

The Homogeneous Unit Principle Revisited: Part One

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Introduction: A Perplexing Hostility

My copy of *Christianity Today* came one morning last June. The feature article, a review of Gordon Fee's new volume, *Paul, the Spirit, and the People of God*,¹ caught my eye. Underliner in hand, I began reading...but never finished. The article broadsided me with one of the harshest in-your-face attacks of the Homogeneous Unit Principle I have read. In a litany of accusations, Fee calls the homogeneous unit principle (HUP) a "classist, racist, elitist" device of secular sciences.

Elsewhere, Escobar reduces the HUP to a pragmatic methodology conceived by the Fuller School of World Mission (FSWM) which makes numerical growth the normative standard for mission. In his estimation, it's a *sociologism*, not sociology.² For John Perkins church growth is a substitute for the gospel. He writes, "The church-growth philosophy of homogeneity is a heresy that...has sacrificed principle for expediency...."³ These accusations—echoed repeatedly by the misinformed—confront us with a *perplexing hostility*. They constrain us to revisit the HUP.

Toward An Understanding Of The HUP

For Fee, Escobar, and Perkins, the more they protest, the clearer becomes the underlying problem: a misunderstanding of

the meaning and role of the homogeneous unit principle. A misunderstanding which is amplified by a conviction that in the heterogeneous church model we have a vehicle for demonstrating our oneness in Christ and our reconciliation with him.

As understood by its critics, a heterogeneous church group is distinguished by diverse social classes, ethnic units, and racial mixes. The HUP for them is just the opposite. They regard church growth people as promoting and pursuing narrow monocultural church groups in the interests of numerical growth quite prepared to sacrifice biblical principle for the dividends of sociological pragmatism.

Even if the HUP might have been better presented,⁴ and even if the HUP has been exploited by some, these HUP critics are guilty of grossly misjudging and misinterpreting this concept. It deserves better of its critics. The HUP controversy begins right here: the conflict and distance between the interpretations of its critics and the intentions of its framers.

Is the HUP a Madison Avenue sociology in clerical garb or a basic construct of the human condition and biblical in essence? The distance between these two positions, I believe, can only be bridged by an indepth re-examination of the HUP. This challenge confronts us with two basic questions: How are we to understand the HUP and how does it work?⁵ Second, does the HUP pass biblical muster? The first question is dealt with in this study. The second will be examined in a subsequent one.

This article, then, will be asking why people are joiners, why the difficulty in defining this term "homogeneity," what about a HUP model, and how does the HUP work. By way of conclusion, we will revisit our HUP critics.

Why people are joiners: From the gregarious instinct to enculturation

The words of John Donne, "No man is an island..." point out the obvious: we are social creatures. Created in the image of God, we turn quite naturally towards group life. And this gregarious instinct which leads the children of Adam to seek out group relationships is universal. But why is this so?

Most would reply that people are joiners by nature and by nurture. We are born into a complex social group called the family. Our families are part of a complex social organization of local communities and cities which in concert form a social-cultural system called a society. Succeeding generations are enabled to function and sustain their cultural systems through a process we call enculturation (or socialization). Enculturation might be defined as a learning process whereby we are taught “the ground rules” of the culture into which we are born. Reisman quotes Fromm,

In order that any society may function well, its members must acquire the kind of character which makes them *want* to act in the way they *have* to act as members of the society or of a special class within it... *Outer force* is replaced by *inner compulsion*...⁶

According to Reisman, we socialize in groups for only groups can give the approval we seek.⁷ Actually groups respond to a variety of needs of which two are *enablement* or *empowerment*, and *identification*.

The enablement or empowerment function of groups: In the dysfunctional atmosphere of urban centers, a variety of groups—formal and informal—act as sociological sponsors into community life and the market place. Peer groups begin intruding into family life the first time a parent hears those words, “But Mom, all the other kids are doing it.” Children naturally turn towards peer relationships and group life for empowerment, it’s the need to be an insider, its the mechanism for group homogeneity.

The identification function of groups: The two most common questions of the human psyche are: “Who am I?” and “What am I?” Usually they are answered at home or in churches and schools.⁸ More and more, however, these two questions are being answered in group identification. *Group participation is primarily an act of self-affirmation and identification.*

What is common to all the other-directed people is that their contemporaries are the source of direction for the individual...⁹

All of which shows us that the common denominator and integrating factor of group life is its unit of homogeneity. In essence, a homogeneous group is a primary group, a natural group. A heterogeneous group is neither, rather it owes its presence to the dynamics of a century of urbanization.¹⁰

I suggest that what is true for society at large is likewise true for the church. To *baptize* Reisman's quote on socialization: *In order for the church to grow quantitatively, qualitatively and ethically, its members must acquire the kind of character which makes them want to live the Christ-life and serve him with all their heart, soul and strength.*¹¹

The Problem with Defining "Homogeneity"

Homogeneity is not easy to define, but quite easy to misunderstand. All those who naively consider *heterogeneity* and *homogeneity* to be equivalent to "mixed" and "unmixed," or regard a homogeneous unit (HU) church as a monoracial group, or think of it as being drawn from a narrow socio-economic class have already confused the function and meaning of the HUP. Here is my attempt to define the HUP and clarify the difference between group homogeneity and group heterogeneity.

For starters, since no two people are ever identical, there is no such thing as absolute homogeneity. And since homogeneity can be defined so many ways, any discussion of homogeneity must make clear what *kind* of homogeneity is being talked about.

The *kind* of HUs McGavran and company were initially interested in were the categories of tribe, clan, caste and age-set. These homogeneous units structuring traditional societies are a *section of society* in which members live by the rules of a shared culture, have a common worldview and mind-set. Tracing their origins to a common ancestral source, they see themselves as a distinct people group. This is a powerful dynamic, it gave birth to the notion of the HU concept. For the FSWM, the HUP became a basic principle for the analysis of traditional peoples and strategizing for church growth.

On this basis, McGavran defined a HU as, "A section of society in which members have some characteristic in com-

mon,"¹²and that "characteristic in common" is able to *set-apart* those who share it and bond them as a homogeneous group. These tribal, clan, caste, and age-set forms of homogeneous social organization, however, don't make it into the city. They break down in whole or in part where immigration brings people into large multicultural populations.

As church growth concepts were increasingly utilized in the evangelization of large urban centers, the HUP went through a certain transformation. While the HUs of traditional societies continued to be defined in terms of tribe, clan, caste, and age-set; the description of HUs in urban centers was all-to-often made in terms of *anthropological markers* (e.g. race and ethnicity) and *sociological markers* (e.g. class and status). This was particularly true for HUP detractors.¹³ This is at best a half-truth. Wagner as early as 1974 pointed us beyond these *typological markers* to the dynamics of a certain mind-set as the catalyst for homogeneity.¹⁴

In a large multicultural center, what we have just called *typological* categories can give us a socio-anthropological profile of a particular group; they can to a certain extent predict group behavior; they can even identify potential group members, but *typological categories cannot describe for us what makes homogeneous units homogeneous!*

One hundred African-Americans watching a Spike Lee film may be homogeneous in terms of race, but they are not a HU. Something other than racial, ethnic, and/or sociological uniformity is needed to generate an HU in the context of a broad multicultural and sociologically diverse society. To appreciate the HUP dynamic, this "something else" is something we need to understand.

A HUP Model

In part, the HUP controversy begins here. The basic problem is that these anthropological and sociological *markers* are *typological* categories which can do no more than identify and/or describe groups. They are not the *cognitive* categories by which people think and act.¹⁵

The mind is the final arbiter in matters of homogeneity.¹⁶ While diverse elements contribute to the formation of HUs, their *sine qua non* is twofold: Basic cognitive factors and local precipitating factors. A shared mind-set is the *ground* in which HUs are born, it is occasioned by local factors which like-minded people find compelling.¹⁷

The cognitive factors are three: A shared cultural framework, the “big picture” we call a worldview and a shared mindset. To show how irretrievably we are emmeshed in culture, Kraft suggests that what water is to fish, culture is to humans.¹⁸ Hoebel calls it an integrated system of learned behavior patterns which is characteristic of a society.¹⁹ In any case, it’s our rule book for living. To flaunt its norms is to risk being socially ostracized.

As such, culture is a construct in which we live, move and have our being as social beings. When West African tribal peoples move out of traditional communities and opt for the bright lights of multicultural cities, the *formal* structure of their traditional culture systems largely breaks down. These immigrants will adapt their life-style, what they will not do is surrender their birth cultures.

Kenneth Little has described for us how *the functions of traditional cultures* are fleshed-out in surrogate groups when tribals immigrate to urban centers in West Africa.

From the point of view of social organization one of the most striking characteristics of these modern towns is the very large number and variety of...certain tribal associations of an extraterritorial kind, known in Nigeria and the Gold Coast as Tribal Unions.

These tribal unions range from little unions, consisting of a few members of the same extended family or clan, to much larger bodies like the Ibo State Union which is a collection of village and clan unions... these associations were originally formed by Ibo and other migrants...to protect themselves from the hostile way in which they were received... *The main raison d’etre, however, is that of fostering and keeping alive an interest in tribal song, his-*

tory, language, and moral beliefs, and thus maintaining a person's attachment to his native town and to provide its younger people with education" (emphasis added).²⁰

Closely associated with the culture construct is the notion of a worldview. When we ask, "What's gone wrong with this world?" or "Why do bad things happen to good people?" we are asking worldview kinds of questions. With the answers we get, we attempt to make sense of the human condition and with it we go about the business of decision making. For Schaeffer this was critical. "In my teaching," he said, "I put a great deal of weight on the fact that we live in an abnormal world. I personally could not stand this world, if I did not understand it is abnormal...that it is not the way God made it."²¹

In a homogeneous group with a shared cultural framework, members need to see the world from the same perspective; they must share a similar worldview. An astronomy club is no place for those who hold to a flat earth. The right-to-choose crowd have a set of worldview perspectives which is sharply opposed to a biblical worldview. The bottom line is that people who share similar worldviews see life similarly, tend to be compatible, do things for roughly the same reasons and gravitate towards groups which valorize their worldview and their self-image.

If culture compels us to group life and our *worldview* seeks to make sense of the world in which we live, our *mindset* is how we think and react to "the stuff" of the human condition...stuff like our children's education, taxes, gambling, abortion, homosexuality, capital punishment, integrity, etc....and whether or not it is encumbant upon us to respond personally to the person of Jesus Christ.

When these cognitive factors are shared by a social group and this group has coalesced around a particular life concern, the HUP is at work. It happens with such frequency, we no longer see it as a process. And in this *sociological mix*, race and class and status differences are pre-empted by common concerns, attitudes and convictions. And that's homogeneity!

Imagine, for instance, a right-to-life group picketing an abortion clinic. Outwardly, they are a heterogeneous bunch: Roman

Catholics, Protestants, blacks, whites, men, young, and old and everything in between. As a group, however, they are the essence of homogeneity. The catalyst which has forged this homogeneity is a certain mind-set forged out of a shared worldview and a set of common values. And within that mind-set, abortion provokes a righteous anger. Their burden compels them to unite as a group to oppose something they feel deeply about. In life we are surrounded by groups who share a common culture, worldview, and mindset and for whom racial and ethnic and class distinctions are of no consequence.

To understand an urban community, we must appreciate its homogeneities. HUPs are the building blocks of a city, they are the glue of any society. In urban life, heterogeneity is *the sociological plural* of homogeneity; a heterogeneous community is a composite of multiple homogeneous units.

The HUP as Process

Homogeneity is as much process as principle.²² Whenever an outsider associates with a particular group, the HUP swings into action. A people-changing process goes to work. When outsiders are received into a homogeneous group, they are expected to conform to the modal behavior and role expectations of the group. *The HUP is a process which assimilates heterogeneity and transforms it into homogeneity.*

From Omaha or Oaugadougou, this process is at work. It works to eliminate cognitive diversity and strengthen the bonds of homogeneity in social groups or church bodies. In Paris, a key Assembly of God church with its broad ethnic and social diversity was anything but heterogeneous. It was an example of a socially diverse and multi-ethnic congregation being transformed by this *process* into a homogeneous church.

This process is extensive and intensive. Outwardly it works to *refashion* group candidates so that they conform with group roles, stereotypes and/or expectations. Inwardly it works to create and reinforce a cognitive homogeneity among its members. Those sharing the life of a group must be willing to internalize the value system of the group...their identity with the group depends

upon it. So formally and informally, the mind-set of new group members is slowly but surely brought into conformity with the group mind-set. That's the nature of social groups, formal or informal. That's also the nature of church life where this process of transformation goes by the name *sanctification*.

During the seventies, I visited two different counter-culture communes in California. It was readily apparent that these young people had never experienced those rites of initiation we call socialization. But they were making up for lost time. Kids fresh off the streets were quickly introduced into rigid discipline codes imposed by long-haired mentors. Young adults whose only point of commonality was a rejection of their parent's world and lifestyle were being transformed by this process into ideal group members. *Group outsiders become insiders by identifying with group expectations. By this process heterogeneity is transformed into homogeneity.* This same process is constantly reshaping the life and membership of local churches.

Homogeneous units are not a grouping of sociological look-alikes. Nor are they racial or class-conscious enclaves. Homogeneous groups are a *cross-section of society where members share in common a certain cultural framework, a common worldview and a certain mind-set finding in their commitment to shared values a social empowerment and personal valorization.* Our daily lives are emmeshed in a network of formal, informal and reference type groups.

By Way Of Conclusion

Revisiting HUP Detractors

The old proverb assures us that "what goes around comes around." Having revisited the HUP, we need to revisit the cutting accusations which occasioned this article.

The accusations of Escobar fall into four categories: Philosophical, methodological, ethical and biblical.²³ Philosophically, he accuses church growth people—along with liberation theology people—of compromising the biblical message in the service of an ideology. He writes,

The Church Growth School has postulated a key to read the missionary situation and Christian history (in which) the totality of the biblical message is reduced and partialized at the service of an ideology.²⁴

Escobar's use of the term "ideology" is technical. For the old U.S.S.R., Marxist-Leninism was a guiding ideology. For a Carl Sagan, science became an ideology, for a Bill Gates, technology becomes an ideology. Escobar discounts the church growth school on the grounds that they have embraced sociology as an ideology.²⁵

McGavran, however, was no ideologue. He was a man constrained by a holy passion. He was committed to the idea that God wants those who are lost found. And once found brought into a redemptive relationship with Jesus Christ where, baptized in his Name, they should become part of His Church. For McGavran, the fulfillment of this will necessitated a multiplication of churches across the ethnic horizons of this world. This is no ideology, it's the Great Commission.²⁶ He's a tactician, not an ideologue.

As for the danger of sociology pre-empting biblical theology, he writes,

The Truth to which I am bound inheres in the...Word which was in the beginning with God, by whom all things were made...He is Truth, and to Him I give answer for everything I think and say and do...All evidence must be weighed before the bar of Truth. *Therefore I cannot consider church growth merely a sociological process. It is that...but much more than that*, it is what happens when there is faithfulness to the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ.²⁷

Those who accuse McGavran of transforming sociology into an ideology have succumbed to an *ad hominem* approach.

Escobar labels the HUP a *methodology*. He writes, "The 'homogeneous unit' principle is but one clearcut example of the use of a methodology."²⁸ So that when McGavran begins talking of

the importance of numerical growth, Escobar concludes that the HUP is a methodology designed to give us numerical success. And when church growth people point to instances of the HUP at work in the New Testament descriptions of the early church, Escobar concludes they are using the HUP as a method of interpreting the New Testament. Prejudices are short-cuts to false conclusions.

In response it should be made clear: The HUP does not define church growth methodology. Church growth methodology embraces a rich variety of conceptual *tools* to do the work of “church planting.” To name a few: cognitive facts such as mental sets and worldview, historical factors, cultural factors and themes, social structure, receptivity factors, the decision making process, contextualization of message and church form, etc...and the HUP. The HUP is one tool—granted a key tool—which church growth artisans employ in the work of raising up new churches.

I once asked Dr. McGavran about appropriate methodologies for church planting in France. His response was clear, “Walther, there is no church growth methodology that is valid for all fields, an effective strategy for France may have no relevance elsewhere. All we can do is to provide you with the tools to fulfill your calling. A working strategy for the field of France, is up to those of you who work there.”

Ethically, Escobar becomes agitated with what he considers to be the ethical lapses of church growth people. He accuses them of being blind to the ethical ramifications of the gospel, i.e. the needs of the poor and oppressed of the world. He believes this blindness has led church growth people to force biblical theology into the “straightjacket of the social sciences, especially sociology....”²⁹ It all boils down to this: For those who take God’s Word seriously, they...

...cannot be blind...to the prophetic and ethical elements that permeate the biblical message. For an evangelical way of life poverty...is a challenge to responsible action....what will rich evangelicals in America do about the masses of poor people attracted to the evangelical faith

in the Third World? Will they take the whole Gospel to them....Or will they turn the Gospel into a social tranquilizer that will give birth to inoffensive homogeneous-unit churches? Will they in that way push the younger generations of Christians who hunger and thirst after justice into the hands of the able Marxist manipulators because 'there is no alternative, the Gospel is not a real option'³⁰

Personally I am profoundly challenged by Escobar's commitment to the poor and his reaction to the cynical political and economic power structures which oppress the poor of this world. Along with Perkins, they are God's witnesses to the poor and disfranchised. In this, I am their debtor!

The analysis and accusations Escobar brings to this subject, however, are profoundly disturbing. Escobar has McGavran preaching another gospel. Church growth people insist that they have neither lost sight of the ethical demands inherent in the gospel, nor are they insensitive to them. McGavran believed that whatever transformations Christians can bring to the unjust power structures in distant lands will largely depend on a vast multiplication of churches across these oppressed regions.³¹ George Hunter agrees, "Our social causes will not triumph," he says, "unless we have great numbers of committed Christians."³²

That the plight of this world's poor will somehow be bettered by ridding ourselves of church growth inspired churches and promoting heterogeneous churches—as Escobar apparently believes—is a recipe for failure. There is no ethical lapse to the church growth vision of Dr. McGavran...unless it can be traced back to the Great Commission!

Biblically, critics freely accuse church growth people of faulty hermeneutics and abusing biblical theology. Convinced that in the heterogeneous group model we have a vehicle for demonstrating our oneness in Christ and our reconciliation with him, HUP critics have no patience for the HUP model. A response to these accusations is crucial, but it will come in part two of this study.

Identifying the Basic Problem

Entrenched in Escobar's thinking is the idea that HUs are artificially created groups which church growth people are forcing upon us. Likewise Fee and Perkins speak of the HUP as being a sociological fabrication foisted upon unsuspecting Christians by sociology-minded theologians. This misconception has led HUP critics to believe that church growth people have succumbed to a worldly inspired sociology.

The HUP is a very human drive grounded in a social construct ordained of God (to anticipate part two of this study).³³ It's no mischievous concept born in the mind of McGavran, nor some methodology conceived by the FSWM and justified by a pragmatic casuistry, nor some dirty-old Madison Avenue strategy. The Sinasina of Irian Jaya or the Fulani of Nigeria did not decide to go "homogeneous" at the urging of some McGavran disciple. Along with the rest of us in this big, wide world, these peoples are group-centric who seek resolutely to maintain the essence of their birth culture.

That the HUP has been tragically abused in South Africa, in India, in the Americas, in the United States and elsewhere detracts in nothing from the reality of the HUP's being a creation construct. From the remotest tribal group to the graffiti jungles of the inner city, people uniformly behave in patterns which give us HUs. This is a basic construct of human behavior, not the social programming efforts of church growth sociologists. Church growth methodology seeks only to discover existing homogeneities and work within their cultural parameters, not fabricate new ones.

This is the HUP dynamic. It won't go away. "What gravity is to the physical realm, the HUP is to the socio-cultural realm." When one begins with this necessary premise, the accusations being brought against the HUP are essentially disqualified.

We have revisited the HUP for the simplest of reasons: People find the Lord in groups. If bringing men and women to experience the unsearchable riches of the grace of God in Jesus Christ is what our servanthood is all about, the HUP is a divine provision to do the will and work of God. That's what makes it so

special!

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1. Gordon Fee, quoted by Wendy Murray Zoba in "Father, Son, and...," a review of Fee's book, *Paul, the Spirit, and the People of God*, *Christianity Today*, (June 17, 1996), pp.18-24.
2. Samuel Escobar, "Solicited Comments" in Frederick W. Norris, "The Social Status of Early Christianity," *Gospel in Context*, Vol. 2, No.1 (January, 1979), p.15-16.
3. John Perkins, in a forum on "The Myth of Racial Progress." ed. Andrés Tapia, *Christianity Today* (October 4, 1993), p.18.
4. The popularization of the HU concept began with McGavran's *Bridges of God* (1955). Hindsight suggests that this concept might have been communicated differently, even so it is painful to read those who might well have become constructive critics choose to attack this construct as an enemy of the Church.
5. Interesting that the primary church growth volume given us by McGavran is entitled, *Understanding Church Growth* (Grand Rapids, Eerdmans, 1970).
6. David Reisman, *The Lonely Crowd* (New Haven, Yale University Press, 1950), p.5. See also Jacob Loewen, *Socialization and Social Control*, *Practical Anthropology*, July-August 1968, pp.145-150.
7. Reisman, *The Lonely Crowd*, p.48.
8. See David Filbeck, *Social Context and Proclamation* (Pasadena, CA: William Carey Library, 1985), pp. 46-47.
9. Reisman, *The Lonely Crowd*, p. 21.
10. See Jurgen Moltmann, "Christianity and the Values of Modernity," *Theology, News and Notes* (October 1996): p. 3.
11. Reisman, *The Lonely Crowd*, p.5.
12. Donald A. McGavran, *Understanding Church Growth* (Grand Rapids, William B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1970), p. 95.
13. One writes, "...for the church to embody into its structures the

separations of race, caste, language, or sex is to deny the gospel which reconciles." Larry McSwain, "A Critical Appraisal Of The Church Growth Movement," *Review and Expositor* (Fall, 1980), p. 530.

14. See C. Peter Wagner's description of the Circle Church in Chicago in "American Church Growth" An article reprint by National Association of Evangelicals (1974), p. 6-7.

15. Paul Hiebert has proposed the notion of "Cognitive Categories" or "Sets" to clarify varieties of cognitive styles reflected by ethnicity. See "Conversion, Culture and Cognitive Categories" *Gospel in Context* (October 1978): pp. 24-29.

16. Hiebert writes, "Societal groups are the mental categories by which people sort out themselves and other human beings on the basis of similarity of kind" in *Cultural Anthropology* (Philadelphia: J.B. Lippincott Co. 1976), p. 179.

17. A primary source for this model is the remarkable study done by Guy Michelat and Michel Simon associated with the *Groupe de Sociologie des Religions* in France, "Catholiques Déclarés et Irreligieux Communistes: Vision du Monde et Perception du Champ Politique," *Archives de Sciences Sociales des Religions*, 35:57-111; Paris, Editions du Centre National de la Recherche Scientifique.

18. See Charles Kraft, *Christianity in Culture* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1980), pp. 45-48.

19. E. Adamson Hoebel and Thomas Weaver, *Anthropology and the Human Experience*, 5th ed. (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1979), p. 279.

20. Kenneth Little, "The Role of Voluntary Associations in West African Urbanization," in *Anthropology for the Eighties*, ed. Johnnetta B. Cole (New York: The Free Press, 1982), p. 178-179.

21. As quoted by Michael S. Hamilton, "The Dissatisfaction of Francis Schaeffer," *Christianity Today* (3 March, 1997), p. 30.

22. In a chapter entitled, "A Jury of Their Peers: Changes in the Agents of Character Formation," David Reisman discusses this process at some length. *The Lonely Crowd*, pp. 66-82.

23. Samuel Escobar, "Solicited Comments" in Frederick W. Norris, "The Social Status of Early Christianity," *Gospel in Context*, pp.15-16. I have focused my response to HUP critics largely on the forceful and well articulated criticisms of Escobar. They are quite representative of other HUP critics.

24. Ibid.

25. Ibid.

26. Donald A. McGavran, *Understanding Church Growth* , pp. 24, 75, 318.
27. Ibid., p7.
28. Samuel Escobar, "Solicited Comments" in Frederick W. Norris, "The Social Status of Early Christianity," p.15.
29. Ibid., p. 16.
30. Ibid.
31. Donald A. McGavran, *Understanding Church Growth* , pp. 25, 330-333
32. Ibid., p.26.
33. Those who have read E.J. Carnell's *Christian Commitment* (New York: The Macmillan Company, 1957) will recognize his mental constructs of "The Circle of Nearness" and "The Judicial Sentiment" as functional parallels to the HUP.