta Pets Method does not impose fixed meanings on the cards. While archetypal associations provide a starting framework, participants are explicitly invited to interpret cards according to their own cultural context, personal experience, and intuitive response. A lion might represent courage for one participant, authority for another, and danger for a third. This interpretive flexibility is essential for cultural responsiveness and honors participants as meaning-makers.

Implementation Protocol: Step-by-Step Guide

The Meta Pets Method can be implemented in individual or group settings. We describe both formats, noting that group implementation is often preferred in collectivist cultures where communal activities feel more natural and comfortable.

Phase 1: Preparation and Introduction (10-15 minutes)

1. **Setting Creation:** Arrange a comfortable, private space with participants seated in a circle (for groups) or facing each other (for individuals). Display the Meta Pets cards face-up on a cloth or table where all can see them.

2. **Rapport Building:** Begin with informal conversation, introductions, and explanation of the research purpose. Emphasize that there are no right or wrong answers and that participants are the experts on their own experiences.
3. **Method Introduction:** Explain the Meta Pets cards as "special friends" or "story helpers" that will guide the conversation. Demonstrate by selecting a card yourself and briefly sharing what it means to you, modeling the process.
4. **Informed Consent:** Ensure participants understand the voluntary nature of participation, confidentiality protections, and their right to decline any activity. In low-literacy contexts, use verbal consent with witness documentation.

Phase 2: Card Selection and Initial Reflection (15-20 minutes)

5. **Invitation to Explore:** Invite participants to look at all the cards, touch them, and spend time noticing which ones draw their attention. In group settings, participants can walk around and view cards together, discussing what they see.
6. **Personal Selection:** Ask each participant to choose one or more cards that "speak to them" or "feel important right now." The selection criteria can be tailored to research questions:
 - "Choose a card that represents how you're feeling today"
 - "Pick a card that reminds you of a challenge you've faced"
 - "Select a card that shows something you hope for"
 - "Find a card that represents your community/family/work"
7. **Silent Reflection:** Allow 2-3 minutes of quiet time for participants to sit with their chosen cards, noticing thoughts, feelings, and memories that arise.

Phase 3: Narrative Elicitation (30-45 minutes)

8. **Story Invitation:** Invite participants to share the story of their card. Prompts might include:
 - "Tell me about this animal. What is its story?"
 - "Why did this card call to you?"
 - "If this animal could talk, what would it say?"
 - "What does this card teach us?"
9. **Dialogic Exploration:** Engage in gentle, curious questioning that follows the participant's narrative thread. Use the card as a reference point:
 - "You said the bird is wounded – what happened to it?"
 - "The lion looks strong – where does that strength come from?"
 - "How does the butterfly feel as it transforms?"
10. **Externalization and Projection:** Encourage participants to speak about the card character in third person initially, creating psychological distance. Gradually invite connections to personal experience:
 - "Have you ever felt like this wounded bird?"
 - "When have you needed the lion's courage?"
 - "What helps you transform like the butterfly?"
11. **Group Sharing (if applicable):** In group settings, each participant shares their card and story while others listen. After each story, invite brief responses:
 - "What did you hear in this story?"
 - "Does anyone else connect with this card?"
 - "What wisdom does this story offer our community?"

Phase 4: Deepening and Integration (20-30 minutes)

12. **Multiple Card Exploration:** Invite participants to select additional cards that represent different aspects of their experience, creating a "card narrative" or "card journey":
 - "Choose a card for where you've been, where you are now, and where you're going"

- "Pick cards for different parts of yourself—the part that's strong, the part that's scared, the part that's hopeful"
13. **Relational Mapping:** In group settings, explore connections between participants' cards:
 - "How do these cards relate to each other?"
 - "What story do all our cards together tell about our community?"
 14. **Meaning-Making Dialogue:** Facilitate reflection on insights gained:
 - "What did you learn from spending time with these cards?"
 - "What surprised you?"
 - "What will you take with you from this experience?"
- Phase 5: Closure and Documentation (10-15 minutes)**
15. **Gratitude and Validation:** Thank participants for their stories and wisdom. Validate the courage it takes to share personal experiences.
 16. **Documentation:** With permission, photograph participants' card selections and arrangements. Record key quotes and narrative themes in field notes. In some contexts, participants may draw or write about their cards as additional data.
 17. **Follow-Up Planning:** If the research involves multiple sessions, explain next steps. Offer participants the option to keep a card or receive a copy as a reminder of their insights.

Variations and Adaptations

The Meta Pets Method is highly flexible and can be adapted for diverse research contexts and questions:

Individual vs. Group Implementation:

- Individual sessions allow for deeper personal exploration and may be preferred for sensitive topics
- Group sessions leverage collective wisdom, build community, and align with collectivist values

Single vs. Multiple Sessions:

- One-time sessions work for exploratory research or needs assessment
- Longitudinal designs with repeated card selections can track change over time

Structured vs. Open-Ended Prompts:

- Structured prompts align card selection with specific research questions
- Open-ended exploration allows emergent themes and participant-driven inquiry

Integration with Other Methods:

- Combine with traditional interviews, using cards as warm-up or to explore specific topics
- Pair with journaling, asking participants to write or draw about their cards between sessions
- Use in photovoice projects, with participants photographing things that connect to their cards
- Incorporate into participatory action research, using cards to identify community priorities

Cultural Customization:

- Adapt animal imagery to local fauna and cultural symbolism
- Create culture-specific card decks with locally meaningful symbols
- Translate card names and prompts into local languages
- Involve community members in card design and validation

Application Context: Jaipur Rugs Weavers Study

Research Setting and Population

To illustrate the Meta Pets Method in practice, we describe its application in community-based research with rural artisan weavers in Rajasthan, India. The study was conducted in Manpura village with weavers affiliated with Jaipur Rugs Foundation, a social enterprise that employs rural artisans in carpet weaving. The research aimed to understand weavers' experiences of well-being, challenges,

and sources of resilience as part of a larger mixed-methods study examining a community-based happiness intervention.

The weaver population presented several characteristics that made traditional interview methods challenging:

- **Low Literacy:** Most weavers had minimal formal education, with limited reading and writing skills
- **Collectivist Culture:** Rajasthani village culture emphasizes family and community over individual expression
- **Gender Dynamics:** The majority of weavers were women who might feel uncomfortable in one-on-one interviews with male researchers
- **Limited Exposure to Research:** Participants had little prior experience with research participation or psychological discourse
- **Language Barriers:** While researchers spoke Hindi, weavers primarily used Rajasthani dialect with different communication norms

These factors suggested that a culturally adapted, visual, and group-based method would be more appropriate than standard semi-structured interviews.

Implementation Process

The Meta Pets Method was implemented as part of a 12-week community-based program. We describe one representative group session to illustrate the method in action.

Session Setup: Twenty-one weavers (all women, ages 25-55) gathered in a community center after their morning weaving work. The researcher and two local facilitators arranged floor cushions in a circle. The Meta Pets cards were spread on a colorful cloth in the center, creating a visually appealing focal point.

Introduction and Rapport: The session began with informal conversation about the day's weaving work, family news, and shared tea. The lead facilitator (a local woman trained in the method) introduced the cards as "special animal friends who have stories to teach us." She selected a card—the Mother Bird—and shared a brief story about how the bird cares for her babies even when she's tired, connecting it to her own experience as a mother and weaver. This modeling demonstrated the process and established a safe, personal tone.

Card Selection: Weavers were invited to walk around the circle, look at the cards, and choose one that "felt important today." The prompt was intentionally open-ended to allow diverse interpretations. Women spent 5-10 minutes examining cards, touching them, discussing them with neighbors, and making selections. The communal exploration created energy and engagement.

Story Sharing: Each weaver shared her card and story. One woman, Kamla (pseudonym), selected the Wounded Bird card. Speaking in Rajasthani with facilitator translation, she said:

"This bird, her wing is hurt. She cannot fly. She sits on the ground and watches other birds in the sky. She feels sad and alone. But she is still alive. She is waiting for her wing to heal. Maybe one day she will fly again."

The facilitator gently asked, "Kamla, have you ever felt like this bird?" Kamla nodded and shared that after her husband's death two years ago, she felt broken and unable to move forward. Weaving gave her something to do with her hands, and the other weavers became like family. She was beginning to feel her "wing healing."

This exchange illustrates several key features of the method:

- The card provided a safe, indirect way to discuss grief and trauma
- Speaking about the bird in third person created psychological distance
- The facilitator's gentle question invited personal connection without forcing it
- The metaphor of the healing wing offered a hopeful narrative frame
- Other weavers responded with empathy and their own stories of loss and resilience

Group Dialogue: After each woman shared, others responded with validation, similar experiences, and collective wisdom. The cards became reference points for ongoing conversation: "Remember the strong elephant?" "We are all like the ants, working together." This collective meaning-making aligned with the community's collectivist values.

Integration: Near the session's end, the facilitator invited weavers to notice patterns across their stories. Many had chosen cards representing strength, community, and transformation. The group reflected on their shared identity as resilient women who support each other through difficulties. This collective narrative became a source of pride and solidarity.

Data Generated

The Meta Pets session generated multiple forms of qualitative data:

Narrative Data:

- Individual stories about card selections, rich with metaphor and personal meaning
- Dialogic exchanges between participants and facilitators
- Group discussions revealing collective values and shared experiences

Visual Data:

- Photographs of card selections and arrangements
- Patterns in which cards were chosen most frequently
- Spatial arrangements of cards in group settings

Observational Data:

- Field notes on emotional expressions, body language, and group dynamics
- Observations of engagement levels and comfort with the method
- Notes on cultural communication patterns and interaction styles

Reflective Data:

- Researcher reflexive journal entries on facilitation process
- Facilitator debriefing discussions
- Participant feedback on the method's acceptability and usefulness

Methodological Insights from Application

Several insights emerged from implementing the Meta Pets Method in this context:

Enhanced Engagement: Compared to pilot interviews conducted earlier in the research, the card-based method generated noticeably higher engagement. Weavers who had been reticent in interviews became animated when discussing cards, suggesting the visual and playful format reduced barriers to participation.

Depth of Disclosure: The projective nature of the cards facilitated discussion of sensitive topics—including domestic violence, grief, financial stress, and mental health struggles—that had not emerged in direct questioning. The metaphorical distance provided by animal characters made these disclosures feel safer.

Cultural Congruence: The group format and storytelling approach aligned with local communication norms. Weavers were accustomed to sharing stories and wisdom collectively, making the method feel culturally familiar rather than foreign.

Accessibility: The visual nature of the cards accommodated low literacy effectively. Weavers who could not read or write engaged fully with the symbolic imagery, demonstrating that the method successfully bypassed literacy barriers.

Empowerment: Participants reported feeling that their voices and wisdom were valued. The method positioned them as storytellers and meaning-makers rather than passive interview subjects, contributing to a sense of empowerment and dignity.

Limitations Observed: Some weavers initially felt uncertain about "correct" interpretations, requiring reassurance that all meanings were valid. A few participants selected cards based on

aesthetic appeal rather than symbolic resonance, necessitating gentle redirection. Time constraints limited how deeply individual stories could be explored in group settings.

Methodological Considerations

Strengths of the Meta Pets Method

1. Cultural Responsiveness and Accessibility

The method's primary strength lies in its cultural adaptability and accessibility. By using visual, symbolic, and narrative modalities, it accommodates diverse literacy levels, cognitive styles, and cultural communication patterns. The cards provide concrete stimuli that ground abstract discussions, reducing cognitive load and making participation accessible to individuals who might struggle with purely verbal methods.

The metaphorical nature of animal symbolism aligns with communication styles in many collectivist cultures, where indirect expression and storytelling are preferred over direct self-disclosure. This cultural congruence increases participant comfort and authenticity of responses.

2. Facilitation of Deep Disclosure

The projective quality of the cards—their ambiguity and symbolic richness—enables participants to access and express experiences that might be difficult to articulate directly. By speaking about an animal character, participants can explore painful, shameful, or confusing experiences with psychological safety. The externalization process allows for gradual movement from metaphorical to personal disclosure as trust builds.

This feature makes the method particularly valuable for research on sensitive topics including trauma, mental health, stigmatized experiences, and marginalized identities.

3. Reduction of Power Differentials

The playful, game-like format of card selection and storytelling creates a more egalitarian research environment. Unlike formal interviews where the researcher asks questions and the participant answers, the Meta Pets Method positions both parties as co-explorers of meaning. The cards become the focus of attention, deflecting power dynamics away from the researcher-participant relationship.

This leveling effect is especially important in research with marginalized communities, where educational and social status differences between researchers and participants can inhibit authentic engagement.

4. Engagement and Enjoyment

Participants consistently report that the Meta Pets Method is enjoyable and engaging. The visual appeal of the cards, the element of choice in selection, and the creative storytelling process make research participation feel less like an obligation and more like a meaningful activity. This positive experience can enhance data quality, increase retention in longitudinal studies, and build goodwill for future research engagement.

5. Flexibility and Adaptability

The method's flexibility allows for adaptation across diverse research contexts, questions, and populations. Researchers can customize card decks, modify prompts, adjust session structures, and integrate the method with other approaches. This adaptability makes it a versatile tool in the qualitative researcher's methodological toolkit.

6. Rich, Multidimensional Data

The method generates multiple forms of data—narratives, visual selections, group interactions, and embodied responses—providing a rich, multidimensional picture of participants' experiences. The combination of individual and collective meaning-making yields insights into both personal and cultural dimensions of the phenomenon under study.

Limitations and Challenges

1. Interpretation Complexity

The symbolic and metaphorical nature of the data presents analytical challenges. Researchers must interpret not only what participants say but also the symbolic meanings of card selections and the relationship between metaphorical and literal content. This interpretive complexity requires careful attention to avoid over-interpretation or projection of researcher assumptions onto participant meanings.

2. Facilitator Skill Requirements

Effective implementation requires facilitators with strong interpersonal skills, cultural competence, and comfort with ambiguity. Facilitators must balance structure with flexibility, know when to probe deeper and when to allow silence, and navigate group dynamics sensitively. Training and practice are essential, which may limit the method's accessibility for novice researchers.

3. Time Intensity

The method is time-intensive, particularly in group settings where each participant's story deserves attention. Sessions typically require 90-120 minutes, which may not be feasible in all research contexts. Additionally, the rich, complex data generated requires substantial time for analysis.

4. Potential for Superficial Engagement

Some participants may engage with cards at a surface level, selecting based on aesthetic appeal or providing socially desirable interpretations rather than authentic personal meanings. Skilled facilitation and rapport-building are necessary to encourage deeper engagement, but cannot guarantee it.

5. Cultural Specificity of Symbolism

While animal symbolism is cross-culturally widespread, specific meanings vary. A snake might represent wisdom in one culture, evil in another, and healing in a third. Researchers must be cautious about assuming universal symbolic meanings and should involve cultural insiders in card design and interpretation.

6. Limited Generalizability

As with all qualitative methods, findings from Meta Pets research are context-specific and not statistically generalizable. The method is designed for in-depth understanding of particular cases rather than broad population-level conclusions.

Ethical Considerations

Informed Consent in Low-Literacy Contexts

Obtaining truly informed consent with low-literacy populations requires special attention. Researchers should use verbal explanations with witness documentation, visual consent forms, and ongoing process consent where participants can withdraw at any point. The playful nature of the method should not obscure the seriousness of research ethics.

Emotional Safety and Trauma

The projective nature of the method can unexpectedly surface traumatic memories or intense emotions. Researchers must be prepared to provide emotional support, have referral resources available, and know when to pause or end a session. Facilitators should be trained in trauma-informed approaches.

Confidentiality in Group Settings

Group implementations raise confidentiality challenges, as participants hear each other's stories. Researchers should establish group agreements about confidentiality and be transparent about the

limits of privacy in group contexts. Some participants may prefer individual sessions for sensitive topics.

Power and Representation

Researchers must be reflexive about power dynamics and representation. Who interprets the symbolic meanings—researcher or participant? Whose voice is privileged in analysis and writing? Participatory approaches that involve community members in interpretation and dissemination can help address these concerns.

Cultural Appropriation

When adapting the method across cultures, researchers must avoid appropriating sacred symbols or trivializing cultural traditions. Collaboration with cultural insiders and community advisory boards can ensure respectful adaptation.

Trustworthiness and Rigor

Establishing trustworthiness in Meta Pets research requires attention to qualitative research quality criteria:

Credibility (Internal Validity)

- **Prolonged Engagement:** Spend sufficient time in the research setting to build trust and understand context
- **Triangulation:** Combine Meta Pets data with other sources (interviews, observations, documents)
- **Member Checking:** Share interpretations with participants to verify accuracy and resonance
- **Peer Debriefing:** Discuss findings with colleagues to challenge assumptions and explore alternative interpretations

Transferability (External Validity)

- **Thick Description:** Provide rich contextual detail so readers can assess applicability to other settings
- **Purposive Sampling:** Select participants who can provide information-rich cases
- **Documentation:** Maintain detailed records of implementation process and adaptations

Dependability (Reliability)

- **Audit Trail:** Document all methodological decisions, adaptations, and analytical steps
- **Reflexivity:** Maintain researcher journals exploring positionality, assumptions, and reactions
- **Consistency:** Use structured protocols while allowing flexibility for emergent insights

Confirmability (Objectivity)

- **Reflexive Practice:** Explicitly examine how researcher background and biases shape interpretation
- **Data-Grounded Analysis:** Ensure interpretations are clearly linked to data rather than imposed
- **Negative Case Analysis:** Actively seek disconfirming evidence and alternative explanations

Reflexivity and Positionality

Researchers using the Meta Pets Method must engage in ongoing reflexive practice, examining how their own identities, experiences, and assumptions shape the research process. Key reflexive questions include:

- How does my cultural background influence my interpretation of symbolic meanings?
- What power dynamics exist between me and participants, and how do these affect the data?
- What assumptions am I making about participants' experiences?
- How might my presence and questions shape the stories participants tell?
- What emotions and reactions am I experiencing, and how do these inform my understanding?

Documenting reflexive insights in research journals and discussing them with research teams enhances methodological rigor and transparency.

Discussion: Contributions to Qualitative Methodology

Advancing Culturally Responsive Research

The Meta Pets Method contributes to ongoing efforts to decolonize and culturally adapt qualitative research methodologies. It challenges Western-centric assumptions about how knowledge should be generated and communicated, offering an approach that honors diverse epistemologies and communication styles.

By centering visual, symbolic, and narrative modalities, the method aligns with Indigenous and non-Western knowledge traditions that privilege storytelling, metaphor, and holistic understanding over analytical fragmentation. This alignment makes the method particularly valuable for research with marginalized communities whose ways of knowing have been historically excluded from academic research.

The method also addresses practical barriers to research participation in low-literacy and resource-constrained contexts. Its low-tech, portable format requires minimal resources while generating rich data, making it feasible for community-based and international development research.

Bridging Arts-Based and Traditional Qualitative Methods

The Meta Pets Method occupies a productive middle ground between traditional qualitative interviews and fully arts-based approaches. It incorporates visual and creative elements while maintaining the narrative focus and dialogic interaction of conventional qualitative research. This hybrid quality makes it accessible to researchers who may be interested in arts-based methods but uncertain about fully embracing artistic processes.

The method demonstrates that methodological innovation need not require abandoning established qualitative traditions. Rather, creative adaptation and integration can enhance traditional approaches, making them more flexible, engaging, and culturally responsive.

Implications for Participatory and Community-Based Research

The Meta Pets Method aligns well with participatory research paradigms that emphasize collaboration, empowerment, and social change. The method's emphasis on co-constructed meaning, participant voice, and accessible communication supports participatory principles.

The cards can serve as tools for participatory action research, helping communities identify priorities, envision futures, and plan collective action. For example, community members might use cards to map assets and challenges, with different cards representing community strengths, barriers, and aspirations. This application extends the method beyond data collection to become a tool for community development and social change.

Future Directions and Applications

The Meta Pets Method has potential applications across diverse research domains:

Health Research:

- Exploring illness experiences and health beliefs in cross-cultural contexts
- Understanding mental health and well-being in stigmatized or marginalized populations
- Facilitating patient-provider communication and shared decision-making
- Assessing community health needs and priorities

Education:

- Understanding student experiences and learning processes
- Exploring teacher identity and professional development

- Facilitating classroom dialogue on social-emotional learning
- Assessing school climate and student well-being

Social Work and Community Development:

- Exploring experiences of trauma, resilience, and recovery
- Understanding family dynamics and relationships
- Facilitating community needs assessment and asset mapping
- Supporting group therapy and support group processes

International Development:

- Conducting participatory needs assessments in diverse cultural contexts
- Understanding community perspectives on development priorities
- Evaluating program impacts through narrative change
- Building cross-cultural understanding in multicultural teams

Organizational Research:

- Exploring workplace culture and employee experience
- Facilitating team building and conflict resolution
- Understanding organizational change and adaptation
- Assessing leadership and organizational values

Methodological Innovation and Evolution

The Meta Pets Method represents one example of ongoing methodological innovation in qualitative research. As the field continues to evolve, we anticipate several directions for further development:

Digital Adaptations: Creating digital versions of the cards for online research, with interactive features and multimedia integration

Expanded Card Decks: Developing specialized decks for specific populations or research topics (e.g., children's deck, health-focused deck, environmental deck)

Integration with Technology: Combining cards with digital storytelling, photovoice, or other technology-enhanced methods

Quantitative Integration: Developing mixed-methods designs that combine qualitative card narratives with quantitative analysis of card selection patterns

Training and Dissemination: Creating training programs, facilitator guides, and open-access resources to support widespread adoption

Conclusions

The Meta Pets Method offers qualitative researchers a culturally responsive, accessible, and engaging approach to narrative inquiry. By integrating visual, symbolic, and narrative modalities, the method addresses significant limitations of traditional interview techniques, particularly in cross-cultural, low-literacy, and collectivist contexts.

The method's theoretical grounding in narrative inquiry, projective techniques, arts-based research, and archetypal psychology provides a robust foundation for rigorous qualitative research. Its practical design—featuring illustrated cards, flexible protocols, and adaptable implementation—makes it feasible for diverse research settings and populations.

Our application of the method with rural artisan weavers in India demonstrates its effectiveness in facilitating rich narrative data, enhancing participant engagement, and honoring cultural communication patterns. The method successfully elicited stories of resilience, struggle, and meaning-making that might not have emerged through conventional interviews.

As qualitative researchers increasingly recognize the need for methodological pluralism and cultural adaptation, the Meta Pets Method represents a valuable addition to the methodological toolkit. It exemplifies how creative innovation can enhance research rigor, accessibility, and cultural

responsiveness while maintaining the depth and richness that characterize excellent qualitative inquiry.

We invite researchers to adapt, apply, and further develop the Meta Pets Method in their own contexts. Through collective experimentation and refinement, we can continue advancing qualitative methodologies that honor diverse ways of knowing, empower marginalized voices, and generate knowledge that serves communities and contributes to social justice.

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