



Being Moved: A Meaningful but Enigmatic Emotional Experience

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Abstract

The emotion often labelled as “being moved” is a commonly felt but somewhat mysterious experience in which joy and sadness are combined in a specific way. In recent years, it has gained much research attention, particularly within psychology, mostly using quantitative methods. The topics of discussion have included, for example, whether being moved is caused by an intensification of social relations or rather by core values of life becoming salient. This article aspires to shed further light on this emotion by exploring descriptions and reflections on moving experiences written by Finnish participants ($N=56$). The writings were collected through a web-based data collection service and analyzed by inductive categorization. The findings suggest that being moved is a commonly recognized emotional state with characteristic bodily concomitants, that it is difficult to control and is often held private. Yet being moved is evaluated as a positive and valuable phenomenon. The events that were reported in this study to arouse such experiences are categorized into three main groups: important life course events (progression of the life course, memories, achievements, the birth and growth of a child), intensification of social relations (compassion and empathy, opening interindividual boundaries, communal experiences, morality), and beauty (art, nature). Our interpretation of what is common to the diversity of events behind the emotion is that they reveal core issues deeply meaningful for individuals and human life.

Keywords Being moved · Emotion · Formal object · Particular objects · Experience of meaningfulness · Written qualitative data

Introduction

For many people, watching media reports of Ukrainians’ brave struggle against the enemy invading their country have brought tears to the eyes. Similarly, seeing the rise of a compatriot athlete to the highest podium at the Olympics may cause welling up of tears or a lump in the throat, as does singing or hearing a song that evokes dear memories. Even fictional

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events representing, for example, the triumph of justice, the birth of a child, or an unexpected expression of compassion are frequently experienced as emotionally touching. These feelings are often called “being moved.”

The emotion of “being moved” (*liikutus* in Finnish) is probably familiar to most people—and presumably specific to humans. Yet despite its familiarity, it has enigmatic features. An individual experiencing this emotion is not necessarily aware of why they feel that way (e.g., “Why do I cry when my daughter gets married?”) (Vingerhoets, 2013, 89). Moreover, while emotions usually pertain to the concerns of the persons themselves, being moved is often aroused by events with which the individual experiencing the emotion is not personally involved (Fiske et al., 2019). The triggers of being moved vary greatly, and while on the whole the emotion is felt as positive, its bodily concomitants are partly the same as those of negative feelings, such as moistening of the eyes (for a review, see Zickfeld et al., 2019b).

While evoking moving experiences has for centuries been the aim of rhetorics, esthetics, religions, and art (Hanich et al., 2014), the nature, content, and motivation of this emotion have in many ways remained obscure, and it has not been an object of scientific research until recently. The neglect of this emotion within psychology is possibly explained by the prevalence of studying cognition, which has only in recent decades given way to the study of emotions. Moreover, being moved may have been deemed less significant than the basic emotions of anger, love, fear, or sadness. This does not, however, mean that it is an insignificant emotion. It is a theoretically interesting phenomenon, and it is also consequential for human life.

In this article, we use written texts collected from Finnish adults describing their moving experiences to analyze the following: in what kind of situations the feeling of being moved arises and what the participants feel and think about the feeling and how they relate to it. By this, we aim to increase the understanding of this phenomenon and thereby contribute to the discussion on what being moved *is about* as an emotion.

Basics of Research on Being Moved

Emotions

In line with the thoughts of Aristotle over 2000 years ago, this study sees emotions as indispensable guides of action. For example, Matsumoto and Ekman (2009, 69) define emotions as “transient bio-psychosocial reactions designed to aid individuals in adapting to and coping with events that have implications for survival and wellbeing.” Emotions can thus be thought of as having evolved to serve human survival (as both individuals and groups) in varying conditions. Emotions reflect the relationship between the person and the situation (Robinson, 2009), which means that they reveal the meaning of the situation to the emoter. They are also generally viewed as both psychological and bodily experiences (Niedenthal & Barsalou, 2009).

In emotion research, a distinction is often made between universal basic emotions and culturally varying complex emotions (Matsumoto & Ekman, 2009). As basic emotions have been counted anger, disgust, fear, enjoyment, sadness, and surprise. Basic emotions and emotion families formed by these are distinguished by their specific physiological characteristics, mental contents, subjective experiences, and non-verbal expressions. The system of basic emotions has been thought to have evolved to deal with the existential challenges of the species. It has been argued that being moved could be counted as a basic

emotion because it has specific physiological concomitants (see, e.g., Cova & Deonna, 2014, 459). For instance, Fiske et al. (2019) propose that being moved (in their terms, *kama muta*) is activated by an innate universal psychological mechanism, the manifestation of which depends on cultural factors.

Being Moved as a Specific Emotion

Being moved—in other languages, *etre ému*, *vara berört*, *bewegt sein* and *gan dong*—is a specific emotion that seems to be common to many if not all cultures, and the term referring to it often relates to the feeling of being moved by something (see, e.g., Fiske et al., 2017). Its Finnish lingual counterpart *liikutus* stems from the verb *liikkua* just as the English term *being moved* stems from the verb *to move*. An almost synonymous but slightly milder term than *moving* in Finnish is *touching* (*koskettaa*, *koskettava*) that we use here in a few places to avoid tautology. Although the vernacular terms for emotions in different languages, cultural groups, and historical periods may vary from the corresponding scientific concept of being moved, creating “the lexical fallacy” problem (Campeggiani, 2021; Fiske et al., 2019; Kostan, 2021; Scherer, 2005), it seems to us that the vernacular or emic term we focus on in this study coincides closely with the way being moved is described in other current English language publications on this emotion.

Compassion, admiration, nostalgia, and awe belong to the same family of emotions, but they are still empirically distinguishable from being moved (for a review, see Zickfeld et al., 2019b). Being moved is often defined in terms of its specific bodily concomitants, the most often mentioned being moistening of eyes, a lump in the throat, warm feeling in the chest, broken voice, chills, and goosebumps (Ibid.). Moreover, a tension in certain facial muscles (corrugator EMG activity) is associated with being moved but not with other positive emotions (Kimura et al., 2019).

In physiological studies, it has been found that being moved activates both the sympathetic and parasympathetic nervous systems (for a review, see Zickfeld et al., 2019b). On the psychological level, being moved can be triggered by both joyful and sad events, and it can consist of both happy and sad feelings. This mixture of positive and negative feelings has provoked much discussion. Many researchers regard being moved as a mixed emotion (e.g., Bartsch et al., 2014; Hanich et al., 2014; Menninghaus et al., 2015). Yet several studies have found that the overall feeling of being moved is positive (e.g., Fiske et al., 2017; Campeggiani, 2021; Schindler et al., 2022).

The phenomenon of being moved has been studied within esthetics for a long time, seeking answers to questions like why people enjoy watching sad plays or why a certain kind of music arouses chills or feelings of ecstasy (Goldstein, 1980; Hanich et al., 2014; Panksepp, 1995; Panzarella, 1980). The ability of art in general to cause powerful feelings of being moved was also pointed out by the famous emotion scholar Nico Frijda in 2007 (Frijda 2007).

Despite these targeted studies on the moving effects of art, this emotion did not receive much research attention in psychology before the 2000s (Tokaji, 2003). Although already Charles Darwin and William James, both early scholars of emotion, had written about the phenomenon of being moved in positive situations (Fiske et al., 2017), a more systematic attempt to explore this emotion is a relatively recent phenomenon. This is reflected also by the inclusion of being moved as an entry in the encyclopedia of emotion research in

2007 (Tan, 2009). A lively psychological research tradition has developed around this issue thereafter.

One of the key texts of this new research tradition is Cova and Deonna (2014) article “Being moved,” in which the authors show, based on empirical philosophy, that being moved is a specific emotion to be distinguished from others. To support their conceptual analysis, Cova and Deonna collected depictions of experiences of being moved by 100 people in the USA. The authors claimed that an emotion can be regarded as specific if it has a specific object, specific experiential quality, specific behavioral consequences, and specific evolutionary function, and they argued that being moved fulfills these criteria.

Along the same lines, a research group led by Menninghaus et al. (2015) strived to create an overarching portrayal of the concept of being moved, leaning on empirical survey research. The group explored what kinds of situations evoke being moved, what kind of feelings it involved, and how it was related to similar emotions such as admiration and awe. A major part of situations inducing this emotion were linked to meaningful human relations and important life events such as birth, death, marriage, divorce, and reunion, as well as to political events and encounters with art and nature. The most common feelings associated with being moved were sadness and joy, which were often activated simultaneously. Moreover, this very powerful emotion motivated people’s tendencies to approach, join, and help.

A research group led by anthropologist Alan P. Fiske explored the emotion of being moved, which it called *kama muta*, a Sanskrit term that literally means “moved by love” (Seibt et al., 2018). The group compared video reception data from five cultures in terms of five dimensions: the objects of the emotion, its valence (positive–negative), the bodily feelings related to the emotion, the motivation it aroused, and the linguistic expressions related to it. Across diverse cultures, similar situations seemed to induce being moved (e.g., birth of a child, wedding, reunion, self-sacrifice, and expressions of friendship), and these were especially powerful in otherwise difficult conditions. Being moved had a positive valence or contained a mixture of sadness and joy, and similar bodily feelings (tears, chills, warmth in the chest, a lump in the throat) were reported across cultures. In terms of action tendencies, being moved seemed to evoke devotion and commitment to preserve and strengthen communal relationships.

Fiske’s research group continued their studies in a larger international project involving 19 countries, five continents, and 15 languages ($N=3542$) (Zickfeld et al., 2019a). The participants watched moving video clips, described moving events, and completed a questionnaire. It was hypothesized that the five dimensions mentioned above form a unified whole in all cultures despite differences in some dimensions. The group also tested the hypothesis that *kama muta* is qualitatively distinct from other emotions. The results supported both hypotheses. No other emotion was characterized by a similar combination of psychological feelings and bodily sensations, which indicates that *kama muta* (or being moved) is a distinct emotion.

Evokers of Being Moved

Being moved seems not to have such evident mental content as, for example, simple joy, sadness, or fear. To gain an understanding of the mental content of this emotion, one must identify its *particular objects* or concrete evokers by asking people to describe situations in which they have been moved or emotionally touched. Another way is to ask what kinds of emotions they feel in connection with situations presented to them by researchers. Different studies have brought up a relatively recurring set of such situations. For instance, Menninghaus et al. (2015) collected 270 student descriptions of situations that had moved them. The responses

were categorized into six groups: human relationships, life changes, political phenomena, nature-related, art-related, and miscellaneous. The first two categories were the largest. The phenomenon leading to being moved could be either personally experienced or shown in the media or fiction (Menninghaus et al., 2015). Schindler et al. (2022) analyzed qualitative data and found the following elicitors (in order of frequency): positive experience of relationship, end of life, beginning of or positive turn in relationship, man-made esthetics, end of/negative turn in relationship, mastery/competence, and beginning of life.

Cullhed (2020) gathered the following evokers of moving emotions from several studies: family member's weddings, graduation ceremonies, funerals, surprise parties, welcome marriage proposals, a serene encounter with death, separation or reunion of friends, forgiveness, success against all odds, dignity in defeat, perseverance in times of trouble, a sacrifice for the greater good, passionate oration about important values in political rallies, sentimental stories, and overwhelming beauty in art and nature. Cute babies and animals have also been mentioned as moving (see Zickfeld et al., 2019b).

Furthermore, music is a well-known instigator of moving experiences, and it has given rise to a specific research tradition. Panksepp (1995), for example, studied the subjective "chills" aroused by music and found out that sad music evoked more chills than joyful music, and the effects were stronger among women than men. In addition, Eerola et al. (2016) observed that sad music evoked a feeling of being moved especially among empathetic persons.

The Fundamental Causes or Formal Objects of Being Moved

It seems, then, that being moved can be evoked by a multitude of diverse, seemingly even contrasting events (e.g., birth and death). The question that has perplexed researchers is, what is the unifying core (Schindler et al., 2022) of these events? In other words, how can the nature of such events be theoretically conceptualized?

Answering this question is a prerequisite for understanding the function of being moved and a starting point for pondering its evolutionary roots. We can define fear as an emotion that is caused by something that threatens our wellbeing or existence and anger as an emotion caused by a violation of a moral norm. But what would be the analogous definition of events that arouse emotions of being moved? Cova and Deonna (2014) call this conceptualization the *formal object* of the emotion. Cova et al. (2017) explored different attempts to define the formal object of being moved and distinguished two main types: *restrictive* definitions see as its cause a restricted group of situations, whereas *inclusive* definitions attempt to consider a wide variety of evokers of the emotion and to find their common denominator.

Among the restrictive definitions, the first one was suggested by Haidt (2003), who saw being moved, or elevation, as caused by perceiving "moral beauty." Alan P. Fiske with his colleagues proposed, on the basis of his theory of social relations (Fiske, 1992), that being moved, or *kama muta*, occurs in response to sudden intensification of communal sharing relationships (Fiske et al., 2017). These authors see *kama muta* as the basis of social cohesion, referring to the ideas of social solidarity and effervescence introduced by Emile Durkheim. The ritual practices of various cultures encourage the emergence of effervescence that strengthens their social identity, thereby promoting their affective and moral commitment to their community.

The inclusive view, in turn, does not start from a certain kind of situation as the evoker of being moved but searches for a more general definition that would cover all kinds of situations that people experience as moving. Hereby socio-moral evokers of being moved are seen as a subtype of a more general phenomenon. Cova and Deonna proposed in their 2014 article that being moved is caused by any situation where a positive core value stands out. It has

sometimes been proposed that “standing out” requires a dark backdrop, or negative events or conditions against which the positive can be seen more clearly (Strick & van Soelingen, 2018).

The inclusive view is supported by the finding that besides moral and social events emphasized by the restricted view, individual accomplishments can also evoke being moved (Landmann et al., 2019). In their study, Landmann et al. compared the moral, social, and achievement perspectives by showing participants video clips related to these three themes and then asking what kinds of feelings they evoked. They found that situations pertaining to social relations were most powerful in evoking feelings of being moved, but the participants also felt that moral deeds and individual accomplishments were moving. In the authors’ view, what is common in these situations is that an individual surpasses an internal standard related to either social norms or individual accomplishments. Moving situations can thus arouse a willingness to spend time with close ones and help them, but also a willingness to achieve something significant in life. Being moved seems to remind people of the most important things for them in life. Landmann et al.’s (2019) study thus supports the inclusive view of the formal object of this emotion.

One clue for understanding the nature of emotionally touching experiences might be found by considering the problem of why joy and sadness, as well as suffering and pleasure are often jointly present in being moved and why people so often find pleasure in, for example, listening to sad music or following sad stories. Tokaji’s (2003) series of experiments related to this question revealed that sad episodes sometimes evoked positive feelings alongside sadness and that joyful episodes similarly evoked sad feelings alongside joy. Hanich et al. (2014) likewise observed that when a sad story evoked feelings of being moved, it was also felt as pleasurable. The same is true as regards music: the more people were moved by sad music, the more they enjoyed it (Eerola et al., 2016).

Similarly, Cova et al. (2017) pondered why sadness in stories or movies seems to intensify the pleasure gained from them. They referred to the distinction between immediate feelings and meta feelings presented by Oliver and Raney (2011). Although following a sad story does not produce hedonistic pleasure (immediate feeling), it can produce eudaimonic pleasure, which is based on feelings of meaningfulness in life (meta feeling). This idea is supported by Bartsch et al. (2014) research in which moving video clips aroused more reflective thinking by participants than non-moving video clips.

Emotionally moving experiences may thus help to reflect one’s values in life. In a similar vein, Tan (2009) proposed that being moved reveals to a people what is significant to them, and Cullhed (2020) suggested that the emotion is evoked by becoming aware of how deeply attached one is to a certain object, be it a person or an abstract cultural idea. Schindler et al. (2022) noted that the underlying core of the emotion is the feeling of importance of individuals, social entities, and abstract social values as sources of meaning in life.

In summary, the following formal objects of being moved have thus far been suggested: (1) ethical and moral deeds (Haidt, 2003; Menninghaus et al., 2015; Seibt et al., 2017), (2) strengthening of communal relationships (Fiske et al., 2017), (3) positive core values like sociability or achievement standing out (Cova et al., 2017; Landmann et al., 2019), and (4) finding some concrete or abstract thing as dear to one (Cullhed, 2020) or as a source of meaning in life (Schindler et al., 2022).

The aim of the study

Being moved has thus far been studied mainly by quantitative methods (i.e., experimental or survey-based). The most typical method has been to show participants verbal, visual,

or auditive materials designed to be moving or not moving and then ask them to assess the feelings and motives that these stimuli have aroused. Sometimes also physiological correlates of the emotions have been registered, and some surveys have included qualitative open-ended questions (Cova & Deonna, 2014; Menninghaus et al., 2015). In their review of research on being moved, Zickfeld et al. (2019b), nevertheless, noted that qualitative methods have rarely been deployed and that their increased use would be welcome. Accordingly, we apply a qualitative approach in our study to avoid premature closure of the conceptual apparatus. Unlike the recent research by Schindler et al. (2022), we use both qualitative data and qualitative analysis methods.

The aim of this qualitative study is to explore the depictions of Finnish study participants' experiences of being moved and the factors that evoked this emotion. As a new element, we asked the participants how they felt about other people seeing their emotional reaction. We also asked how they would explain the nature of the emotion of being moved. Our theoretical aim was to use the data to identify the formal object of being moved. In other words, we seek the general and abstract phenomenon represented by the concrete evokers of moving experiences.

Method

The methodological approach of this study is phenomenological-hermeneutic. It is phenomenological in the sense that it attempts to capture people's lived experience and their ways of making sense of them on the basis of their own linguistic expressions (see, e.g., Smith & Nizza, 2022, 3–6). Therefore, we collected data using writing requests guided by relatively few questions, leaving the participants space to freely describe their experiences of being moved and their thoughts about it. The focus is not on language but on the experiences and thoughts that the verbal expressions convey. In the analysis, we organized the material in thematic categories and present them in a way that reveals the content of the participants' responses authentically and comprehensively.

Our interpretation of the results is hermeneutic in the sense that it aims at reaching a holistic understanding of the phenomenon of being moved. A hermeneutic circle involves circular (or spiral) movement from preunderstanding to better understanding, from description to conceptualization, and from parts to the whole of the data (see, e.g., George, 2021). We started from our initial hunch that being moved is something important for humans, proceeded to reading the research on this emotion and collecting data, then categorized it inductively in dialogue with each other. We aimed at an interpretation that would make sense of the whole data set and finally compared our findings with those of previous studies.

The data for this study were collected in 2019 by a writing request delivered through a web-based service (E-lomake). We sent the request by e-mail to our personal networks and asked the recipients of the request to both respond themselves and spread the request further. Participation in the study was anonymous. We ended up using a writing request (instead of, e.g., interviews) both because it was a more efficient way of collecting data and because we thought that being moved might be felt as such a private experience that it would be easier to write about it than to discuss it face to face with an interviewer.

In the instructions, it was necessary to somehow define the emotion we were studying to ascertain that the participants understood it at least roughly the same way. Therefore, we decided to use a concrete definition to characterize being moved; we asked the participants

to associate the emotion with “a drop in the lens” (a colloquial Finnish expression for a specific kind of tearfulness not associated with sadness) or a “lump in the throat.” Note that “a drop in the lens” does not denote actual weeping but only moistening of the eyes. Tears and a lump in the throat have been pointed out in previous studies as common signs of being moved. The participants were asked to describe their experiences based on the following instructions: “Please write about one or more instances when you felt moved by responding, for example, to the following questions: What was the situation like? What kind of sentiments did the emotion contain? Did you disclose that you were moved to other people? What do you think made you feel moved?”.

We obtained 56 responses, 45 from women and 11 from men. The participants were distributed in different age groups, but they were mostly at least middle-aged: six of them were younger than 30 years, whereas 37 were over 60 years old. The mean length of the texts was 102 words (ranging from 11 to 299 words). The writing was free in form, and the responses did not always contain direct answers to our questions. The style of the responses varied: some participants described in vivid detail a single situation in which they had been moved, while others described several situations, and the rest wrote in a more general way about the kinds of situations where they were usually moved.

As the data set was small, we examined it without computer assistance. We analyzed the data inductively (Clarke & Braun, 2014) by (1) discerning the meaning units pertaining to our research questions (situation, feelings, display, thoughts about the causes) and coding them, then (2) categorizing the codes into more comprehensive groups, (3) grouping these categories into still more comprehensive classes, and (4) attempting to achieve an interpretation that would cover all the classes. We first read the data separately, then discussed our thoughts and created a joint preliminary categorization. After that, we coded the data separately and modified the categories, and finally, after several rounds of discussion, the final categories emerged. Instead of drawing these categories from pre-existing theories, we tried to form them based on our data. We are aware that this is not the only possible categorization: the borders between categories are sometimes blurry, and sometimes, one meaning unit contained several evokers of being moved. We looked at the data as if rotating a kaleidoscope and chose the clearest organization.

Because of the qualitative nature and small sample as well as the difficulty of classifying some of the responses into just one category, the frequencies we provide for the categories should be seen rather as indicative than definitive. In connection with the quotations, we mention the participant’s gender and identification number (based on the order of responding) but leave out other identifying information. As the proportion of men was small, it is not possible to compare the gender groups.

Findings

Physical Signs and Bodily Sensations Related to Being Moved

In the participants’ descriptions of how the emotion of being moved manifested, the most commonly cited “symptoms” were tears and the feeling of a lump in the throat, which were also the ones listed in the instructions. Tears were sometimes mentioned only by the commonly used expression “drop on the lens” or as moistening of the eyes. A few times, it

was depicted as a strong and uncontrollable emotional reaction: “The tears just flow... so I can’t see anything” (F23).

The symptoms of “warm sensation in the chest” and cold shivers or goose bumps, which are often cited in previous studies of being moved, were each mentioned only once in our dataset—the latter as a description of “spine creepiness.” Instead, an unspecified feeling of warmth was mentioned more often. The chest area is also referred to by mentions of respiratory arrest, inhibition of singing, or a special shiver-like respite. Facial sensations of jaw-dropping, mouth twisting, and a wide smile were also mentioned. The following excerpt describes a wide range of these different experiences:

Being moved usually involves a quick, spontaneously and authentically rising “splash” in the body that can bring tears to the eyes, a warm feeling in the chest (especially if you are moved by something you perceive as positive), as well as gentleness and acceptance in your own mind, your gaze, and way of being in that moment. (F55)

The descriptions of being moved are so similar to each other that they can be thought of as expressing roughly the same emotional state, which is similar to that described in previous studies.

Psychological Sentiments Connected with Being Moved

As will be observed, the descriptions of the elicitors of being moved contained many comments on the emotions involved in such experiences. The valence of the emotions mentioned was either positive (joy, pride, happiness) or negative (sadness, pity, wistfulness) or a combination of positive and negative emotions. Since they were quite often mentioned as qualities of the classified elicitors, we chose not to focus on them separately in this article. It should be noted, however, that in some cases, it was difficult to distinguish pure sadness from being moved since shedding tears is so common in both cases.

Situations That Evoke the Feeling of Being Moved

The data included 210 descriptions of elicitors of being moved (on average 3.8 per person). Our detailed analysis of the participants’ descriptions of their experiences of being moved resulted in nine categories (see Table 1). The first four categories are primarily focused on *life course*, such as occasions marking the course of life, birth and growth of a child, accomplishments, and memories connecting the past to the present. The next four categories may be grouped under the more general concept of *sociality*. Even though many of the descriptions of moving life course events contained elements related to social ties, we gathered under this more general title of sociality only the types of responses in which empathy, communality, and prosocial or moral behavior were the sole instigators of being moved. Finally, experiences of *beauty* formed a separate class.

Life Course 1: Progression of the Life Course

Central socially shared life course events from birth to death led to typical occasions of being moved. Especially common among them were weddings and funerals; sometimes, christening and birthdays were mentioned. The simultaneous reference to weddings and

Table 1 Categorization of the elicitors of being moved**Life course events****Progression of the life course (19)**

- Christenings, weddings, funerals (10)
- Awareness of inevitable life changes (4)
- Leaving something behind (3)
- Other (2)

The birth and growth of a child (or another vulnerable creature) (30)

- Birth, the first encounter (3)
- Reaching new stages (5)
- The child's performances, successes (8)
- Cuteness or vulnerability of a child (or a small animal) (13)
- Realizing the importance of a child to oneself (1)

Achievements, performances, pride (23)

- Seeing someone attain a goal after having worked hard, perfection (17)
- Seeing someone receive well-deserved praise (6)

Memories (22)

- Personal memories, memorable events (7)
- Memories provoked by music (13)
- Memories told by the close ones (2)

Sociality**Empathy and identification (47)**

- Storylines inviting empathy and identification (42)
- Contagion of being moved (5)

Opening the borders between people (5)

- Confiding one's troubles with someone (3)
- Forming a connection over interindividual or intergroup borders (2)

Communal experiences (18)

- Marches, patriotic events (7)
- Demonstrations (2)
- Joint efforts of a team, a choir etc. (4)
- Joint experiences (concerts, spectacles) (5)
- Religious events (1)

Morality (22)

- The victory of justice (1)
- Self-sacrifice, unselfishness, generosity, consideration (6)
- Showing compassion (14)
- Display of broadmindedness (1)

Beauty (24)

- Beauty of art (20)
- Beauty of nature (4)

funerals shows that the positivity or negativity of the event is not decisive for evoking the emotion of being moved. As one participant noted, the question is about the great turning

points of life. Moreover, the moving nature of weddings and funerals seemed to be not only about their importance but also their communal nature. “Being moved is often linked with collective empathy in that situation” (M3), and the character as a ritual turns individual events into expressions of more general events. A participant described, “Although I am divorced, seeing a woman walking toward the altar in a wedding dress triggered in me a feeling of being touched” (M14).

Life course–related inciters of moving experiences were also situations connected with inevitable life changes. They seemed to have “something to do with the wistfulness of change, as when closing a door either symbolically or concretely, even if you know that something new awaits around the corner” (F8). For instance, a woman who worked with elderly clients got tears in her eyes during their afternoon dances when she saw them “dance like in their youth” (F9).

Life Course 2: the Birth and Growth of a Child

The births and first encounters with one’s children or grandchildren were frequently mentioned as evokers of being moved. Participants described times “when I first embraced my grandchild” (M7) and “The child said for the first time clearly and recognizably ‘papa’” (M49). Following the children’s growth and achieving new milestones, skills, and courage were also felt as moving. Various performance situations are examples of such situations. For instance, one participant remembered, “My granddaughter played ‘Snowman’ in a level examination of Conservatory” (F24).

Although many participants described experiences involving their own children in particular, the positive energy of children in general could be moving. According to one participant, “When children dare to, can, and enjoy what they do, it has revolutionary power in which the observers have a chance to participate” (F43). On the other hand, moving experiences could also be incited by observing children’s fragility, as when one participant described that “Children are so helpless in this world of adults” (F16), and by thinking about their future possibilities and risks: “You need to think whether to hide behind your glasses or your cell phone when you wish them a good and safe journey to the future” (F8). Finally, in addition to children, cute puppies were mentioned as emotionally moving.

Life Course 3: Achievements

Witnessing achievements reached through tenacious work, rehearsal, and efforts were also experienced as moving. A participant mentioned, “Perhaps somebody does there something great compared to one’s size or tries to do it and expresses something great with the deed” (M1). Welling up of tears could as well be evoked by success in sports competitions by familiar people, compatriots, or personal favorites. Here, the admirability of the achievement is combined with a strong sense of community with people that the athlete represents. Rituals like the awards ceremony strengthen the moving emotions. For example, one participant described, “Always when Finland wins a gold medal and you see the champion there on the winner’s podium and the beautiful flag of Finland waves, one is moved...” (F17).

Understanding the hard work and great sacrifices behind these achievements reinforces the appreciation. Yet a winning performance as such may moisten one’s eye as well: “Although I am not a sports fan or nationalistic, for some reason the success and rewarding of others generally triggers an emotional reaction” (M14). A truly refined and skillful

performance could also move people to tears by its beauty, whether in connection with sports or art.

In addition to various public accomplishments, there were several descriptions of familiar people receiving good feedback on account of their efforts. For instance, one participant mentioned when “my work mates and people dear to me are praised for a good reason” (F39). Joy and pride incited by the achievements of close friends or family were felt as deeply moving. For instance, a participant said, “The last case was probably when I heard that my husband had received a gift and was praised by his patient” (F10). Times when a participant’s own contribution received unexpected praise was placed in the same category.

Life Course 4: Memories

Many participants described being moved by events that awakened important memories of their past or in some other way made them think about their own life. This could even lead to a long process of recalling, as when one participant watched an emotionally touching film: “I was astonished how far and immensely deep into my youth I fell. I was thoroughly moved and opened up” (F2). The event helped the participant suddenly realize her personal history as a continuum instead of separate bits and pieces. Moving experiences could also be evoked by reading a text that brought up a joyful *déjà-vu* experience. As a participant noted, “I almost started to cry from happiness” (M45).

We also categorized events related to songs into the category of life-course related instigators. Songs were mentioned by several participants as being difficult to sing because of the strong emotional state they created. One participant described, “I feel moved when hearing the first notes of ‘Suviirsi’ (Summer hymn), and I never can sing the hymn ‘Enkeli taivaan’ (Angel in heaven) without bursting into tears” (F47). These types of songs were ones that had been sung over the participants’ lives and reminded them of their childhood atmospheres and experiences. Also, the song lyrics were sometimes linked with personal memories. For instance, the song “Varpunen jouluamuna” (A sparrow in the Christmas morning) that tells about a dead child appearing as a sparrow reminded a participant about the loss of his child.

Likewise, the tragic experiences of close ones could evoke deep emotions. One participant mentioned, “Trying to sing the song of an evacuee in karaoke caused me almost insurmountable difficulties... My father was an evacuee” (F17). Similarly, a certain melody reminded another participant “of my almost fatherless childhood, and my divorce, and our children remaining almost fatherless just at the threshold of their puberty. I was thus moved both for myself and my children” (M56).

Sociality 1: Empathy and Identification

Empathizing with the sorrows or joys of others was a particularly common cause of moving experiences. This was typically evoked by various stories, media articles, books, films, or theater performances. Evoking deep emotions through empathy is often the central purpose of stories. As one participant said, “Scriptwriters knew what they did if this happens” (F5).

Identification with story characters is strengthened by their similarity with the observer. According to one participant, “The most certain way to make me moved is a book/theater performance that not only is good but somehow also touches my own life and things important to me” (M40). Emotionally moving empathy could be stirred as well by

everyday events when witnessing “something sad, consoling, beautiful, or otherwise touching” (F55).

Furthermore, moving experiences were produced by a plot in which a misfortune turns into joy. For instance, a participant described that, while watching a movie, “I empathized with the parents’ sorrow about the sickness of their child. First [I felt] grief, then an enormously strong experience of being moved, when the situation turned to happiness and relief” (F53). Children’s experiences were described as touching also by other participants who had heard or read about children’s difficulties in life or, on the other hand, about their improved situations.

The participants also mentioned some purely sad events, injustices, or excessively challenging events. For example, a participant said, “I feel moved when reading stories about terrible things in the world and the bad experiences caused by them. In this case, the moving experience is incited by empathy or sorrow” (F27). Personal memories could strengthen this kind of empathy, which could also be directed at the past sense of self. Another participant described, “I feel repeatedly moved when somebody feels him or herself inadequate in the crossfire of work and family.” She explained this by her personal experiences of “been there, done that” (F48).

Sociality 2: Opening Borders Between People

Opening borders between individuals and groups and tacit mutual understanding were mentioned as other causes of moving experiences. The following example depicts a Christmas carol event at a church that a participant attended with a dark-skinned colleague. Next to him there was a grandmother with a small grandchild.

My colleague asked the lady with his gestures if he could raise the child so that the child could see the performers. The grandmother nodded... The child came willingly in the lap of my colleague and from there on his shoulders and from there she could now see the whole beauty. The situation was moving because it reflected in such a touching and beautiful way the possibilities of human interaction. (F41)

Opening up to others may also evoke emotions. As one participant noted, “I am moved when I ought to tell others about things that are difficult to me, such as my exhaustion or life difficulties” (F51). Another woman with similar experiences explained this reaction by the caring and empathy that she received from others.

Sociality 3: Communal Experiences

Several responses described emotional experiences shared in group situations. The strengthening of communal relations could be experienced, for example, in a football match, when the whole audience shouts the name of the goal maker. A participant explained, “What made me moved in this situation was that thousands of people unknown to each other were at that moment on the same wavelength and celebrated the same thing together” (F31). Another participant described how in theater, concerts, or other public performances, ecstatic emotion was created by the participation “in a magical moment when the whole audience applauds” (M40).

There were also several examples of moving experiences in public demonstrations. The emotion was incited by “communal events in which many people jointly experience common positive feelings and share a struggle for good” (F54). In these situations, being

moved is linked with a strong feeling of sharing. As one participant put it, “We all are together telling our opinion type of experience” (F23). Similar experiences were also felt in climate demonstrations, such as described by another participant: “Perhaps it was caused by the feeling that there were so many of us for such an important cause, and so many children and young people for their future. So even if things would go badly, at least we tried (together)” (M49).

Communal events can be made even more moving by music. One participant described that marching music heard in processions had ever since her childhood raised a lump in her throat and moistened her eyes. Likewise, another participant said that *“a good religious song or hymn may vegetate in my psychophysiology in a way that could be called as moving. The same is achieved by a piece of ultra-nationalistic or even military music, for instance, in the funeral of the head of the state”* (M7).

Sociality 4: Morality

Moral feelings played a significant role in many previously described situations. In this category; however, we included only responses with a direct reference to prosocial or moral activity. For instance, one participant described “when an injustice is corrected and justice triumphs. Or when a person is raised by others to receive thanks although he personally would have stayed in the shadow” (F5). In addition to justice, unselfishness, self-sacrifice, and generosity were general instigators of moving experiences. A participant explained, “I feel moved when I see goodness, empathy, [and] true caring instead of attempts to profit and hard values” (F26).

One participant was moved by her son’s generosity toward a Romanian beggar who sat on the street. The same participant also told about her father “who in the army went to donate blood because a small baby had been in a car accident and there was a call for blood donors” (F17). Thinking about young men who had sacrificed their lives for the fatherland was also felt as moving. For instance, a participant described, “My most recent moving experience took place when the president laid a wreath at the memorial of the soldiers who died in the Winter War” (F50).

Beauty: the Beauty of Art and Nature

Beauty created by art was a common source of moving experiences. As one participant put it, “Art appears to have a straight channel through emotional control. It is moving by itself; it does not need to be linked to any own feeling or state. Yet it can be linked to such a state, and then it serves as a kindle for the emotion” (M3).

Music in particular appeared to affect numerous participants either by itself or by strengthening the effect of other evokers of being moved. About half of the study participants mentioned music in their responses. For example, a participant said, “But then this pleasant, beautiful, sometimes peaceful melodic interpreter of emotion, often containing a message, makes my soul sing and opens up lacrimal glands” (F2). Another said, “The beauty of music is incomparable. One feels that this is now all” (F16). Memories awakened by music could strengthen the effect, as illustrated by one participant’s description: “The heart is bursting from the beauty of the song and the meaningfulness of the memory” (F23).

Moreover, participants found the beauty of nature moving, as when “some scenery, starry sky, or a piece of music is so breathtakingly beautiful” (F52). In addition to an esthetic experience, the feeling of connection to nature could go “under the skin.” On a morning walk through a forest, a participant “sat down on the cliffs of a foggy lake. I was absorbed in the scenery and felt the heat of the exercise in my body when tears filled up my eyes” (F36).

Participants’ Reflections on the Causes of Being Moved

In addition to describing situations that evoked being moved, the participants also answered, albeit less systematically, questions about what feelings being moved entailed and what they thought were the causes of these feelings. Overall, the participants speculated that the emotion of being moved was caused by strongly experienced feelings such as compassion, happiness, sadness, longing, exaltation, and gratitude. On the other hand, physiological factors caused by hormonal circulation and alcohol, as well as conflicting emotions, may, according to some, have contributed to the formation of the emotion.

One participant explained her moving experiences as follows: “It touches something deep and important in me” (F39). Another felt that the emotion arose from “being on the verge of something valuable and from the connection with oneself and the reality around oneself and feelings of happiness” (F55). The connection of emotion to humanity and people’s sense of community was evident from the following response: “I think it [being moved] is one of the things that makes us human beings and connects people, even strangers, to others, with each other” (F30).

Attitudes Toward the Display of Being Moved

Being moved was considered as a thing to hide rather than to display publicly. Especially losing control of one’s emotions like bursting into tears or “howling” was not wanted—yet it could not always be prevented. In any case, it was generally felt that in Finnish culture, showing the state of being moved is mostly not quite welcome, which is interesting by itself because this emotion is seen as mainly positive. The ambivalence associated with it was illuminated by the following comment: “I suspect that I associate the feeling of this emotion in my mind not only with sensitivity and openness but also with vulnerability, which makes it sometimes difficult to display the feeling” (F55).

Comments on this issue were presented by half of the female participants, the majority of whom had tried to conceal the state of being moved. “I hide my emotion. I do not know why. I am embarrassed to always have tears in my eyes” (F9). Even though many participants said they were easily moved, open expression of this emotion was mostly avoided. “Becoming moved unexpectedly often causes some embarrassment. ‘What’s wrong with me?’ ‘This is not what I usually do.’” (F52). A minority of female participants, however, did not regard concealing the emotion as necessary. In this case, openness was a good thing worth promoting especially if the situation was fit for it, “but it has not always been easy for me” (F55).

Five male participants disclosed their thoughts about showing a state of being moved. Against our preconception, only two of them said they had tried to conceal the emotion: “As a man who has grown up in Finnish culture, one has been socialized to hide this emotion as well as possible. Revealing it was certainly not encouraged. Our culture is probably

changing in this respect” (M3). Three men accepted their tears. According to one, “I get tears in my eyes quite easily, and I do not try to conceal it” (M14).

Being moved in the company of close ones was felt as more acceptable by both genders, and in some situations, it was even desirable. For example, at weddings and funerals, “the lack of being moved can be seen only as insensitivity and coldness” (F52). In the company of unfamiliar people or public situations, moistened eyes were feared to reveal something private about oneself. As one participant described, “Evidently, I have felt that being moved tells about excessive emotionality, exorbitant throwing oneself in the stream of emotions” (F52). It was feared to expose one’s vulnerability.

Two participants regarded being moved as something belonging to the sphere of private experiences. One described that “Being moved is an inner feeling that can be kept private” (F27). Another said, “I often feel moved while being alone, and in some situations it feels very personal, a thing that one wants to keep to oneself” (F55).

Interpretation of the Findings

The results of our empirical research support the view that being moved is a relatively consistent emotional experience that can be identified by its physical symptoms. According to the findings, it is relatively difficult to control, yet people often try to conceal it. Being moved is, nevertheless, regarded as a positive and valuable feature of humanity. We categorized the widely varying situations where this emotion was evoked into nine groups: progression of the life course, memories, the birth and growth of a child, achievements, empathy and identification, opening interindividual boundaries, mass experiences, morality, and beauty. Through abstraction, the specific factors were further grouped into three main categories: important life course events, sociality, and beauty.

Finally, we sought an overarching concept that would comprehensively make sense of our results. According to our interpretation, the common denominator of the factors instigating being moved (its formal object) is the feeling of meaningfulness. We propose that this feeling stems from seeing a specific event as representing something bigger or deeper and that this feeling reflects a sudden contact with the essential preconditions of what it is to be human. When in everyday life people concentrate on things that are relevant to their ongoing normal projects, the instigating phenomenon behind moving experiences seems to pierce a hole in this ordinary orientation. It flashes a view behind the everyday experience and sensitizes a person to the core issues of life. There is thus something similar between this experience and the one that Charles Taylor called an *epiphany*. Taylor connects epiphany to art experiences in which a work of art “shows some greater spiritual reality or significance shining through it” (Taylor, 1989, 419). This interpretation fits with a response by one of our participants, according to which being moved is to be on the verge of something valuable.

As a phenomenon, being moved seems to be inherent in the same way as blushing or falling in love. None of these emotions is fully controllable since they are mainly controlled by the autonomous nervous systems. All of them serve in their specific way the survival of individuals and groups by displaying honest signs of the internal state of individuals (Cova & Deonna, 2014).

We thus hypothesize that moving experiences have deep roots in human evolution. They can be thought to have contributed to the survival of individuals and groups by strengthening their mutual relations and common values (Vingerhoets, 2013, 90–91). Basic sociality

was characteristic already of our biological forerunners, and the empathy and compassion based on it have been essential for the preservation and development of our species (see, e.g., de Waal, 1996; Smith, 2003, 100). Empathy and compassion also seem to be behind the charm of a small child and being moved by moral activity. The “imagined societies” common to human beings may have further enlarged the sphere of meaningful social relations beyond time and space (Anderson, 1983; Brooks, 2011).

What makes significant life course events as well as children growing may then again rise from the momentary visibility of the change of generations and their continuity. Producing, listening, and enjoying stories of others have joined even the most primitive human groups together, thereby improving their collaboration and chances of survival. Furthermore, both individual and group accomplishments and successes that stand out can also be thought to improve the inclusive fitness of not only the achieving individuals but also the groups that they are dependent on and support them.

The moving nature of beauty may rise from its ability to touch the memories, feelings, and core values hidden in one’s heart of hearts. The power of nature to touch us can also be linked to understanding human life as a part of and dependent on nature (Caracciolo, 2021). In summary, the capability of all these experiences to move us can be seen to rise from their ability to sensitize us to observe crucial things in life (Cova et al., 2017).

Yet one can also think that in different cultures and stages of history, people are socialized to be moved about somewhat different things and with different intensities. Within individualistic cultures, individual accomplishments can be thought to be on display, whereas in collective cultures, the focus seems to be more on the relations between people. Within a larger culture, there may also be specific subgroups with their own instigators of moving experiences. Our results display, for example, that certain songs are common instigators of emotional experiences among Finnish people. People who participate in mass demonstrations and ideological marches see the experience of defending a joint cause as a moving event. The representatives of a certain generation, like people who grew up during or right after a war, are often united by the shared experiences of their personal history. Also, within cultural groups, individuals may differ in respect to the things that make them feel moved. In the light of our results, the interindividual variation seems to be such that among joint causes of moving experiences, different individuals are sensitive to different instigators. Finally, even the same individual may be touched by different things in different situations, life stages, and environments.

Discussion

The situations that aroused a feeling of being moved identified in our study are largely similar to those found in previous studies. As in Menninghaus et al. (2015) and Schindler et al. (2022), our study identified significant life events or milestones as commonly mentioned in addition to situations that strengthen social ties. Cova and Deonna (2014) briefly reported the events mentioned by their study participants as moving, such as births, weddings, surprising reunions, and achievements related to sports or studying. Kuehnast et al. (2014) found three groups of events that participants experienced as moving: significant life events, art, and shocking events like earthquakes. In our data, the most often mentioned inducers of moving experiences were those involving empathy and compassion as well as events related to children. Somewhat less often mentioned inducers were important life events, personal memories, achievements, morality, communal experiences, and beauty.

In regard to the more abstract, or formal, object of being moved, we conclude the following. In the introduction, we categorized the proposed candidates of such formal objects as ethical and moral deeds, strengthening of communal sharing relationships, positive core values like sociability or achievement standing out, and finding some concrete or abstract thing as dear to one. Strengthening of communal sharing (*kama muta*) as suggested by Fiske et al. (2017), together with moral beauty mentioned by Haidt (2003), indeed seem to capture a great deal of elicitors of being moved also in our study, but they do not cover all the situations that are felt as moving, such as achievements. Similarly, the extended definition by Landmann et al. (2019), according to which being moved is elicited by strengthening of social ties and individual accomplishments, is not comprehensive enough in our view as it does not cover such common elicitors of being moved as beauty, meaningful memories, and witnessing life events. Based on our data, we end up with the inclusive definition proposed by Cova and Deonna (2014), which covers all kinds of elicitors or particular objects of being moved and defines them as core values, and Schindler et al. (2022), who defined as the unifying core of being moved the feeling of the importance of different sources of meaning in life. Cullhed's (2020) suggestion that being moved is elicited by the feeling of attachment to "both concrete and abstract objects that are extremely dear to us" is part of the same family of inclusive views.

Our conceptualization, according to which the core of being moved is the experience of what is really meaningful in life, resonates with the articles by Oliver and Raney (2011) and Cova et al. (2017), in which a distinction is made between hedonistic (pleasurable) and eudaimonic (meaningful) experiences. We suggest that the experience of meaningfulness is evoked by contact with the conditions that are basic to human life (community, achieving aims through effort, overcoming adversities, justice, life course as a part of the succession of generations, the beauty produced by humans and contact with nature). In our view, the differences as regards the conceptualization of the formal object of being moved should not be seen as mutually exclusive rivals but rather as contributions to a joint endeavor to understand what would best make sense of the array of phenomena related to this emotion.

It is possible that a feeling of meaningfulness could also be connected with some emotions close to being moved, such as awe and admiration. Anyway, due to the formulation of the instructions given in the writing prompt, we believe that our participants had the specific emotion of being moved in mind when they wrote about the feelings elicited by beauty and achievements.

We agree with the proposition of Cullhed (2020) that being moved is a complex emotion in which different elements are entangled. For example, at a funeral being moved is elicited by the combination of relationship with the deceased, contemplation of death, relations with fellow mourners, religious tradition, sacral environment, and music. According to Cullhed, a person feels attachment to all these elements. Yet we would prefer saying that these elements are all felt as meaningful, and when simultaneously present, they strengthen each other. This is exemplified by the combination of a meaningful message and beautiful melody in music.

Reflections on the Study

This study is an initial exploration of Finnish people's feelings of being moved. The sample is small, and its gender and age distributions are uneven. Also, the participants were selected such that they belonged to the social networks through which the request was spread, which resulted in a relatively high average age. However, since the sample included

both women and men and people of different ages, the written accounts can be assumed to represent Finnish people's feelings of being moved relatively well. If the findings had suggested a restricted range of elicitors of being moved, the small sample size would have been more of a problem. Yet in the future it would be fruitful to collect a wider sample that would enable a comparison of groups defined by gender, age, education, ethnic background, and place of residence. This would shed more light on what is common versus related to specific groups. Moreover, as Zickfeld et al. (2019b) note, it would also be interesting to study the individual development of feelings of being moved, as well as the persons whose neural setup for sociality differs from the norm.

Previous studies have not reported the experiences and practices related to the display of being moved. Our finding, according to which being moved was commonly held as private and even something to be hidden, remains open to further comparative examination. Might it be that people feel vulnerable in revealing something that is especially important to them? Is it embarrassing to show one's emotions or the fear of sentimentality, or is it something akin to the confusion aroused by blushing? It would also be interesting to know whether being moved is felt to be private in other cultures as it is in Finland.

The research tradition on being moved is still in a rather early stage, but it has constructed a basis of psychological understanding of this emotion. In the future, it will be important to take steps toward a social understanding of the phenomenon. For instance, one might study how manipulating the feeling of being moved can be used to direct and incite emotions toward certain objects (e.g., political, religious, or racial propaganda). The interpersonal contagion of being moved as well as the combination of collectivity and privacy inherent in being moved are also interesting objects for further study.

Author Contribution Both authors contributed to the study conception and design. Material preparation, data collection, and analysis were performed by Vilma Hänninen and Anja Koski-Jännes. The manuscript was written jointly by Vilma Hänninen and Anja Koski-Jännes. Both authors read and approved the final manuscript.

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Data Availability The datasets generated during the current study are not publicly available because in qualitative data, the unidentifiability of the participants cannot be ensured. However, the data are available confidentially from the corresponding author on reasonable request.

Declarations

Ethics Approval In the Finnish practice, non-medical studies involving human participants should obtain an ethics review from a research ethical committee if "a) participation in the research deviates from the principle of informed consent, b) the research involves intervening in the physical integrity of research participants, c) the focus of the research is on minors under the age of 15, without separate consent from a parent or carer or without informing a parent or carer in a way that would enable them to prevent the child's participation in the research, d) the research exposes participants to exceptionally strong stimuli, e) the research involves a risk of causing mental harm that exceeds the limits of normal daily life to the research participants or their family members or others closest to them, or f) conducting the research could involve a threat to the safety of participants or researchers or their family members or others closest to them" (Ethical Review | Finnish National Board on Research Integrity TENK). This study does not have any of the above characteristics, and therefore, ethical approval was not sought.

Informed Consent In the call for participation, the potential participants were given information about the purpose of the study and told that participation would be anonymous, and the participants would not be identifiable in the publications of the study. Filling out of the form was considered as constituting consent.

Competing Interests The authors declare no competing interests.

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