

Introduction to Eastland Disaster Guest Lecture
Department of Sociology, DePaul University
Wednesday, October 25, 2000
SAC 154, 9:40 A.M.

Good Morning. My name is Dr. Susan Fournier. I am an adjunct faculty member in the Department of Sociology. This lecture has come about as part of my Introduction to Sociology class.

Two years ago, I was walking on Wacker Drive along the Chicago River, when I came upon a plaque telling about the Eastland Disaster in 1915. Although I was born and raised in the Chicago area, this was the first I had ever heard about the Eastland.

I asked my husband about it. He also had never heard. BUT, when I asked my 93-year-old grandmother - had she heard of it? - matter of factly she stated, "Oh yes, my mother had a friend who died on the Eastland - Nanny Shannon." And yet, in all of our years of interactions, the subject never came up.

As a symbolic interactionist, I study social meaning. Needless to say, I was fascinated. In class, we are learning about culture. And so, seizing upon this opportunity to actually "do" some real sociology, my students and I are working on a project to understand why?

Some of the questions we are thinking about are:

1. What does it mean when certain information gets transmitted from one generation to the next?
2. And what it means when certain information is not transmitted?
3. Why is it that the Eastland Disaster seems to have remained within the individual memory instead of becoming a part of the transmitted culture? A part of our culture?
4. What does this lack of transmission say about the possible transmitters, those who do remember?
5. What does it say about we the receivers?
6. What about the meaning of the disaster itself?
7. And what about the fact that we are here today discussing it!
8. Is this a case of social or cultural amnesia?
 - where a part of our culture once known,
 - was lost,
 - and then found again?

After learning about the Eastland Disaster Historical Society. I found that they were wondering the same sorts of things.

While we do not have the answers to these questions, at least not yet, my students have each asked 20 people the questions, "Have you ever heard of the Eastland Disaster?" and "why do you think people have never heard?"

Our preliminary findings are on the handout going around.

Each student is also working on a research essay on their ideas about why the Eastland Disaster is so poorly remembered, and on whether the concept of social amnesia is a fitting one to describe this strange phenomenon (also, whether this concept has been studied anywhere in the literature).

We will collectively submit the essays to the Eastland Disaster Historical Society at the end of the quarter.

But before we start, a few important notes:

First, I need to thank Dr. Richard Schaefer, the Chair of the Department of Sociology at DePaul University for making this presentation possible to begin with.

Second, and this applies only to my students: please sign the attendance sheet that is going around.

And third, I've been told there is another class in this room right after us, around 10:50, so we will need to keep this in mind.

Finally, then, I would like to introduce our guests:

Ted Wachholz, President of the Eastland Disaster Historical Society, who did the planning and arrangements for today.

Susan Decker, Vice President of the Eastland Disaster Historical Society.

Barbara Decker Wachholz, Secretary.

Susan and Barbara are the granddaughters of Borghild Aanstad, who was on the Eastland that day and fortunately for all of us, survived to tell them about it.

Additional notes regarding "Social Amnesia" as it possible concept:

My students and I have not, as of yet, located information specifically concerning "social amnesia." There exists a concept of "collective memory" written about by Arthur Neal in his book, *National Trauma and Collective Memory*, (1998, NY: M. E. Sharpe Publ.)

Do not yet know where the term actually originated.

But I do think that social amnesia or cultural amnesia is something different than collective memory. Maybe a part of it, but not the same thing. Amnesia involves the notion of forgetting. So this would be a use of the psychological term but at the social level -- a linking of the individual psychology and the social base of knowledge.

Relevant here are the following, which are addressed in my lecture notes:

- Definition of collective memory.

- Definition of amnesia.

- Working definition of social amnesia.

- References so far (books, articles)

- Symbolic interactionism as a useful perspective.

- How the Eastland is well suited to Sociology.

In their essays, my students will be evaluating the usefulness of "social amnesia" as a social psychological concept, and its relevancy for an enhanced understanding of the Eastland Disaster.