

The Steve McQueen Paradox

How emotions and memory mislead us

By

Francis Wyburd

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Table of Contents

Summary	3
Introduction	4
Film Facts	5
Research Findings	7
Conclusion	11
Appendix	13

**** Spoiler alert *** This paper discusses factual events that occur during the 1963 second world war film, The Great Escape.*

Summary

Within a year of seeing the 1963 film *The Great Escape*, 78% of respondents correctly recalled the last scene involving Steve McQueen.

However, only 32% of those who viewed the film one year or more ago remembered the last scene correctly. Of the remaining 68% who didn't, 45% did not remember at all and the remaining 55% falsely remembered one of two fictional endings: that he dies or he escapes.

And there is a significant association between the emotion respondents felt when recalling the end of the film and the fictional ending they recalled. So if they felt sad or angry, Steve McQueen had a higher propensity to die by the end in their memory; conversely if they felt happy, he was more likely to escape.

This demonstrates a correlation between emotion and false memory. Which, raises some challenging questions about how we should collect recall-based information when people have a capacity to be so wrong.

Introduction

The pub is as good a place as any to start a quest. An innocent question gets posed - "what happened to Steve McQueen at the end of "The Great Escape?" - and the argument kicked off. What was so interesting about the consequent beer fuelled melee was the fact that here there were a bunch of university educated people with above average intellects who had very different answers for what was a simple factual question. So why couldn't they all recall the correct answer?

For the next five years I would ask anyone I came across - family, friends and colleagues - the same question and was intrigued to hear how many either couldn't recall the ending or invented a fictional ending for Steve McQueen's character. And therein lay the paradox: how could Steve McQueen end the film recaptured in his cell yet exist in an alternative reality in the minds of my friends?

Now I'm a marketing consultant, concerned with showing public and private organisations how and why customers behave in the way they do so they in turn can develop better strategies for serving them. Over the years, I have commissioned tens of thousands of interviews and interpreted their findings for clients. So what if, over all these years, the data we had been analysing was incorrect?

I resolved to run a quantitative experiment for myself and see if I could find an explanation for why people remembered incorrectly and if I could learn how to "read" markets better.

I've been interested in the emerging field of behavioural economics for the last few years and last year, I watched a lecture by Daniel Kahneman's about the riddle of experience and memory. The 2002 Nobel prize winner and god-father of Behavioural Economics postulated the idea of two "selves, teasing apart the experience a person has and the memory they end up having of that experience". In it, he goes on to assert that these can differ markedly and how people can end up taking decisions based on their "remembering self",

however inaccurate that might be. In addition he added that a negative or bad ending of an experience both disguises any hitherto positive experiences and can end up as the memory of it.

So I wondered if time and emotion was playing a part in the paradoxical existence of Steve McQueen. In late 2011, I set out to investigate the relationship between false memory and emotion. The first decision was whether to continue using the Steve McQueen question as the research vehicle. My experience was that most people had seen the film irrespective of gender and age. I discovered that the film is still aired regularly and frequently appears in the Top 10 films people in the UK want to see at Christmas. It seems to have stood the test of time and is still well regarded for drama and characterisation. Finally, it seemed to engender a mixture of emotions. I chose Steve McQueen's character because he is distinctive, his performance included a number of iconic moments that most people remember and crucially, he appears in the last scene of the film.

And so I prepared an online survey to see if I could understand what drives false memory.

Film Facts

The film, based on a real Second World War event, is about a mass breakout from a special, supposedly escape-proof German prison of war camp involving hundreds of men. But by the end of the movie, most of the escapees had been shot, with an unspecified minority being recaptured and only three successfully making it out of occupied Europe.

And what happens to Steve McQueen's character in the Great Escape? The final scene of the film shows Steve McQueen throwing a baseball against the wall of his prison cell and catching it in the baseball glove that a fellow prisoner has thrown to him as he is led back to the cooler.

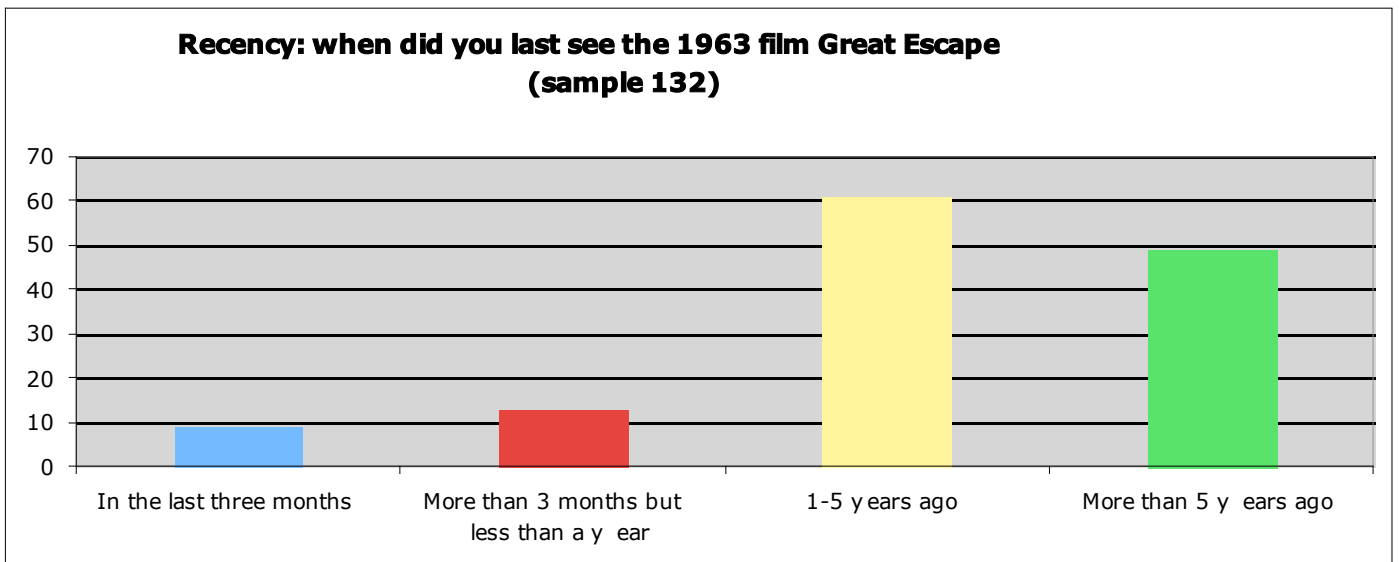
This is preceded by a series of highly dramatic scenes showing what happened to all the escapees as they attempt to reach safety. For Steve McQueen it includes an epic motorbike

scene, attempting to jump over a fence crashing and getting caught up in barbed wire before he is recaptured after. For the remainder, some are shot or killed on the spot, some are recaptured but the majority, some fifty in all, are, in the penultimate scene, rounded up, taken to the woods and then murdered en mass.

Research Findings

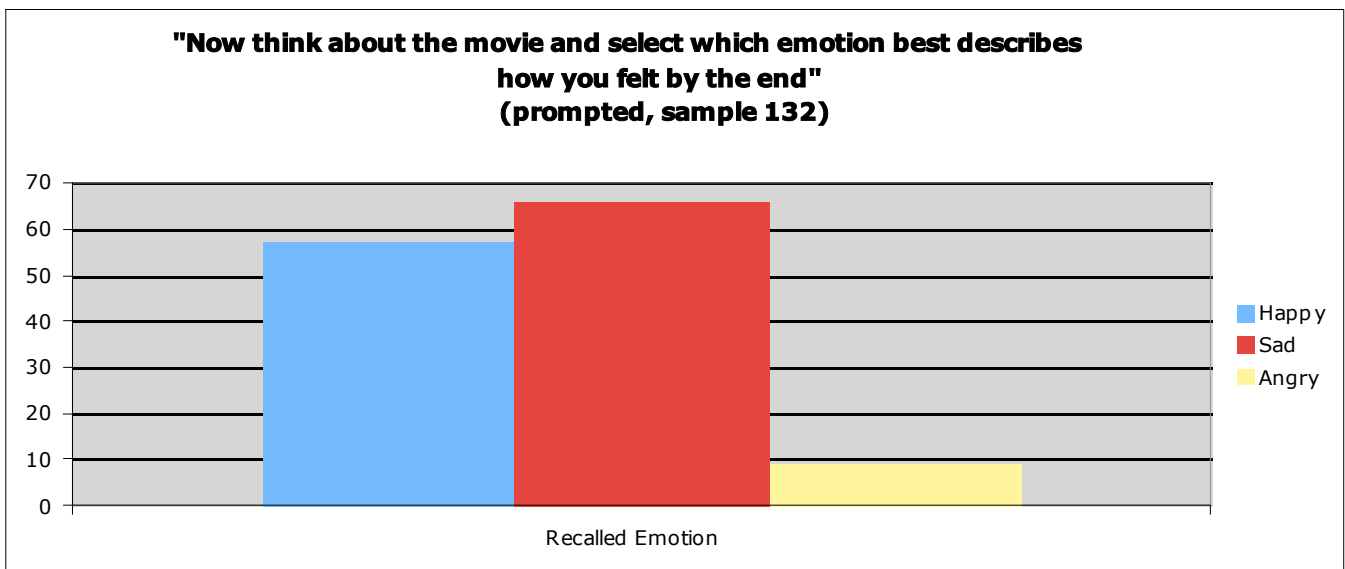
We asked respondents to answer if they had seen the film the Great Escape and how recently they had watched it (Table 1). For a film that is nearly fifty years old, it is surprising that 63% had seen it in the past five years.

Table 1: All respondents’ recency of seeing the film



We then asked them a prompted question about which emotion best describes how they felt by the end of the movie (Table 2). It is not surprising that respondents feel a range of emotions about the film given the emotional roller coaster they experience. A good mix of emotions were reported for an action film and it was not surprising that 57% felt sad or angry given the tragic nature of the film. The remaining 43% felt positive by the end, perhaps buoyed by the last scene and the fact that three escape.

Table 2: All respondents' emotions

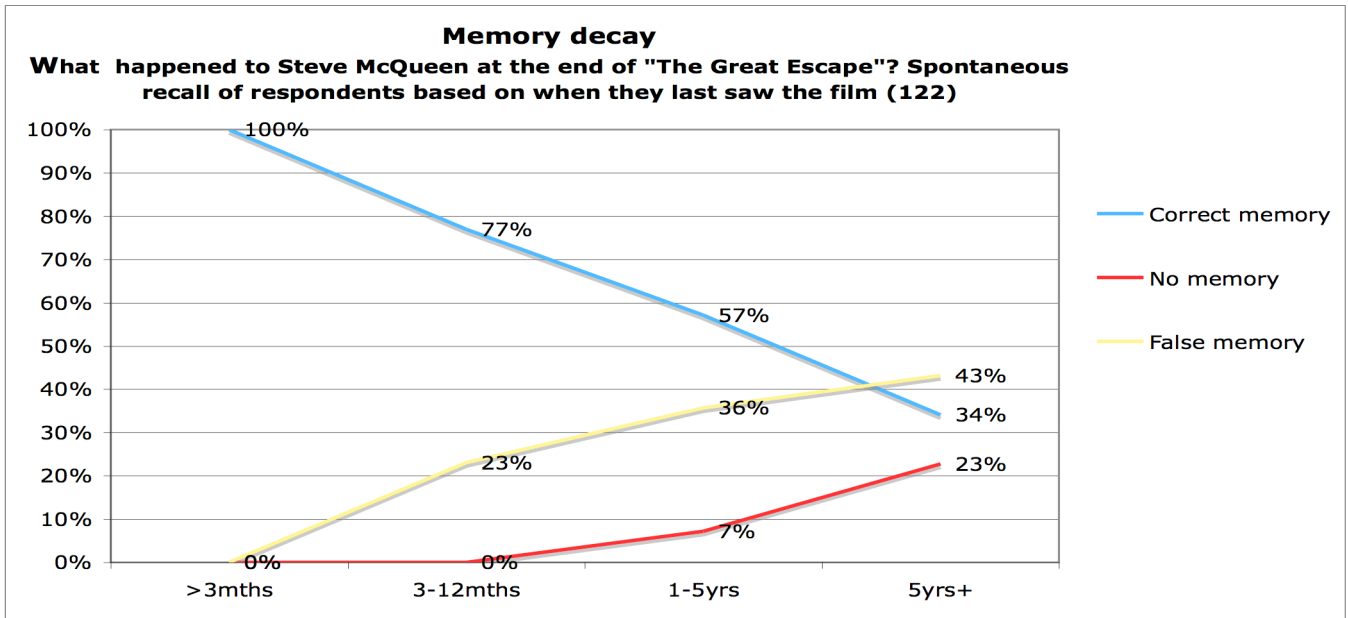


The final question we asked was for an unprompted description of how the film ends for Steve McQueen. These were codified into the following categories:

- Correct: References to recaptured, baseball and the cooler were typical responses.
- No memory: Couldn't remember.
- False memory: Recalled other scenes but not the final "cooler" scene or said he dies or escapes.

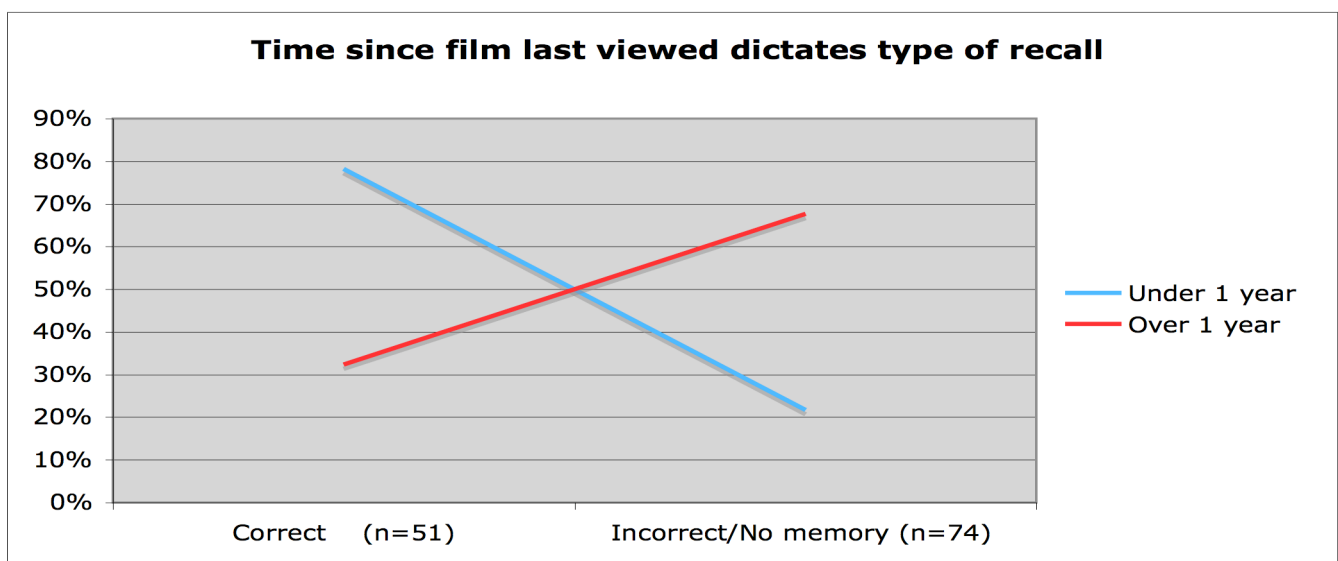
We cross-tabulated these criteria against the recency by which they had seen the movie and observed how correct memory falls over time. What was interesting was not just the group who could not recall the ending but the emergence of a group whose memory was false (Table 3).

Table 3 Respondents' recall of the ending by recency



By condensing respondents into two recency groups, "Under a year" and "Over a year" and condensing "No memory" and "False memory" types, a statistically significant correlation between recency and failure to recall emerges (Table 4). This recorded a p score of <.01.

Table 4: Recency of viewing vs. recall accuracy



The final piece of analysis looks at the relationship between the emotion respondents who remembered the film’s ending inaccurately and the ending they recalled. We split the respondents into Sad/angry 57% or Happy 43% types. We then sorted them into two groups – those who had a negative memory, believing Steve McQueen died and those with a positive memory, believing he escaped.

Table 5: Association between emotion and memory

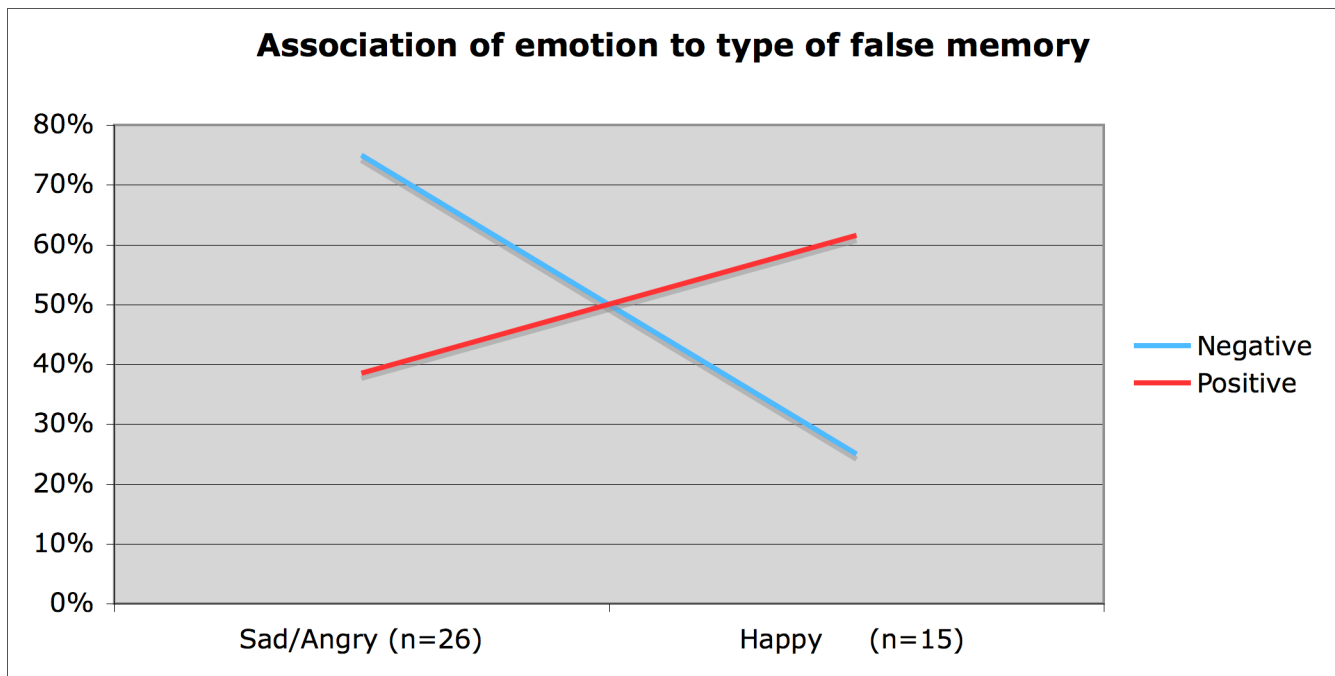


Table 5 shows that those who believe he died are more likely to feel sad and conversely less likely to feel happy; whilst those who believed he escaped, are more likely to feel happy and less likely to feel sad. A statistically significant p score of $>.02$ establishes a correlation between the emotion and the type of false memory a respondent had.

Conclusion

In its own quirky way, this research confirms the fallibility of human memory over time and how recalled emotions correlate with the mis-recalling of factual events.

In a social context, that in itself provides a valuable reminder of how wrong one can be in an argument, with a partner, ones children or ones friends. And imagine how badly a dispute amongst people whose emotional recall differed could escalate if their memories included fictional accounts. A wider concern is the potential for personal testimony to be flawed if collected some time after an event and the implications for the judicial system.

Professionally, I have often wondered how colleagues can recall very differently the outcome of a meeting and again this reminds us of the needs to record events when they are fresh in everyone's minds.

But most importantly, this research provides a reminder to everyone concerned with human engagement – whether in the public or private sector – that understanding people can be a tricky business. The £2bn UK Market Research industry is an important contributor to the business decision making of many organisations and it is incumbent on them and their clients to pay more attention and take greater care when seeking to understand their audiences. For instance, customer satisfaction surveys have come under scrutiny over the years for failing to connect what people say and their actual behaviour. The 90%+ failure rate of new products, an issue highlighted over thirty years ago, also indicates an ongoing problem in the way organisations research and test new endeavours.

However, this research complicates the situation by showing how a person's emotional state heavily influences the false memory they have. Imagine how this incorrect memory could shape future decision-making? A sad conclusion to a holiday for instance could create a fictional negative memory and so influence decisions about choice of destination the following year. Any decision based on an infrequent experience – renewing insurance or a

holiday, attending an annual medical, visiting a distant relative – could be affected by the emotional memory of that experience.

At the very least this suggests researchers should collect data on respondents' emotional state when collecting data based on aged experiences to qualify their findings. But for me this places another nail in the coffin of lazy research methodology and challenges organisations to find a better way to understand the people they serve. Academics, practitioners and commentators have written extensively on this subject for many years and yet little seems to have changed. What everyone seems to agree on is that people struggle to articulate what they want or explain why they behave in the way they do. Which means practitioners should focus more on understanding **how** people behave, get under the skin of the **context** of what they are trying to achieve and identify the alternates they have used or considered. This qualitatively rich approach coupled with quantitative behavioural data can provide much more accurate insight into **what** drives behaviour and **why**.

History shows us people just don't know what they want and often can't even recall the truth. These findings add a further dimension – that their emotional state heavily influences false memory. Organisations aiming to maintain or change behaviour should pay even closer attention to the way they collect data if they are to achieve their objectives.

Appendix

Methodology

In December 2011, an online survey was launched and publicised through Twitter, Facebook, Linked-In and email contacts of Francis Wyburd and whereyoustand Ltd. Contacts and respondents were all encouraged to promote the survey link through their own networks.

Significant contributors included the tweet of psychology professor Karen Pine, repeated mentions in the Brand E newsletter and coverage of the survey on Radio 4's PM programme on 25th January 2012.

A total of 136 survey responses were completed.

About the author

Francis Wyburd is a management advisor to public and private sector organisations about how to engage better with people. Formerly a marketing agency boss, he now runs his own London-based advisory business, WYS. In his free time, he conducts research into human behaviour and the unconscious mind. He is married and lives with six women, four cats, a dog and a snake in London.