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Sociology

## **“The Eastland Disaster”**

The Eastland Disaster of 1915 has been overlooked for eighty-five years. I am surprised that many people, including myself, don't know about the disaster that took the lives of about eight hundred people in our own Chicago River. After my classmates and I surveyed several people from the public, I came to several conclusions for why a tragedy such as this has been ignored for decades.

On October 20, 2000, I went out and surveyed twenty people. I spoke to ten people under the age of sixty and ten people over the age of sixty. I asked them if they had heard of the Eastland Disaster, if so, where from, what they exactly knew about the event, and why they thought many people didn't know about this event. The responses I received varied from group age but still fell in a pattern-like repetition.

Three out of ten people under the age of sixty knew of the Eastland Disaster. Another three out claimed that they were not from Chicago and should not be expected to know about this occurrence. The rest simply had not heard of it. The three persons, who heard of this event, knew that it was a company-sponsored event, where a boat tilted and caused many deaths. They didn't know how it tilted or how many people died. One individual heard of it from a newspaper article, another from word of mouth, and the last person could not recall where he heard the information from.

Only one of the ten persons surveyed answered my question as to why others did not know about it. He shared with me that he had recently read an article on the previous week's business newspaper. He told me that the New York media is more powerful than Chicago media and therefore, it has more influence on people. He also believes that the Eastland Disaster does not have the same impact as the Titanic disaster. The others just stated that 'it simply wasn't talked about'.

On the other hand, five out of ten people over the age of sixty knew of the Eastland Disaster. The other five had never heard of it. Once again, they had heard a brief description of a middle class boat excursion that caused many deaths. They didn't know any details to the story; they only knew the main idea. They acquired the information from newspaper articles, a grandfather, or an exhibition, which took place at the Museum of Science and Industry. The museum displayed the Eastland as "The Titanic of Chicago". The elderly people's comments were slightly different than the non-elderly's responses. They stated that others had not heard of the incident because other catastrophic events had happened during and after that time, there wasn't a song dedicated to the happening, people did not want to remember it, it was a conspiracy, the event is not taught in school, and maybe they were not watching the news.

After the whole class's surveys were gathered, we found that out of seven hundred ninety eight younger people, only thirty-two percent knew of the Eastland Disaster. However, forty six percent of the elderly group knew of the happening. We can conclude that the only ones who really know of the disaster can be the group who lived closer to the time this event happened and if they don't talk about it, it just might be because they do not want to remember for X amount of reasons.

Many reasons could explain why society doesn't know of this disaster. Social amnesia is a possibility. The fact that so many died, including whole families, is enough reason to try and forget. Many people had friends, family members, or co-workers on the boat. The loss of important people in a person's life can make this person omit the thought from one's mind. The idea that people might not remember the incident by its appropriate name might also be the case. It could also be that these people were not rich enough to be acknowledged.

Another possibility that exists is plain and simple: people do not care. Many times we look at the newspaper and read something tragic. We feel some pity for a few minutes but continue with our lives within moments. As long as the event does not include us or our loved ones, the event does not have much importance to us. We, then, forget about the whole happening or can only recall the event vaguely. That is the case with many people interviewed. They either did not remember or vaguely remembered.

A conflictionist would state that this was a case of inequality. People do not know of this event because the deaths belonged to lower class or middle class people. Why should media talk about it if it was not an issue that concerns society as a whole? After all, Western Electric could replace its employees. However, can families replace a family member, or can a friend replace his best friend? Except for the fact that it could gain a bad reputation, Western Electric was not at great loss in this situation.

Functionalists believe that everything happens for a reason. In this case, people are deciding to ignore the tragedy because the simple thought of it is not needed. Talking of a situation like this would only create a discomfort between everyone. This issue isn't needed to *survive*. Society needs to feel like everything is all right, thus, fulfilling its needs. "Functionalists acknowledge that not all parts of society contribute to its stability all the time"

(Richard T. Schaefer pg. 17). The dysfunction of expressing ones shock about the whole event would lead to instability and society must avoid this by all means. They would rather not talk about it and omit it from their minds.

At the same time, a functionalist would see a latent function to why the Eastland Disaster was forgotten about. Unintentionally, media was bombarding people with all sorts of other historic events that took place around the same period of time. For example, the Titanic and the war stole much of attention. Because people were so focused on what was going on with the wealthy, they forgot about what others were suffering at the same time.

The interactionist perspective is slightly more complicated than the others are. An interactionist focuses on society's behavior and why it has caused people to disregard the memory of the Eastland. They believe that society has forgotten about this event because the instant death of eight hundred people is too traumatic. Others react to the embarrassment of this occurrence by avoiding the subject. The dramaturgical approach states that "we all seek to present particular features of our personalities while we hide other qualities" (Schaefer 20). Society decides what is proper to talk about and what is not. It is not proper to talk about the entire families were lost. The front stage behavior would be how people react in front of others, which isn't necessarily the way that they want to react: they must appear as strong and capable. They decided that they didn't want to talk about it because it hurt to talk about death, itself. The backstage behavior is exposed by maybe analyzing and mourning the situation when one is privately alone. We would all rather think that we are not going to die and that something as tragic as that would never happen to us.

Charles Cooley's looking-glass self idea can also be applied to why people don't talk of the Eastland Disaster. This idea states that "the self is the product of our social interactions

with other people" (Schaefer 94). In the first stage, we imagine how we present ourselves to others. Society feels the need to maintain an image of stability to others. They want to let others know that they are strong and can cope with situations such as this. Second, we imagine how others evaluate us. People began to wonder what others would think of them if they began to take the disaster so seriously. If they expressed how they felt, they might be regarded as over sensitive or strange. Third and last, we develop a feeling about ourselves as a result of the other two impressions. If we feel like we look strong, then we believe that we are strong. However, if we come across to others as weak, we will believe that we are weak.

Going out to the public and surveying people in a more accurate fashion might help sociologists discover answers that might be overlooked today. Perhaps, a survey on a larger number of people of different age and background. Maybe different cultures, as well. It is always interesting to know what other cultures have to say about how other cultures behave.

There are numerous conclusions we can come up with. I, personally, believe that The Eastland disaster could have been prevented and Chicago was embarrassed at the fact that they allowed eight hundred people to die in the Chicago River. The lack of information on this event proves that Chicagoans do not want to talk about the issue. Not only did the boat not leave the dock yet, when it sunk, but the rescue effort of it all was pitiful. It happened so close to the dock that many more lives should have been rescued, if not all. This whole situation must have embarrassed Western Electric and affected its reputation. It would have ridiculed the entire city, and so everyone, including the media decided not to talk about it. Tourists might even lose interest or want to ridicule Chicago for the act. Others who could also be affected would be boat renters or ship owners. Customers might be scared to board onto the Chicago River, creating less business for the ones who make a living from renting

boats. Most important, however, the discussion of this event would have made Chicago the laughing stock of the states.