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Intro to Sociology
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The Eastland Disaster

Envision this picture if you will. It is July 24, 1915 and the sky is filled with clouds, rain is beginning to fall. Imagine being dressed up in your Sunday best with a straw hat atop a head full of tight brown curls. Your entire family is preparing for a family picnic that is to be held by your father's employer, Western Electric. Western Electric, one of Chicago's main employers at the time, is hosting a picnic in Michigan City and your entire family has been invited. This is supposed to be one of those childhood memories that you will one day look back and smile upon. Instead, something goes wrong that will bring pain and tears to your heart and your eyes. You arrive at the Chicago River where a boat, The Eastland, is docked and is prepared for the celebration to begin. 7 a.m. is approaching and approximately two thousand passengers have boarded the Eastland. "The boat felt top-heavy" said Bobby Carlson, the only survivor from his family. Shortly after 7 a.m., the Eastland begins to jolt and eventually capsizes. When disaster struck, people flew into the cold river water while others were trapped, eventually drowning or crushed to death by flying debris.

The Eastland Disaster of 1915 claimed over 800 lives but until Dr. Susan Fournier, my Sociology teacher, introduced this to me, I had never heard of it. I have lived in Chicago for almost nineteen years and have always been completely oblivious to this. Now, the mind-tattering question arises: Why don't people know about the Eastland Disaster?

As part of my project, I was asked to informally survey twenty people. Out of twenty males and females, only six had some slight recognition of the topic. Out of these six, all of them had heard of the Eastland recently on a special television show. My results had come

out even; three over the age of sixty and three fifty-nine and under had heard of the Eastland. This surprised me because I thought that more of the older crowd would have recognition of this. With our class results, we concluded that out of 798 people, thirty-nine percent (313 people) had some type of awareness of the Eastland Disaster.

While doing my project, I encountered several recurring themes. The first, and most evident, is the undeniable fact that most people have absolutely no prior knowledge as to what the Eastland Disaster was. Another pattern that I discovered was that the people who have heard of the Eastland, had only seen it on a brief television special or a short article in the newspaper. Another evident pattern was that most people had no idea as to why the Disaster is so unfamiliar, even to those who have lived in Chicago for their entire lives.

New generations have surfaced that had no direct experience with the traumas that had such a serious impact on the lives of their parents and grandparents. There is a tendency for the older generation to avoid talking about experiences that were painful, while many members of the younger generation have little interest in events that are now frozen in the past (Neil, preface).

There are several theories as to why we don't know about the Eastland, but as a sociologist let's look at it from the three major perspectives; functionalist, conflict, and interactionist.

A functionalist believes that if an aspect of society does not contribute to its survival, it will not be passed on. Perhaps looking at the Disaster from this point of view, a functionalist might conclude that since knowledge of this tragic event is not crucial to our well-being, it will not be transmitted throughout generations. A functionalist might wonder

about the cause of the Eastland and might question the fact that knowledge of this event does not exist.

A conflict theorist believes that human beings are competitive and passive and that there is constant competition between the haves and have nots, if you were to look at the Eastland from this perspective you might look at one of the theories that compares the Eastland to the Titanic. This theory has gained the name of the "Average Joe Theory". The people involved in this mysterious tragedy were all members of the working-class. They were non-wealthy and not famous unlike those aboard the Titanic. The Eastland contained people of ethnic origin and many were recent immigrants to the United States. Since these were nothing but the average person, they were socially unequal to those on the Titanic. Thus, the Eastland did not bring about as big of a stir. A conflict theorist may ask several questions pertaining to the Eastland. They might question who lost more; the wealthy on the Titanic or the "Average Joe" on the Eastland. On the other hand, they might question why the Titanic was more publicly commemorated than the Eastland.

Commemoration also factors into reasons as to why people do not know. The Titanic has an exhibit at the museum and even a movie. The Eastland has a tiny plaque that can easily be missed. The act of commemoration is when formal recognition is given to past events, if they are commemorated, then they are deemed worthy of collective remembrance. Thus, implying that the Eastland is not.

Lastly, an interactionist generalizes about everyday forms of social interaction in order to understand society as a whole. They might look at the amount of interaction that was involved, perhaps between the people on the ship, the families as disaster was about to strike, and communication overall. An interactionist would be concerned with the people's facial

expressions and last words to each other. They would want to study everyone's reaction as the boat began to capsize. From their point of view, they might wonder why safety measures were not taken when the boat began to sway.

By looking at the Eastland Disaster from the three major sociological perspectives, we are able to create new theories as to why no one knows. Also by using these perspectives, we can incorporate several important questions that surround this mystery.

Theories as to why there is such a large unawareness of the Eastland go further than these three perspectives take them. One major cause may be the extent of trauma that was involved. The Eastland not only claimed the lives of one or two family members, it took the lives of entire families, neighbors, and co-workers. Eighty-five years ago, social ties were different than they are today. Your co-workers were often your neighbors, best friends, or your own blood. Nowadays, you often have little or no contact with your neighbors. Then, your ties were extremely strong. The fact that the Eastland occurred so close to home also could have influenced this oblivious knowledge of the ship and its disaster. Since it occurred on our river, it would be difficult for people to distance themselves from the situation, if you lost your entire family, you would constantly be reminded of it. When the news of the Eastland hit, Chicago was similar to a large funeral home; all of Chicago seemed to be in mourning.

Since the Eastland took the lives of entire families, it was impossible for the story to be passed on. Collective memory is transmitted primarily through oral tradition.

Some experiences are dismissed, while others are elaborated...Selective inattention is a way of minimizing the risk of cluttering memories with information that is perceived to

be...irrelevant...we tend to remember what we sense is important for us to remember...and to avoid those activities that were associated with pain and suffering (Neil 202).

Another reason that many people may not remember the Eastland has to do with our psychological memory. There is something that can be referred to as memory storage deficit. It is pretty self-explanatory dealing with a problem that occurs in the process of storing the memory with the people who experienced the Eastland, choosing not to remember it. There may also be a problem with the retrieval of memory. This may happen for several reasons such as; changes in the values of people, poor education about local history, and the fact that the younger generation does not seem to be concerned with issues of the past. I definitely have to agree with the argument that we do not have enough local history. I have taken history courses all throughout school and never have I ever learned of the Eastland. As far as Chicago History, I think I may have heard about the Chicago fire twice. Although people may have some recollection of what happened on this disastrous day, many people are unfamiliar with the name. They may remember the ship that sunk in the Chicago River or the hundreds of people that died, but they do not know of it in terms of the Eastland Disaster.

Dr. Fournier introduced us to a new term categorizing the Eastland Disaster as a case of "social amnesia". Although this term does not exist, I feel that it is appropriate to relate the two together. Social amnesia can be described as having the knowledge of an event and then forgetting about it and then once again remembering. In this case, I believe that there can be such a thing. The Eastland Disaster has been long forgotten by many, but with the work of the Eastland Disaster Committee, it is being remembered once again. In the words of a French sociologist

When it comes to historical memory, the person does not remember events directly; it can only be stimulated in indirect ways through reading or listening or in commemoration and festive occasions when people gather together to remember in common the deeds or accomplishments of long-departed members of the group (Coser: 1992: 24).

I think that it is easier to understand what happened in 1915 if we look at it as a case of social amnesia. I think that the concept makes much sense and can easily be related to the Eastland. Although there are several reasons and theories that can be applied here, I think it is safe to describe this as a case of social amnesia. If we look at it from this view, we can get a good idea of what occurred psychologically.

The one thing that surprised me was that I thought that that the older crowd might have more knowledge about the Eastland, but in reality the ratio of people that knew came out even. All in all, I feel that this was an excellent project that helped me grasp a better understanding of Chicago. Without Dr. Fournier, I too would have been a victim of oblivion to a tragedy that occurred so close to home.