

THE EASTLAND DISASTER

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In the early morning of July 24, 1915 as a crowd gathered for a picnic on Lake Michigan, there was an aura of excitement and anticipation for the day ahead. Many individuals poured onto an excursion boat named The Eastland, which was docked in the Chicago River getting prepared for departure. One after another the individuals climbed on not knowing what tragic event awaited them. As they continued to pour onto the boat, the total occupancy was exceeded, causing the boat to overturn. The result was an estimated 844 people dead, with several entire families lost, as well as many memories. Now 85 years later, what once was a tragic loss, is now a loss in history, as many do not recall the event. What is known as The Eastland Disaster seems to have disappeared over the generations, just like the individuals who happened to disappear beneath the rivers' water. One by one each casualty was counted, and one by one the years go by with area residents not knowing of this particular occurrence.

As fewer and fewer people remember this tragedy here in Chicago, what often crosses one's mind is why. Why do not many people know about the Eastland disaster of 1915? With this in mind, my Sociology class at DePaul University took it upon ourselves to bring forth the possible answers to this perplexing question. Our first mission was to survey twenty people, ten over the age of 60 and ten under the age of 60. We would then ask them whether or not they have heard of the disaster. If they had, we would ask them what they felt was the reason for the lack of knowledge of the incident among people in the area. Within my own survey, in the "under 60" category, the main individuals who heard of the event were those closer to the age of 60. This gave a sense that a majority of those that were familiar with the accident were one or two generations removed from the incident. Fascinatingly enough their responses as to why many people do not know about this incident were similar. A 59-year-

old male stated that years following the event, many individuals "chose to not talk about it" as they wanted to put it past them. This paralleled another statement by a man the same age, "it was not passed down by word of mouth through relatives", and a 41 year old stating, "It was too local and those who really knew about it have passed on." These ideas were alike, in that it was never or rarely talked about. Interestingly, three of the eight in the over 60 category that did hear of the incident, had similar responses. "It is not current and not many people know the history of their city," stated a 70-year-old male. "All the people at that time have expired and have not carried on the message." "Things fade..." And "Most young adults from that period are dead" were the other similar answers. However, although these responses were alike and shed some light to the ultimate answer, another question arises. Why were the people of past generations keeping the story within? What caused this lack of socialization?

With these questions still unanswered, the next objective is to take the sociological skills gained from class and apply them to this particular situation which seems to be in dire need of being answered. The procedure would use the three major theoretical perspectives in sociology. These consist of the conflict, interactionist, and functionalist perspective. The process is to then focus on the issue in the shoes of these perspectives, one at a time.

In the conflict theorist's perspective, the main area of concentration is within conflict and a struggle between power. They are interested "in how society's institution may help to maintain the privileges of some groups and keep others in a subservient position" (Schaefer 18). What stimulates the thought process with the Eastland disaster, is that many of the casualty's were people in the lower to middle class. Although the event was catastrophic, the fact that they were average people with average jobs may have actually lead to the present lack of knowledge of the incident. Contrary to this, if by any chance these individuals were

wealthy, like those of the better known Titanic, to this day the percentage of people that know of the event would be greater. This inequality can also be viewed from the perspective that a majority of the individuals that passed away were woman. This is due to the fact that the day of the outing there was a slight drizzle and therefore, the men were being courteous and allowed woman to board the ship first. At this time, women were also thought of as subordinate which also may have resulted in the lack of knowledge of the incident.

Another aspect that a conflict theorist may focus on is who gains and loses in this incident. Looking deep within the event, one may think that the company as well as the family loses, as they lost employees and family members. However, the actuality of it, is that although the company lost employees, they can easily acquire new ones, whereas, family members cannot be replaced. A different view within this "who gains or loses" question is that overall the amount of money that was lost is not comparable to the sum lost in the Chicago fire. People seem to be more interested in the loss and gain of money than the loss of individuals. With these conflict theorist ideas in mind, a different approach is taken among an interactionist theorist's perspective.

Interactionist theorist's deals mainly with the need to know how people define situations and the symbolic interactionism behind it. It focuses on the subjective meaning of behavior and processes by which people develop and communicate shared meaning. One of the areas of focus is a dramaturgical perspective, where everyday life is set to that of theater and stage. This means that we allow ourselves to present certain features, yet we hide others. For example, in class students tend to show a very sophisticated and serious image. Therefore, in the year 1915 at the time of the event, those individuals living through it may have had to put on a facade showing that everything was okay. At this time it may not have

been proper to talk of the deceased, resulting in the lack of conversation of the incident. Although their front stage was revealing a collective look, back stage they were struggling as they were in pain throughout the whole ordeal.

One interactionist by the name of Charles Horton Cooley looked at situations with a "looking glass self" idea. With a curiosity of how an individual knows what they are like, and how they come to realize that. Basically emphasizing "that the self is the product of our social interactions with other people" (Schaefer 94). Cooley felt that there were three self theory questions that consisted of the following: 1) How I think I appear 2) What I think others think of me 3) How I feel of what I think, you think of me. Therefore, these ideas could also lead to an embarrassing factor, as people at that time cared about what others were to say about the city. This in the end lead to few newspaper articles and less coverage, that otherwise would have been greater if it did not happen in twenty feet of water in the Chicago river.

The final theoretical perspective is the functionalist perspective, which holds that "if an aspect of social life does not contribute to a society's stability or survival-if it does not serve some identifiably useful function or promote value consensus among members of a society-it will not be passed on from one generation to the next" (Schaefer 16). Reasons for this lack of knowledge of the Eastland disaster may stem from the functionalist perspective's latent functions and dysfunctions. A latent function is where there is an unconscious or unintended function that "may reflect hidden purposes of an institution" (Schaefer 17). An example may be that a university's hidden purpose is for a student to find a husband or wife. Thus in this incident the hidden meaning behind the lack of knowledge may be that there were many other happenings at the exact time. Around the year 1915 technology, such as various

ways to communicate, and other events such as World War I, covered the newspapers. This did not allow anyone to remember what had occurred. With latent functions also came dysfunctions. "A dysfunction refers to an element or a process of society that may actually disrupt a social system or lead to a decrease in stability" (Schaefer 17). In essence, society has basic needs to fulfill in order to survive. So to answer the ultimate question, a theoretical theorist may state that people did not talk about it because those particular thoughts were not needed for their survival and stability. Society needs to feel that everything is okay and if this feeling is not achieved then survival is threatened. By talking about the incident the feeling of being okay has vanished, resulting in an unwanted and unstable environment. With no true solution to the ultimate question, these three perspectives shed an enormous amount of light and lead us toward the right direction. However, even with these ideas in mind, can the situation be considered a case of social amnesia and is there such a thing?

Social amnesia has yet to be discovered as sociological term, yet there are many other terms that seem to fit this idea. In the case of the Eastland disaster, as a whole this could be a case of social amnesia, as it seems that many people chose for some reason or another to stop thinking about the incident. When it comes to situations like that of the Eastland, where there is a lack of knowledge, one can only think that there is another factor coming into play. Whether it is social amnesia caused by other events, embarrassing situations or improper behavior to talk of the deceased, the reality of it is, is that we may never find an answer to the main question. And as those that survived the incident continue to perish we must not worry why many people do not know of the incident. Rather we must continue the process of informing others of the heroic efforts by civilians, the multiple loss of families and the countless numbers of casualties, as this should be the number one priority. As a result, as

years pass by, the ultimate question can then be erased and no longer be a question that will haunt us for many more years to come.