Clarifying the Frontiers
Beyond Groupism:
Refining Our Analysis of Ethnicity and Groups

by Brad Gill

A blunt tool can be frustrating. It can't be used where a task demands precision. And in the complex world of frontier missions, we feel the need for precision tools when we engage unreached people groups (UPG). I was reminded of this when Peter Lee and James Park published their critique of the "unreached peoples concept" in the recent issue of *Missiology*.[1] They claim the UPG concept is seriously flawed and has no place in the tool kit of mission workers today.

Their article reminded me of my first years in the mountains of North Africa, where we lived among a Berber population. French ethnologists had done their research alongside a French colonial government that had tried—and failed—to "divide and conquer" Arab and Berber peoples. Yes, millions of transhumant Berber nomads could still be found across those mountains. Still, in some regions where Berbers were assimilating into the national civic culture, to speak of ethnic Berber identity and tribal affinities almost seemed archaic. In other regions of North Africa, people were holding fiercely to their Berber language and identity, even asserting political autonomy. Berberness was a reality, but the sense of groupness varied greatly according to the context.

Recently, a quick conversation with Lee transported me to that early crucible of trying to figure out the ethnic realities of this particular Berber region. I felt the insufficiency of the UPG concept. That peasant society demanded better social analysis. Paul Hiebert, a mentor, had directed me to the work of Mary Douglas, who had helped him in his own study of worldview and urban anthropology. It was her use of group as a variable in social analysis that offered new insight about the dynamics of my local context.[2] It also helped that my region had been the research haven of prominent anthropologists like Gellner and Geertz.[3] I used their work to sift and sort out how a Berber people might perceive its ethnic identity. I came to understand early on that group boundaries are variable, not a given. "People group," the idea of an ethnic group with a sense of solid social bondedness, was actually more elastic across the Berber world. Ethnicity was real, potentially powerful. That reality simply wasn't locally reinforced in the same way everywhere.

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It was the anthropologist Lawrence Rosen who identified the social processes of negotiation that were warping ethnic realities in my mountain setting. In his study of Sefrou, Morocco, he was able to push past preconceived notions:

> I looked for the social groups to which people belonged, and the categories and principles by which these families, tribes, quarters, and brotherhoods were ordered. In a very short time, however, it became apparent that the presumed subjects of my study, social groups, were far less corporeal and durable than current ethnography and theory had suggested.… It was not that people failed to acknowledge perduring ties with one another, but that their actions could not be contained by a set of limitations associated with familial and tribal affiliation.[4]

His methodology, analysis, and social theory, although specific to a Moroccan context, helped me venture towards a better grasp of the actual barriers to the gospel.

Lee and Park's article is a call for this kind of analysis of mission contexts, for more precise tools that go *beyond* people group thinking. Their concern is that we have too simplistic a notion of culture and society if we hold to the essentialism of "people group." I applaud their concern. There certainly can be a naïve but very popular "folk anthropology" that circulates across the global mission sending base. As they point out, these ideas rest on an exegetical understanding of the biblical terminology of *panta ta ethne* (all peoples). My study here will skirt this very important biblical argument. I wish to point out that our promotion and training can get a bit lazy and accepting of popular terms like "people group" and their commonsense meanings. McGavran used to say, "Promote all you can; just don't inhale." He would certainly understand the spirit in which Lee and Park have written. There must always be a place for a solid critique of the unexamined assumptions that support our mission enterprise.

However, when Lee and Park claim the UPG concept is "flawed," I beg to differ—it is simply "blunt." As their short article makes clear, the concept of "people group" or "ethnic group" gained prominence with Donald McGavran's "homogenous unit principle." This concept synthesized McGavran's observations from India and the "bridges of God" that allowed the gospel to be received by whole peoples in a short period of time. He used that "ethnic group lens" to discover new principles of growth in church movements through history and across the world.

McGavran then wielded these insights like a hammer on an individualistic American evangelical mind. We must recall that in the 1950s and 1960s there

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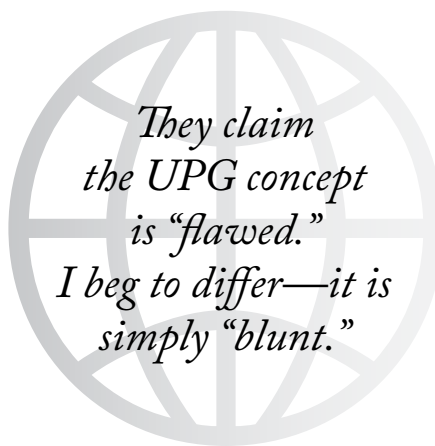
was an emphasis on evangelizing *individuals* all across the world, whether through mass events or one-on-one. This unexamined social assumption had leavened American churches and, by extension, their mission agencies. Their orientation towards *individual* conversion meant they could not easily accept the way God was apparently working in group conversions. McGavran's almost singular focus on groups has drawn strong critique in recent years, especially its implication for racially charged socie-ties. While I appreciate much in the evaluations offered, especially from mission anthropology, I would simply point out the evangelical resistance to cultural groups and the movement of the gospel. McGavran

was a controversial spokesman who would pound away at this granite-like resistance. His instrument was blunt, but we can't deny what it accomplished. The evangelical imagination gradually yielded to a new meta-narrative, one that included how God moves among whole people groups.

McGavran had much to do with this shift. A new cadre of mission anthropologists would emerge to reinforce this focus on groups, cultures, and group decisions. True, a more sensitive or more progressive mission anthropologist today might consider McGavran's usage of the "people group" concept as "crude" anthropology.[5] But let us not forget the context: American evangelicalism carried an ethnocentric individualism until McGavran grafted the realities of "group" into our consciousness.

This shift in American missiology explains the genesis and continuing promotion of what are popularly referred to as the unreached people *groups* of the world. Ralph Winter used the term "people groups" as a residual, but explicit, corrective to the strong individualistic propensity in our mission sending base. The simpler terminology of "peoples" was not sufficient. Those of us in Western societies would continue to see the world as simply populations or aggregates of individuals. As a result, we would continue to ignore the cultural commonalities and connectedness that can determine the flow of the gospel.

There is much to respond to in any re-examination of the UPG movement. I would like to focus on "group" as problematic. I have been cited as one who appreciates the forces of globalization and their impact on people groups across the world. I may have given the impression that people groups are disappearing; in fact, I was actually calling for a more comprehensive understanding of what is happening to the "groupness" of peoples across the world.

Ethnicity without Groups

I offer here the voice of another anthropologist, Rogers Brubaker (I have

previously cited his work in my attempt to understand the anthropology of ethnic diaspora[6]). Brubaker needs to be included in this conversation on the viability of UPGs. A cognitive anthropologist, Brubaker studies the interface of cognition and ethnicity.[7] How does this relate to our discussion? In his discipline he has taken the analytical step of separating the reality of ethnicity and group. He insists that group is a *variable,* not a *given.* This variability is what originally attracted me to Douglas's work—that the boundedness of group ebbed and flowed across a broad ethnic terrain. Brubaker recognizes that the concept of group has remained curiously under-scrutinized in recent years:

> "Group" functions as a seemingly unproblematic, taken-for-granted concept, apparently in no need of particular scrutiny or explication. As a result, we tend to take for granted not only the concept of "group," but of "groups"—the putative things-in-the-world to which the term refers.

Brubaker introduces the concept of "ethnicity without groups." A rather startling concept. I'd like to isolate two aspects of this anthropology that might refine our understanding and use of "people groups."

Groupism

First, Brubaker labels the ubiquitous tendency to mistakenly assume that ethnicity represents an actual group entity. He calls this inclination *groupism,* a very commonsense way of reifying people groups, making them active entities.[8] He describes groupism as "the tendency to take discrete, bounded groups as basic constituents of social life," and "to treat ethnic groups as substantial entities to which interests and agency can be attributed."[9] Ethnic groupness is simply assumed, goes unexamined and becomes a kind of folk anthropology.

By exposing groupism, however, Brubaker is not saying that ethnicity is not real. He neither disputes its reality nor minimizes its power. Rather, he probes groupism as a way to rethink ethnicity, to construe it in a different way.[10] A cognitive anthropology

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that understands "ethnicity as cognition" appreciates ethnicity as a perspective *on* the world, not as an entity *in* the world.

The UPG movement would benefit from Brubaker's assessment, which would force us to address more accurately any deficiencies in our assumptions about ethnic groupness. We certainly want to prevent notions of a popular groupism from oversimplifying our missiological analysis of ethnicity. This is one legitimate concern of Lee and Park regarding UPG thinking. Unfortunately, their critique of the anthropology behind UPG understanding diminishes the value a cognitive anthropologist like Brubaker bestows on ethnicity. They would certainly agree with his definition of groupism and the way a UPG movement may use ethnic groups as "fundamental units of social analysis."[11] They simply conclude that UPG thinking is flawed, irrelevant and should be eliminated. Yet, it is Brubaker's analytical separation of ethnicity and groupness that allows him to maintain the value of ethnicity, even ethnic groups, as a legitimate path of analysis: "The concept of ethnic group may be a blunt instrument, but it's good enough as a first approximation."[12]

Cognitive Processes

Secondly, when a cognitive anthropologist studies ethnicity, an important perspective emerges. That's because his focus is not just on individual cognition, but on how certain cultural representations are diffused across social and relational worlds. He has analytically isolated groupism as a mental process, a way of thinking that "essentializes" ethnic groups, treating them as actual entities in the world. It's a shared way of seeing the world, of "naturalizing" ethnicity as a given. Yes, we can recognize it in any popular UPG thinking that treats ethnic categorizes as though they have a primordial existence. [13]

But a keen anthropologist like Brubaker also recognizes the tenacious hold of groupism in our world. Among participants of other cultures exists the "often observed tendency to naturalize ethnicity." Analysts of ethnicity aren't the only ones who essentialize people groups. Indeed, this tendency appears to be a commonsense way of understanding others. An anthropology that respects the cognitive side of ethnicity will note

> a deep-seated cognitive disposition to perceive human beings as members of "natural kinds" with inherited and immutable "essences."[14]

This commonsense logic assigns ethnic categories to others; "ethnicizes" others, and creates a kind of "folk sociology."[15] While Brubaker warns the cultural analyst of the dysfunction of groupism, he cannot dismiss it. It is too enmeshed in the cognitive realities of ethnicity. He thus strikes a balance, maintaining ethnicity as a real and necessary focus in understanding humanity.

He puts the brakes on a more progressive "anthropology of globalization" that emphasizes the melting down of cultural categories. A kind of cosmopolitan idealism emerges today which only sees the flows of global change and ignores this human tendency to assign ethnicity to others. Further, any post-modern ethical sensibility of unity and equality is sure to demand a melting down of all such ethnic boundaries. Brubaker's cognitive approach to ethnicity sounds a lot like what most of us would call *worldview.* He is more tuned to the mental processes at work. Ethnicity is a way of perceiving, interpreting, and representing our social world. Ethnicities are not entities *in* the world (groupism), but perspectives on the world.

> These include ethnicized ways of seeing (and ignoring), of construing (and misconstruing), of inferring (and misinferring), of remembering (and forgetting).

They include ethnically oriented frames, schemas, and narratives, and the situational cues—not least those provided by the media—that activate them. They include systems of classification, categorization, and identification, formal and informal. And they include the tacit, taken-for-granted background knowledge, embodied in persons and embedded in institutionalized routines and practices, through which people recognize and experience objects, places, persons, actions, or situations as ethnically meaningful.[16]

That appears to be a classic understanding of a cultural way of thinking. It suggests once again that ethnic groups may be a good place to begin any social analysis. But his focus is not just on a static ethnic worldview. Brubaker runs the gamut between *essentialist* and *constructivist* approaches to ethnic groups by focusing on the mental processes which accompany "group-making"— the cognitive "grouping" processes of classifying, categorizing, and identifying self and others.[17] A shared ethnic vision and division of the social world may exist, but it is dynamic, variable, and in flux. And just how those grouping processes actually add up socially needs to be discovered if we are to have any clear understanding of barriers to the gospel.

## Anticipating Barriers of Understanding and Acceptance

As the UPG movement was beginning to take hold of the evangelical consciousness in the 1980s, Ralph Winter (along with other mission leaders) issued the definitions we now use for understanding people groups:

> A people group is a significantly large group of individuals who perceive themselves to have a common affinity for one another because of their shared language, religion, ethnicity, residence, occupation, class or caste, situation, etc., or combinations of these.[18]

Winter himself came from a more functionalist approach to anthropology.[19] Yet, he quickly recognized that a UPG definition of people groups as bounded ethnolinguistic units had to be nuanced

to account for other sociological, economic, and political realities. He had worked in the rural highlands of Guatemala. In this Mayan peasant/tribal world, ethnolinguistic boundaries (thirty-seven mutually unintelligible languages) represented real barriers to the flow of the gospel. But even there, ethnicities were stretching and fracturing with modern realities. He recognized the necessary inductive process of discovering the dynamic groupness of any large bloc of people. Most importantly, he believed this sensitivity, this open exploration, would help us recognize the potential barriers to the gospel.

You would think that this definition would satisfy those critical of the UPG movement; that a groupness that

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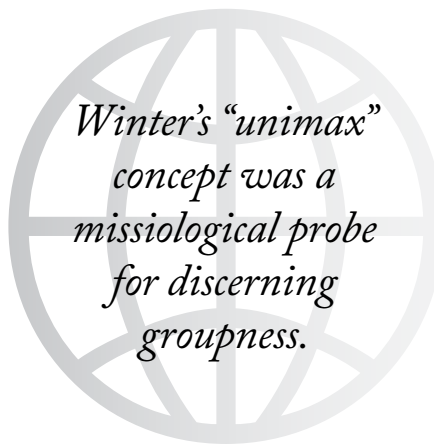
respected religious, economic, and residential factors would be sufficient. But the more popularly understood concept of UPGs may still promote a groupism that naturalizes ethnicity the same way everywhere—and that is certainly not acceptable. Missiologists will always press for more precision tools for purposes of evangelization—and that's as it should be. It is interesting that in 1982, Winter quickly amended this standard people group definition by asserting a "unimax" principle (for discerning a "unimax people").[20] He seemed dissatisfied with anything that represented groups as static. He seemed suspicious of an analytical groupism that would essentialize groups religiously, politically, economically, or according to any other

commonality. In the unimax principle, he was trying to represent the dynamism of groupness that lay hidden among our large categories of unreached peoples.

> A unimax people is the maximum-sized group sufficiently unified to be the target of a single people movement to Christ, where "unified" refers to the fact that there are no significant barriers of either understanding or acceptance to stop the spread of the gospel.[21]

Winter's unimax concept was, we might say, a missiological probe for discerning groupness. For evangelization purposes, we should follow the diffusion of the gospel, study the group affinities, and identify barriers that cause a movement to stop. The principle assumes that ethnicity (ethnolinguistic identity) is a blunt instrument, but it is the best place to begin. As we follow the path of the gospel, as movements to Christ emerge, we will notice what facilitates or hinders the flow of the gospel. When movements stop, we will attempt to identify the barriers.

Winter's unimax concept pushes us to discover barriers of understanding and acceptance. Can we anticipate those barriers? Should we only wait and see a movement to Christ stop and then identify the barriers? Or can we "specify how 'groupness' can 'crystallize' in some situations while remaining latent and merely potential in others"?[22]

The Berber world is an excellent case study of how a salient ethnic groupness can influence movements to Christ. More recently, where ethnicity had crystallized in a specific geographic and political setting, the largest movement to Christ since the early Christian centuries has occurred. The movement is diffused among tens of thousands across their homeland and into Europe. But in my former Berber region, ethnic identification is latent; the language is ebbing; the cell phone is lifting persons out of their traditional worlds. And yet a subtle "groupism" still maps out one's social world, and could still determine one's marriage partners. In such a place one finds it hard to imagine a virile "Berber" people movement of any sort.

I share Brubaker's conviction that cognitive perspectives can help us anticipate how groups may coalesce. We need to add his cognitive filters to Winter's missiological probe in the hope of greater intuition. Any astute mission worker is usually aware of the categories, the commonalities, the connectedness, and the identifications among the people to whom he ministers. Adding a cognitive anthropology, a focus on the social and mental processes that create and sustain the division of a social world, could help us anticipate how groupness might emerge either as a bridge or a barrier to the gospel. We would gain a better sense for what may hinder or facilitate movements to Christ. In a quick synthesis of some of Brubaker's material, we can distill some questions that might help indicate the prevalence of groupness.[23]

1. What appears to be the familiar cultural construct (social division) people use when they process a new issue, a new person, or a new event?

2. Do you notice if people accentuate, maybe exaggerate, their similarities with others of their in-group, or their differences with out-groups? Do they demonstrate an in-group bias?

3. Do you hear any stereotypes or categories proposed, propagated, imposed, or used?

4. What do you hear in their responses to government and its policies? Can they speak about this?

5. How does any crisis or event ratchet up the presence of groups? Is there evidence of organizations dedicated to certain group identities?

6. How do people frame conflict? Are there certain interpretive frames that are prominent, accessible, resonant, and widely understood?

These questions simply indicate a trajectory, a direction that may help us identify the latent groupness which exists among people among whom we live and minister. This inductive

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process would press us beyond any shallow analytical groupism in the popularization of the UPG concept.

A Balanced Analysis: The Pauline Way

In conclusion, this consideration of Brubaker's cognitive anthropology leads me to consider a rather risky biblical conjecture. I suspect that the Apostle Paul had an intuitive sense for what Brubaker is talking about. He did not have the benefit (nor the confusion) of modern anthropology, but he had a clear sense for the *group processes* at work in his Roman world.

Paul could boldly declare—as he considered an entire region that was yet to be entirely evangelized—"I have fulfilled the ministry of the gospel" (Rom. 15:19). How could he assert this? For years he had ministered across that empire in synagogues and temples, in cities and hinterlands, and in households and palaces, and my hunch is that he could sense how ethnicity and context create both bridges and barriers to the gospel. Paul could respect how the ethnic realities of Jew, Greek, barbarian, and Scythian framed very real ethnolinguistic frontiers, but he also understood how more dynamic group processes might permit the gospel to move through both an urban and a rural landscape. I may be reading into Paul's sense of completion here in Romans 15, but he seems to balance hard ethnic realities with the fluid infrastructure and flows of a cosmopolitan society. He could not always assume clear ethnic boundaries; instead he often faced barriers of ethnic hostility. He couldn't fall for a superficial cosmopolitanism that minimized these barriers, he had to be alert to how the processes of assimilation were creating new avenues for the gospel. He was confident the gospel would continue to find natural bridges throughout the region. His

frontier task in that part of the Mediterranean basin had been completed and he was moving on.

There's a balance in Paul, and I see it in Brubaker as well. We face similar cosmopolitan conditions as Paul, and it requires a similar analytical dexterity. Any assessment of the UPG movement needs to find a balance. We can't succumb to ethnic groupism, nor can we adopt a sociological reductionism that only sees the global erosion of ethnicity. Ethnicity is real, sometimes salient, often latent, at times disappearing. But latent groups survive and can reconstruct in powerful ways.[24] It's a blunt tool, admittedly, and we require more precision tools in this modern era of globalization. But we could begin by examining ethnicity and then move beyond to look at the cognitive processes by which groups emerge, crystallize and create either bridges or barriers to the movement of the gospel. **IJFM**

Endnotes
[1] My thanks to Lee and Park for pressing into this UPG issue once again. It is specifically their inclusion of newer anthropological perspectives that became the single focus of this article.

[2] Douglas introduced this group/grid matrix in *Natural Symbols* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1982). I am grateful to another mentor, Sherwood Lingenfelter, for helping me more appreciate and apply the variables of group to my North African context. See Lingenfelter, *Transforming Culture* (Grand Rapids: Baker House, 1992).

[3] Their relevant works to our subject matter would be: Clifford Geertz, Hilda Geertz, and Lawrence Rosen, *Meaning and Order in Moroccan Society* (Cambridge University Press, 1979) and Ernest Gellner, *Saints of the Atlas* (London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 1969).

[4] Lawrence Rosen, *Bargaining for Reality: The Construction of Social Relations in a Muslim Community* (University of Chicago Press, 1984), 1.

[5] Robert Priest gave an anthropological reflection on homogenous unit thinking

in Howell and Zehner's work, *Power and Identity,* eds. Brian M. Howell and Edwin Zehner (Pasadena, CA: William Carey Library), 191. As he concludes, he uses the term "crude" for McGavran's anthropology, and I believe by that he means "basic," "unrefined," "rudimentary," and "outdated."

[6] For my editorial reflections on Brubaker's insight into diaspora phenomena, see http://ijfm.org/PDFs_IJFM/30_3_PDFs/IJFM_30_3-EditorialReflections.pdf.

[7] Brubaker's study of groups also includes race and nationality, but I intend to apply it singularly to ethnicity here in this article.

[8] Brubaker calls this "entitivity."

[9] Brubaker, 64–65.

[10] Brubaker, 11.

[11] Brubaker, 8.

[12] Brubaker, 18.

[13] I have skirted the important anthropological debate between primordialism and instrumentalism. Dewi Hughes explains it succinctly: "The primordialists believe that ethnic identity is the essence of what human beings are. It is not something humans create; it is a given, the assumption on which they build their lives. The instrumentalists argue that ethnic identity is a human creation. It is something that societies construct in order to pursue political or economic ends." Hughes, 20.

[14] Brubaker, 84.

[15] Brubaker, 84.

[16] Brubaker, 17.

[17] Brubaker, 79.

[18] Winter and Koch, 536.

[19] Winter earned a PhD in Linguistic Anthropology at Cornell University.

[20] I'm thankful to Dave Datema for pointing this out. I refer you to his excellent article on the history of the unreached concept at http://ijfm.org/PDFs_IJFM/33_2_PDFs/IJFM_33_2-Datema.pdf.

[21] Winter and Koch, 535ff.

[22] Brubaker, 18.

[23] These questions were synthesized from portions of chapters 1–3 in Brubaker 2004.

[24] For a more cognitive approach to how latent groups survive, see Mary Douglas's treatment of institutions in, *How Institutions Think,* 31–43.

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