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Sociology Final

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Social Amnesia

On Saturday, July 24, 1915, the passenger ship Eastland was docked in downtown Chicago on the Chicago River preparing to depart for a Lake Michigan cruise. Over 1000 people from the General Electric Company were to board the boat that was to take them to a fair in Indiana. Unfortunately they did not make it to the fair. The ship tipped over spilling passengers into the river and trapping others underwater. The disaster claimed over 800 lives. Even though this disaster resulted in the second-largest death toll of any single event occurring in the continental United States, very few people are familiar with the story.

But since this is the second largest tragedy you would think most people should have heard of it. I interviewed ten people ages fifty-nine and below and ten people above fifty-nine. Out of all twenty people, twelve people heard of the Eastland Disaster. Out of those twenty, four non-elderly knew and eight elderly knew. The patterns that were found were that the older the person was the better chance they heard of the disaster. Only two elderly did not hear of the Eastland. One woman who was eighty moved from Germany within the past ten years. The other elderly woman who did not hear of the Eastland is eighty five. This lady wouldn't remember what she ate for breakfast. Six younger persons never heard of the disaster. The oldest was eighteen and the youngest was sixteen. I found it interesting that a fourteen-year-old boy knew about the disaster since he had to write a report on in eighth

grade. All in all the older people did hear about this disaster, while more young people did not.

There could be a very in depth answer for why most people haven't heard about the Eastland tragedy, and yet there could also be an answer that is right under our noses. Let's first look at the three major perspectives that we study in sociology, which are the conflict, functionalist, and the interactionist perspectives. The conflict perspective is one where the sociologist looks at social behavior, which is best understood in terms of conflict or tension between two competing groups. The conflict theorist in this case would look at the Eastland disaster versus WWII. Since the war is always a larger national story, it stole most of the Eastland's headlines. This could explain why the two older ladies who moved into Chicago in the past ten years never heard of it. They would also look at the Titanic, which definitely overshadowed the Eastland. The functionalist perspective looks at society and believes it to be structured to maintain stability. The functionalists would consider this a narrow scope to the disaster and not a general threat to most people. For example, there was little advanced publicity about the excursion, unlike the Titanic. Also, there were only employees and family from one company, not a random collection of people. Lastly, the Eastland was not available for the general public to use at anytime, so there was no feeling of the general public that "this could have happened to me." The interactionist would look at every day forms of social interaction. They would see if the people who survived the tragedy interacted with the population surrounding them. They would ask the survivors if they kept their hard feelings to themselves or if they shared their story to the rest of the people who were not on the ship. These three perspectives shed an enormous light on why the tragedy is not known. If we

assume that these questions would actually be asked, then we can start making predictions on why.

If you try to look up social amnesia in the dictionary, you will be looking forever because it's not there. However the word amnesia is in the dictionary. Amnesia is a disease that clouds your memory with extreme cases being that you won't even remember who your parents are. Social amnesia therefore refers to people easily forgetting events that affect society in general. That is, having amnesia but only in a social setting. I do believe that social amnesia exists, and some of the people who have not heard of the Eastland could be a result of social amnesia. Society as a whole seems to have forgotten about this disaster, despite the news coverage at the time and the fact that it is well documented in historical societies. We already know that with over 800 dead people laying out on the streets of Chicago, this was the toughest part of life that anyone who survived or had a loved one who died had faced. This in turn could cause the people who experienced this tragedy to deliberately erase it from their minds. Since the survivors tried to erase it from their minds, in turn they did not tell their kids, and their kids did not tell their kids. The longer since this tragedy took place, the less and less people knew about it.

From the perspective of conflict, we can see that the news of the WWII may have caused the Eastland Disaster to be forgotten. That is a common answer to the question of why it is not remembered. From the perspective of interactionist, it is likely that the stories of the disaster were not passed down from the people affected. The perspective of functionalist does shed new light on why we do not remember the Eastland disaster. Functionalists look for order in society. Large disasters such as the Chicago Fire have a large and long lasting impact on many people. That is, those types of disasters upset the common order of society. The

Eastland disaster did not upset the common order of society, mainly because the impact was limited to the people directly involved and there was little if any sense that this disaster was in any way random could have happened to anyone.

Everyone has heard of the Chicago Fire. But not many people know about the fire in Wisconsin that was actually larger. This could be due to the fact that it happened on the same weekend and Chicago is more populated. Chicago also lost a lot more land in their fire, but surely you would think that most people would still have heard of it. This is where the case of social amnesia comes into play. The comparison between the two fires and the two boating disasters are quite similar. They both also scream for the case of social amnesia. The only logical reason why people choose to remember one rather than the other has to do with what personal ties each person has with the disaster on hand.

In conclusion I feel that not only social amnesia is to blame for the reason of why people don't remember the tragedy of the Eastland. Media has to take a big part of the blame for why more people don't know. If the media would have gave equal time to the war and the Chicago tragedy than more people worldwide would have been informed. The Chicago Fire had a greater long-term impact on the society as a whole because more land was lost. Even though more people died in the Eastland disaster than the Chicago Fire, the impact on society as a whole in the Chicago area was far less. That is why I believe more people know about the fire then the sinking of the Eastland. No matter what the reason may be, the only thing that is certain is that most people have never heard of the Eastland disaster. Chicago has an obligation to honor the memory of those impacted by the disaster by spreading the news of what took place on July 24, 1915.