

Response to Urbanization and Measuring the Remaining Task

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Justin has put his finger on what I believe is the number one problem related to current people group thinking. For decades numerous voices have cast doubt on whether the people group paradigm can adequately describe human grouping in urban contexts. As centers of amalgamation, assimilation and integration of ethnicities, languages, and cultures, cities create hybrid or hyphenated identities over time.

“Fusion cuisine” is one product of such blending, yet such fusion goes far beyond food. It takes place within people as distinct communities living side-by-side in densely populated areas interact with others daily. The traditional framework of people groups, in which peoples are seen as clearly distinct groups with clear lines of demarcation, does not work in cities in a similar way. So does urban reality doom the people group paradigm to irrelevance?

It depends on how you define people groups. Historically, there have been two primary ways of defining them, one narrow and simple, the other broad and complex. The simple definition is best known as the ethnolinguistic definition, meaning that the peoples of the world are categorized according to shared ethnicity and language. The advantage of the ethnolinguistic definition is that it is quantifiable. This is the standard way peoples have been categorized, not only by missionaries, but also by the United Nations, national governments, etc.¹

By contrast, the “official” definitions for people groups, hammered out by American, evangelical mission leaders, have been much more complex. These definitions of people groups did not neglect ethnolinguistic realities, but also recognized other factors. As early as 1978 Ralph Winter was defining “hidden peoples” more broadly: “Any linguistic, cultural or sociological group defined in terms of its primary affinity (not secondary or trivial affinities), which cannot be won by E-1 methods and

drawn into an existing fellowship.”² Here the word “sociological” broadens the types of grouping possible far beyond ethnicity and language. The emphasis is on “primary affinity” and is not necessarily ethnolinguistic.

Then in 1982 leaders gathered to agree on a standard definition of a people group,

A people group is a significantly large grouping 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. For evangelistic purposes it is the largest group within which the gospel can spread as a Church Planting Movement without encountering barriers of understanding or acceptance.³

Notice that the first sentence includes much more than ethnicity and language as acceptable affinities. The second sentence, added at Winter’s impetus, puts the emphasis simply on “group” and emphasizes “barriers of understanding or acceptance.” In other words, a group is identified not only because it represents a new language (barrier of understanding) but also because it may represent other barriers created due to religion, class, caste, etc. (barrier of acceptance), perhaps even within one ethnolinguistic group. By this definition, people groups cannot be reduced to ethnicity and language.

² Winter, *Penetrating the Last Frontiers*, Pasadena, CA: William Carey Library, 1978, 42.

³ Ralph D. Winter and Bruce Koch. “Finishing the Task: The Unreached Peoples Challenge.” In *Perspectives on the World Christian Movement, 4th Ed.*, edited by Ralph D. Winter and Steven C. Hawthorne, 531-546. Pasadena, CA: William Carey Library, 2009, 536.

¹ www.cia.gov/the-world-factbook/countries/

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Even after the establishment of the 1982 definition as an industry standard (which saw the demise of the phrase “hidden peoples”), and even though Winter helped create that newer definition, he felt that people groups were still being interpreted ethnolinguistically. So once again he attempted to change the focus with his description of “unimax 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.”⁴ Again, there is no reference to the type of affinity. Winter was less concerned about *how* groups held together and more concerned with *why* the gospel wasn’t getting to them, less concerned about *affinity* and more concerned about *access*, less concerned about *bonding* and more concerned about *barriers*.

The differences in these views of what constitutes a people group are important. Winter and Koch rightly asked, “What if an ethnolinguistic people is actually a cluster of unimax peoples, and while one of them is experiencing a church-planting explosion, other groups in the cluster have little or nothing happening within them?”⁵ Not satisfied with identification of ethnolinguistic affinity, they have pushed us to discover where and why the spread of the gospel may be hindered *within* a given ethnolinguistic group.

With that history in view, let’s return to the question: does urban reality doom the people group paradigm to irrelevance?

If people groups are seen *exclusively* as ethnolinguistic groupings, then I believe they have indeed become somewhat irrelevant for urban contexts. I say “somewhat” because we need to remember that even with all the realities mentioned above, people in urban contexts can also remain very devoted to their home cultures. Not all people in urban environments mix in equal measure. Traditional norms often remain very strong, as illustrated by mother tongue transfer to younger generations and marriage within existing groups. It is not accurate to portray cities as bastions of indiscriminate and wholesale mixture.

⁴ Ibid., 534-535.

⁵ Ibid., 539.

However, given that caveat, it remains obvious that if we equate people groups with ethnolinguistic peoples, cities create problems too difficult to overcome. Rather than defending ethnolinguistic people groups in this way, I think we need to remind ourselves that the actual definitions hammered out decades ago allow for a more elastic, non-ethnolinguistic definition.

I believe that these classic people group definitions remain valid in urban settings. Under this paradigm, we are looking for groups (whatever their affinity) that appear to exist outside gospel witness. In most cases, this will be due to barriers of acceptance. Regardless of the fusion of peoples in urban settings, they are still forming into groups. That is what matters, not the particular and varied affinities they are grouped around. We don’t have to abandon people group thinking to understand urban life. But we do have to return to the earlier definitions to be reminded of the breadth of possibility human grouping takes.

Finally, this line of thinking can be taken too far. One of the weaknesses of the 1982 definition is that it allows for literally millions of human groupings encapsulated in “a common affinity for one another because of their shared language, religion, ethnicity, residence, occupation, class or caste, situation, etc. or combinations of these.” While a purely ethnolinguistic focus is too limiting, a focus on every conceivable human grouping in the world is far too broad. I believe the ethnolinguistic focus has served us well, but when an issue like urban contexts limit its effect, we need to delve deeper, but not too deep.

Our goal is not to describe every human grouping on this planet. It is to notice when the gospel is not getting somewhere, and then to prayerfully and humbly seek God for the wisdom needed to discern the barriers as well as the bridges to that group. The complex realities of human grouping will always frustrate simple definition and people group databases. They can only be discerned by workers embedded in urban centers over many years. Today’s urban missionary needs to become expert in new forms of research like social network analysis and become reacquainted with old forms of research like prayer. It is hard to imagine a more exciting vocation! 