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Eastland Disaster

The Eastland Disaster was a huge tragedy that occurred in Chicago. Over 800 people died and yet hardly anyone knows about it. Why is this? There are a variety of answers ranging from the media, to society's social amnesia.

According to the data I found from interviewing individuals on the Eastland Disaster, a total of five of twenty people knew. Out of the non-elderly, 2 of 10 knew, and out of the elderly, 3 of 10 knew. I specifically asked people not originally from Chicago and currently not living here now, in order to see if the pattern of little recognition was the same in other areas, not just Chicago. The majority of the individuals interviewed believed the reason hardly anyone knows of the disaster was because they were not from Chicago and it was not apart of their history. They assumed that a lot of people would know from Chicago, considering how big the accident was. Unfortunately, the five people who did know of the disaster had no specific or vivid memories, but very faint remembrances.

Everyone I interviewed wanted to know more details on the tragedy. They asked many questions, the two most common being, "Why did it happen?" and "Why don't more people know about it?" I tried my best to provide all the information that I learned from class to them.

The responses definitely do not tell the whole story regarding the Eastland Disaster. If we look at how the three different perspectives would view it, it may provide some better answers. First of all, a conflict perspective focuses on the haves and have-nots and who gains or loses from the situation. Knowing that, I believe a conflict sociologist would look at the social standing of the passengers. Since the passengers were not rich or famous but hard working lower class individuals, this may be a reason no one knows today. The media and upper-class people didn't lose anything or gain anything from the tragedy, so they didn't give as much attention to the disaster as it deserved. Had it made a large impact on them and their own lives for example like the Titanic, there would have been more coverage and in depth stories.

A functionalist would say the Eastland Disaster is unknown because it did not contribute to the stability of society, but did the opposite. They might say that the situation was so traumatic that had they focused on it more, it would have been damaging to families and society. Since it did not contribute to stability, it would not be passed on from generation to generation, as other historic things do.

An interactionalist would believe that the Eastland disaster is unknown because of individual people. They would ask the question "How did people's behavior influence the lack of recognition for the Eastland?" Answers could be a variety of answers. Some people may have had a connection with the war and been more concerned with that at the time. Others may have not wanted to speak about it because of pure embarrassment. The disaster was a combination of very many silly mistakes. For some the saturation could have been too traumatic to speak about. Some lost entire families, parents, and friends at the same time. In order to deal with the pain, they did not speak often about it.

All three perspectives offer possible explanations to the question why. I think these perspectives do not necessarily shed any new light but focus in on the topic more specifically in it's own ways. The conflict and functionalist views do not concentrate on as many reasons as the interactionist does though. I believe there is such a thing as social amnesia. Especially when it is stated that historical memory can only be stimulated by readings, listening, or in commemoration or festive occasions. I believe society forgot about the disaster because they were not overly stimulated by any of those factors, so it is natural that they forget. Although it is not a well-known disaster, I believe that if attention is drawn to it again, more people will come forward with their own stories. I believe we can rid of the amnesia with time and by spreading the word.

I think many, many factors contributed to the lack of recognition of the Eastland Disaster. I personally believe that media played an extremely large role in it though. As pointed out in class the only way to get information was through newspaper. At the same time of this event, coverage was also being dedicated to the war going on. I believe if the war wasn't also happening, more emphasis would have been on the Eastland. This disaster would have been in the audiences' faces more and easier to remember. I also believe the respect for families back then was much different than today. These days tragedy's that happen are heavily covered with little respect for the families and their feelings. Back then, media approached the subject much differently and wasn't as eager to run a story that may further traumatize a family. I also wonder if the media purposely did not run more stories because the passengers were not rich. Sometimes people push away problems hoping they will go away and they will not have to deal with them. With the war going on, the upper class may have

been more concerned with what will be impacting their life more and simply did not want to add any extra unhappiness in to their lives so they simply ignored it.

Media has a huge impact on history, what we know, and what we remember. The presidential race is a perfect example of what media can do. Without it, people wouldn't have known as many issues or personalities of the nominees. We also wouldn't be aware of what happens in the voting right away, or be faced with the problems every time we turned around.