
My interest was focused on emotional and cognitive aspects of collective responses to national tragedies. Neal's book includes a focus on the enduring effects of tragedies or traumas as they became embedded in the collective memories of the nation. He examines generational issues:

"There is a tendency for the older generations to avoid talking about the experiences that were painful, while many members of the younger generations have little interest in the events that are now frozen in the past." (1998: x).

"Traumatic events of the recent past are important ingredients of our social heritage and continue to convey implications for the prospects and limits of the world in which we live.

Neal questions what constitutes a national trauma. One primary issue is that of conceptual boundaries. Using this notion, we can ask several questions of the topic at hand.

**Question:** Is the Eastland Disaster a national trauma? Certainly it could be considered a citywide trauma. It is, after all, like having four jumbo jet disasters occur all at one time (assuming 200 passengers on each plane).

**Question:** Do you remember the DC-10 that crashed by O'Hare? American Flight 191, back in 1979, that killed 273 people. Do we remember this collectively? Or do we prefer to forget? Maybe it's too dangerous to remember that it can happen any time, anywhere, or that we could be one of the two killed on the ground, when the plane fell out of the sky. Maybe there is a parallel with the Eastland? What do you think? And what might that parallel be?
**Question:** Similarly, what would you or would you not consider a national trauma? Would you consider Elvis’ death a national trauma? The AIDS epidemic? Tanya Harding and the ice skate caper? What about the OJ Simpson trial? Maybe the scope of the trauma depends on the social consequence or reaction. Rodney King’s verdict sparked citywide rioting and national controversy and debate. Does that make it a national trauma?

How about Janis Joplin's death? The Edmond Fitzgerald? Buddy Holly's plane wreck? Do we need a song to commemorate and publicly pronounce a trauma at the societal level? Would a song about the Eastland, push it into collective memory? Or do the victims of tragedy and trauma need a public persona for it to be remembered? Maybe John Belushi? Or Martin Luther King, Jr. or Malcolm X or JFK? Maybe a movie is required to place such an event into public memory.

**Question:** And what would you consider a national trauma in your time? JFK, Jr.’s plane wreck? Kurt Cobain's death? The Shuttle Disaster with the teacher on-board? Or how about an Amtrak wreck (pick one)? Or certainly the Oklahoma City bombing. Is it the news coverage that makes it remember-able?

**Question:** Can you recall any national traumas that do not involve the wealthy or the famous or the first of it's kind if the victims are not famous, such as terrorism taking its first steps into the US, like the World Trade Center bombing, or again, the Oklahoma City bombing? Beyond such firsts, can you think of any tragedies that you would consider national traumas that involve working class, ethnic or minority non-famous people?

Neal's article suggests that national events are those, which "had a major impact on the institutional structure of society and fed into overriding forms of collective fear and anxiety" (1998: x). So whether something gets transmitted into the national or collective memory of a group would involve an element of generalized fear or worry, to the extent that we identify with these anxieties.

BUT a national trauma does not necessarily have to be a trauma for all individuals of a society. Not all will respond the same. Whether a person will respond and take a national trauma into their personal sphere is a selective process. War may not be similarly traumatic for all, or terrorism -- the bombing of Beirut, for example, pulled me into the personal realm when, as an undergraduate, a fellow classmate of mine lost a brother there. It took on great meaning for each of the class members due to our happenstance connection.

The final test for a national trauma -- whether something will enter our collective memory or whether it will die a vague, ambiguous sort of death and become what we're calling a part of the social amnesia of a culture -- will depend on whether it has had, according to Neal, "...the disruptive effects of an extraordinary event on the institutional underpinnings of the social order." (1998: x)
In other words, a national trauma might be designated by whether or not the event touches the institutions of society, whether it arouses in us fear and anxiety regarding those important institutions. Recall the definition of institution: the structures (patterns of groups, relationships) that form to meet the basic needs of a society.

Other issues touched on by Neal (1998) which might inform our search for understanding include the following issues:

- Boundaries around specific events -- they weaken over time, become stereotyped and selectively distorted as they become embedded in collective memories.

- Memory itself is a collective process:

  "The contents of the human brain are primarily social in character.... Images of ourselves and of our external environment are shaped by memories that are passed on by legions of men and women we have never known and never shall meet (Neal, 1998: 202)."

- In the past, the inclusion of an event into collective memory as a national trauma involved a sort of myth-making process. As Neal describes, it was derived from the oral tradition, involving embellishment for dramatic effect. This contributes to social continuity of an event (1998).

  Nowadays we have newspapers, media, and the Internet for storing and retrieval. But there becomes such a mass of knowledge and memories, that the inclusion into collective memory involves a selective process. It must be "interpreted, given credibility and constructed along lines that give it applicability to present concerns" (Neal, 1998: 202).

**Question:** Does the social amnesia surrounding the Eastland disaster disturb you in any way? Thinking back to 1915 today, and the creation of an Eastland Disaster Historical Society nearly a century later, what does this say about our current society and sense of being?

**Question:** Does it bother you that something like the Eastland could be forgotten?

Me, personally? Yes. It says something about meaninglessness to life in the modern day. There is too much of this today. Life is taken, people shot on the street, murders, house fires, terrorism, war, windows falling out of skyscrapers and striking down innocent passersby holding a 6 year-old daughter's hand, and so on and so forth. We are overloaded by senseless accidents, random acts of tragedy, deliberate efforts at violence. Too much. As if the loss of life has itself lost its meaning. So much so, and possibly feeding into this, is the reality that we have been forced to develop an air of indifference. "Cynical indifference," Neal says. Maybe what we really want is to put some value back into our lives.
How could the loss of more than 800 lives in the river go unnoticed in our social history? It is disturbing. It should mean something to us. If it does not, what does this say about our own individual passing and that of my family and your family? No one wants to think that their time here doesn't matter, that we will live and die unnoticed. Maybe this is why there is a renewed interest in the Eastland disaster recently. Yes, the founders of the Eastland Disaster Historical Society do have a bloodline connection, but still, there is something that makes them want to remember their grandmother's story. And something makes them want to make us to remember. But it's not on a collective level. Not yet, I don't think. Still at the level of social amnesia or cultural amnesia.

**Question:** Should the tragic loss of regular hard-working people like you and I matter? Down the road? In the scheme of things? Is there some moral significance in remembering? Is there some larger understanding of humanity to be gleaned from looking back and remembering what we were never told? Would you agree with this? Or is this simply another accident, tragic, but still just a bit of random chaos?

**Some Additional Thoughts From a Symbolic Interactionist Perspective**

1. What are the broader sociological implications of what it means to forget? When events are not transmitted as a part of culture. What does this mean? How can we come to understand this type of amnesia, selective social amnesia? This conclusion, as with most sociological endeavors, leads to the need for developing further questions. Examining, as Neal does, the characteristics and context for those events that are not forgotten and comparing these with the characteristics of the events that are forgotten. We can look for patterns. Just like you are doing with your 20 subjects' responses to the question, "Have you ever heard of the Eastland disaster? And why do you think so few people know about it?"

2. The inclusion of an event into collective memory requires meaning. So the question becomes specifically: What does the Eastland disaster mean to us? What does it mean to us now, in the year 2000? And what did it mean to people then, in 1915 and afterward? In other words, why should it be remembered? And the flip side of this question is: Why isn't it remembered collectively?

3. Is our social amnesia regarding the Eastland a matter of the old folks not remembering or not choosing to tell us? (Neal touches on this too.) Or is it a matter of our not bothering to ask? Does it have anything to do with changes in the way we value the wisdom of older people? Have we de-valued their knowledge with such a focus on youth and our media frenzy and marketing frenzy with youth-orientation?

4. I have also briefly ventured into the psychology of amnesia. Individual amnesia. In *Memory and Amnesia: An Introduction*, by Alan J. Parkin. (1987: Ch. 7, "Explaining Amnesia"), Parkin talks about the cause being either a failure of memory storage or memory retrieval. Can we translate these concepts into social parallels? Storage – the old people of today chose to hide it away and not talk about it? Retrieval -- we're
so focused on self-actualization and planning for future comforts (ever since the prosperity of the 1950s) that it would never occur to us to ask about the past?

Parkin also mentions a third possibility: one of a specific encoding deficit (1987: 104-105) in which there is some problem in the initial processing of information, which can have effects at either the level of storage (the generations from 1915) OR the retrieval level (younger generations). A specific encoding deficit would have to do with the nature (or meaning) of the difficulty to begin with, not so much the stage (storage or retrieval, i.e., us or them).

Instead the questions would focus on the nature or meaning of the Eastland disaster if we follow the parallel to the social realm. What was it about the Eastland -- the actual tragedy, the context in which it occurred, the manner in which it was treated in the press, by the politicians, by the rescuers, by the survivors, by the courts, and by the maritime industry -- what was it about this traumatic event that caused it to be remembered, or not remembered as it has?

What was it about this disaster that has brought about its lack of transmission across generations? Or is it simply a matter of people remembering, but choosing not to burden their offspring with the gruesome story? Were they doing us a favor in their minds, by allowing us the luxury of never having known such horror? Or maybe doing themselves a favor in the process?

So again, we are brought back to the Symbolic Interactionist's primary question: How do we understand this? This disaster? What meaning does it have? What meaning in our social history and in our present-day culture?

Demographics: Neal talks about this -- that demographic changes during the 20th century encouraged and intensified the "fragmentation of the social realm." Fertility declined, life expectancy at birth increased by more than 25 years, and the median age of the population itself increased. The result was "dramatic changes" in the contrasts between generational experiences, leading to fragmentation. And that we "are notorious in [our] disregard for the long reach of [our] historical past" (Neal, 1998 206). That the past is behind us, and we prefer to keep it that way, our more recent generational attitude.

Commemoration: Neal suggests that we commemorate events, traumatic events, in order to address needs of the social system. Does the Eastland not touch on some basic needs? Maybe not. Maybe that's why it was forgotten.

Overly Traumatic: Or, maybe it was just too traumatic. As Ted Wachholz, (president of the EDHS) discussed with me, maybe it touched on too many basic social institutions: family members, friends, neighbors in a time when neighborhoods were like extended families, and co-workers, when again, co-workers were siblings and the company, a surrogate parent.
Maybe we are very, very selective in what we choose for our collective memories and social amnesia. It must touch basic human emotions, fear, anxiety. It must be somehow relevant to us, that we must identify in some way with its victims. Or alternately, it must hold some form of fascination, the famous, the wealthy, to revel, if only from afar, in a mildly sadistic sort of poetic justice. The event must touch on basic institutions, family, work, school, leisure, economy.

But it must not touch these with too strong a fist of fate. It must not stir too much trauma within us, or threaten too closely our basic institutions in which we find comfort. If the suffering occurs in individuals a little too reminiscent of our own image, then maybe it's better to look the other way, now and down the generations.

Like Flight 191. We don't talk about or commemorate that event. For those of us who do recall, we don't like to think of it. Maybe the Eastland was similar in its day. A company picnic. Too close too home, literally and figuratively. Literally in our own backyards. Men, women, children, babies, just like us, just like our kids, drowning before our very helpless eyes. Our buildings and boulevards becoming makeshift morgues. Today's Excalibur nightclub, haunted by the ghosts of Eastland. The man on the street becoming body retriever and deputy coroner. Too much reality.

Could it be that our grandparents were indeed sparing us their own anguish and despair. A better life, not just materially, but emotionally and memorably as well.

And yet, maybe we need just such a dose of reality, a raw and grim reminder that life is fleeting. Could it be that this is what we're looking for? Could this be the right time, finally, to properly commemorate the deaths of the Eastland drownings?

A lot of maybes, but maybe these ruminations are the in-roads to more fruitful questions and, maybe, someday definitive answers.

The final word, may be along the lines of Arthur Neal's ideas, who himself may or may not have ever heard of the Eastland:

"Who are the keepers of collective memories? In the final analysis, we all are. The intersection of personal biography with historical events is crucial to the many aspects of knowing who we are and what we are to become" (1998: 213).

In other words, the meaning of the Eastland Disaster and it's victims and survivors, may, after all these years, rest in our hands. And the meaning of our lives may very well lie buried in theirs.

Somewhere within our own social amnesia.

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