THE $H$-PROBLEM AND THE STRUCTURE OF $H$-GROUPS

DANIEL R. HUGHES AND JOHN GRIGGS THOMPSON
**THE $H_p$-PROBLEM AND THE STRUCTURE OF $H_p$-GROUPS**

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1. **Introduction.** Let $G$ be a group, $p$ a prime, and $H_p(G)$ the subgroup of $G$ generated by the elements of $G$ which do not have order $p$. In a research problem in the Bulletin of the American Mathematical Society, one of the authors posed the following problem: is it always true that $H_p(G) = 1$, $H_p(G) = G$, or $[G : H_p(G)] = p$? This problem is easily settled in the affirmative for $p = 2$, and a similar answer was recently given for $p = 3$ ([5]). In this paper (Section 2) we give an affirmative answer for the case that $G$ is finite and not a $p$-group. Furthermore (Section 3) we are able to give a rather precise description of the structure of $G$ in the most interesting case, when $[G : H_p(G)] = p$. This structure theorem depends heavily on the deep results of Hall and Higman ([4]) and Thompson ([6]) on finite groups. If $H (\neq 1)$ is a finite group and there exists a group $G$ such that $H_p(G)$ is isomorphic to $H$, where $H_p(G) \neq G$, then we call $H$ an $H_p$-group; it is seen that $H_p$-groups are natural generalizations of "Frobenius groups." By a Frobenius group we mean a finite group $G$ possessing an automorphism $\sigma$ of prime order $p$ such that $x^\sigma = x$ if and only if $x = 1$. It is easy to show that this implies

$$x^{1+\sigma+\cdots+\sigma^{p-1}} = x(x^\sigma) \cdots (x^{\sigma^{p-1}}) = 1,$$

for all $x$ in $G$. This last equation characterizes $H_p$-groups, and as a generalization of Thompson's result ([6]) that Frobenius groups are nilpotent, we show that $H_p$-groups are solvable, among other things.

Throughout the paper, if $B$ is a group, $A$ a subgroup of $B$, then $N_B(A)$ and $C_B(A)$ mean, respectively, the normalizer and centralizer of $A$ in $B$. By $Z(A)$ we mean the center of $A$.

2. **The $H_p$-problem.** Let $G$ be a group, and let $H = H_p(G)$. Suppose

(1) $G$ is finite,
(2) $G$ is not a $p$-group,
(3) the index of $H$ in $G$ is greater than $p$,
(4) $G$ is a group of minimal order satisfying (1), (2), (3). Note that every element of $G$ which is not in $H$ has order $p$.

Let $q$ be a prime dividing $[G : 1]$, $q \neq p$, and let $Q$ be a Sylow $q$-group of $G$; then $Q$ is also a Sylow $q$-group of $H$. Let $N = N_q(Q)$; then

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1 Unless the group is a $p$-group; see Theorem 2.
by the Frattini argument (see [1], p. 117, for instance), \( G = NH \). Thus
\[ [G : 1] = [NH : 1] = [N : 1][H : 1]/[N \cap H : 1]. \]

First, let us suppose \( N \neq G \). Then clearly \( H_p(N) \subseteq H_p(G) \), so
\( H_p(N) \subseteq H \cap N \). Since \( Q \subseteq H_p(N) \), it follows that \( H_p(N) \neq 1 \), so
\[ [N : H_p(N)] \leq p, \]
and hence \( [N : N \cap H] \leq p \). So \( p^2 = [G : H] = [G : 1]/[H : 1] = [N : 1]/[N \cap H : 1] = [N : N \cap H] \leq p \). This is impossible, so we must have \( N = G \), and thus \( Q \) is normal in \( G \).

Now let \( Q_1 (\neq 1) \) be any subgroup of \( Q \), normal in \( G \), and consider \( G/Q_1 \). Clearly \( H_p(G/Q_1) = 1 \) or \( H_p(G/Q_1) \) has index \( p \) in \( G/Q_1 \), unless \( Q_1 \) is a \( p \)-group. Indeed, it is obvious that \( \langle \text{Frattini subgroup of } Q \rangle \) is characteristic in \( Q \). Since \( Q_1 \neq Q \), \( G/Q_1 \) cannot be a \( p \)-group, so we must have \( Q_1 = 1 \). Thus \( Q \) is elementary abelian. Since \( G/Q \) is a \( p \)-group, it is clear that \( G = PQ \), and the rest of the lemma follows similarly.

In what follows, \( P \) is a Sylow \( p \)-group of \( G \) and \( P_0 \subseteq P \) is a Sylow \( p \)-group of \( H \); clearly \( [P : P_0] = p^2 \) and \( P_0 \) is normal in \( P \), since \( P_0 = P \cap H \).

If \( x (\neq 1) \) is in \( Q \), while \( a \) is in \( G \), not in \( H \), and if \( ax = xa \), then \( ax \) has order \( pq \). But \( ax \) is not in \( H \), since \( a \) is not in \( H \), and thus \( ax \) has order \( p \); hence \( ax \neq xa \). If \( P_0 = 1 \), then \( P \), of order \( p^2 \), is an automorphism group of \( H = Q \) such that no non-identity element of \( P \) fixes any non-identity element of \( Q \). But by ([2], pp. 334–335) this means that \( P \) is cyclic, whereas \( P \) is clearly elementary abelian in this case (for all its elements have order \( p \)). So \( P_0 \neq 1 \).

Since \( P_0 \) is normal in \( P \), \( P_0 \cap Z(P) \neq 1 \) (see [3], p. 35, for instance). Let \( z \) be an element of \( P_0 \cap Z(P) \), chosen to have order \( p \), and let \( Z_0 \) be the subgroup (of order \( p \)) generated by \( z \); note that \( z \) and \( Z_0 \) are contained in \( H \). Let \( K = Z_0Q \), and observe that \( [K : 1] = p[Q : 1] \). Let \( a \) be an element of \( G \), not in \( H \), and \( G_1 = \langle a, K \rangle \) = the group generated by \( a \) and \( K \). Then \( Q \subseteq H_p(G_1) \subseteq H \cap G_1 \neq G_1 \), so \( [G_1 : H_p(G_1)] = p \), by induction. Hence \( Z_0 \subseteq K \subseteq H_p(G_1) \), so there must be an element \( y \) in \( K \) of order \( pq \). Then \( y^a \) is in \( Q \) and \( y^a \) is in \( x^{-1}Z_0x \), for some \( x \) in \( K \), since \( Z_0 \) is a Sylow \( p \)-group of \( K \). By adjusting our choice of \( P \), we can assume that \( y^a \) is in \( Z_0 \); let \( u = y^v \), \( v = y^a \). Then \( u \neq 1 \), \( v \neq 1 \), \( u \) is in \( Q \), \( v \) is in \( Z_0 \), and \( uv = vu \). So if \( Q_1 = \{u\} \), we have \( Z_0 \subseteq C_0(Q_1) \). But then \( x^{-1}Z_0x \subseteq C_0(x^{-1}Q_1x) \), and if \( x \) is in \( P \), this implies \( Z_0 \subseteq C_0(x^{-1}Q_1x) \), for all \( x \) in \( P \). But, from Lemma 1, the subgroup generated by all

\[ \text{LEMMA 1. If } [G : H] = p^2, \text{ then } Q \text{ is an elementary abelian } p\text{-group, none of whose proper subgroups (}\neq 1\text{) is normal in } G, \text{ then } Q \text{ is normal in } G, \text{ and } G = PQ, \text{ where } P \text{ is a Sylow } p\text{-group of } G. \]

\[ \text{Proof. We have shown that } Q \text{ is normal. If } Q_1 \text{ above is taken to be the Frattini subgroup of } Q, \text{ then } Q_1 \text{ is normal in } G, \text{ since it is characteristic in } Q. \text{ Since } Q_1 \neq Q, G/Q_1 \text{ cannot be a } p\text{-group, so we must have } Q_1 = 1. \text{ Thus } Q \text{ is elementary abelian. Since } G/Q \text{ is a } p\text{-group, it is clear that } G = PQ, \text{ and the rest of the lemma follows similarly.} \]

In what follows, \( P \) is a Sylow \( p \)-group of \( G \) and \( P_0 \subseteq P \) is a Sylow \( p \)-group of \( H \); clearly \( [P : P_0] = p^2 \) and \( P_0 \) is normal in \( P \), since \( P_0 = P \cap H \).

If \( x (\neq 1) \) is in \( Q \), while \( a \) is in \( G \), not in \( H \), and if \( ax = xa \), then \( ax \) has order \( pq \). But \( ax \) is not in \( H \), since \( a \) is not in \( H \), and thus \( ax \) has order \( p \); hence \( ax \neq xa \). If \( P_0 = 1 \), then \( P \), of order \( p^2 \), is an automorphism group of \( H = Q \) such that no non-identity element of \( P \) fixes any non-identity element of \( Q \). But by ([2], pp. 334–335) this means that \( P \) is cyclic, whereas \( P \) is clearly elementary abelian in this case (for all its elements have order \( p \)). So \( P_0 \neq 1 \).

Since \( P_0 \) is normal in \( P \), \( P_0 \cap Z(P) \neq 1 \) (see [3], p. 35, for instance). Let \( z \) be an element of \( P_0 \cap Z(P) \), chosen to have order \( p \), and let \( Z_0 \) be the subgroup (of order \( p \)) generated by \( z \); note that \( z \) and \( Z_0 \) are contained in \( H \). Let \( K = Z_0Q \), and observe that \( [K : 1] = p[Q : 1] \). Let \( a \) be an element of \( G \), not in \( H \), and \( G_1 = \langle a, K \rangle \) = the group generated by \( a \) and \( K \). Then \( Q \subseteq H_p(G_1) \subseteq H \cap G_1 \neq G_1 \), so \( [G_1 : H_p(G_1)] = p \), by induction. Hence \( Z_0 \subseteq K \subseteq H_p(G_1) \), so there must be an element \( y \) in \( K \) of order \( pq \). Then \( y^a \) is in \( Q \) and \( y^a \) is in \( x^{-1}Z_0x \), for some \( x \) in \( K \), since \( Z_0 \) is a Sylow \( p \)-group of \( K \). By adjusting our choice of \( P \), we can assume that \( y^a \) is in \( Z_0 \); let \( u = y^v \), \( v = y^a \). Then \( u \neq 1 \), \( v \neq 1 \), \( u \) is in \( Q \), \( v \) is in \( Z_0 \), and \( uv = vu \). So if \( Q_1 = \{u\} \), we have \( Z_0 \subseteq C_0(Q_1) \). But then \( x^{-1}Z_0x \subseteq C_0(x^{-1}Q_1x) \), and if \( x \) is in \( P \), this implies \( Z_0 \subseteq C_0(x^{-1}Q_1x) \), for all \( x \) in \( P \). But, from Lemma 1, the subgroup generated by all
$x^{-1}Q_ix$, as $x$ ranges over $P$, must be $Q$, and so $Z_0 \subseteq C_o(Q)$. Since $Z_0$ is in the center of $P$, it follows that $Z_0$ is normal in $G$, so we consider $G/Z_0$. One easily sees that $H_p(G/Z_0) \subseteq H/Z_0$, and $H_p(G/Z_0)$ equals neither 1 nor $G/Z_0$. Hence $p^2 = [G : H] = [G/Z_0 : H/Z_0] \leq [G/Z_0 : H_p(G/Z_0)] = p$, which is a contradiction. So:

**Theorem 1.** If $H_p(G) \neq 1$ or $G$, and if $G$ is finite and not a $p$-group, then $[G : H_p(G)] = p$.

If $G$ is a $p$-group, or is infinite, the situation seems more inaccessible; as remarked earlier, Theorem 1 still holds if $p = 2$ or 3, no matter what $G$ is. But the proof for $p = 3$ (see [5]) utilizes the Burnside theorem (for $p = 3$) and this strongly suggests that the infinite case at least is considerably harder.

3. **Structure of $H_p$-groups.** Let us suppose that $G$ is a finite group, and that $H = H_p(G)$ has index $p$ in $G$. Then we say that $H$ is an $H_p$-group.

**Theorem 2.** If $H$ is not a $p$-group, then $H$ is an $H_p$-group if and only if $H$ has an automorphism $\sigma$ of order $p$ such that

$$x^{1 + \sigma + \cdots + \sigma^{p-1}} = 1,$$

for all $x$ in $H$.

*Proof.* If $H = H_p(G)$, let $a$ be in $G$, $a$ not in $H$, and define $x^\sigma = a^{-1}xa$, for $x$ in $H$. Since $(ax)^p = 1$, while $(ax)^p = a^p(x)(x^\sigma) \cdots (x^{\sigma^{p-1}})$, the equation of the theorem follows immediately.

Conversely, if $\sigma$ exists satisfying the hypotheses of the theorem, then let $G$ be the holomorph of $H$ by the automorphism group $\{\sigma\}$. It is easy to see that $H_p(G) \subseteq H$. Since $H_p(G) \neq 1$ (for $H$ is not a $p$-group), it follows that $[G : H_p(G)] = p$, from Theorem 1, so $H_p(G) = H$.

Note that if $x^\sigma = x$, then the equation of Theorem 2 implies $x^p = 1$. So if $p$ does not divide the order of the $H_p$-group $H$, then $H$ is even a Frobenius group, and so is nilpotent ([6]).

**Theorem 3.** If $H$ is an $H_p$-group, then $H = PK$, where $P$ is a Sylow $p$-group of $H$, $K$ is normal in $H$ and is nilpotent, and $P \cap K = 1$. In particular, $H$ is solvable.

*Proof.* We can assume that $P \neq 1$, and that $H$ is not a $p$-group. Inductively, suppose the theorem is true for all $H_p$-groups whose order is less than the order of $H$, and (using Theorem 2) let $\gamma$ be an automorphism of $H$, of order $p$, such that

$$x^{1 + \gamma + \cdots + \gamma^{p-1}} = 1,$$ all $x$ in $H$. 

If \( A \) is a \( \gamma \)-invariant subgroup of \( H \), then \( A \) is an \( H_p \)-group or is a \( p \)-group, while if \( B \) is a \( \gamma \)-invariant normal subgroup of \( H \), then \( H/B \) is an \( H_p \)-group or is a \( p \)-group.

Now let \( B \) be any \( \gamma \)-invariant subgroup of \( P \), \( B \) normal in \( P \), \( B \neq 1 \); let \( N = N_{\gamma}(B) \). If \( N = H \), then \( H/B \) is an \( H_p \)-group, so \( H/B = (P/B)(K_1/B) \), where \( K_1/B \) is normal in \( H/B \) and is nilpotent. So \( K_1 \) is normal in \( H \) and since \( K_1/B \) is \( \gamma \)-invariant in \( H/B \), so is \( K_1 \) \( \gamma \)-invariant in \( H \). So \( K_1 \) is an \( H_p \)-group. If \( K_1 \neq H \), then \( K_1 = BK \), where \( K \) is normal in \( K_1 \) and is nilpotent, and \( K \cap B = 1 \). But then \( K \) is characteristic in \( K_1 \), hence is normal in \( H \); every Sylow \( q \)-group of \( H \), \( q \neq p \), is in \( K \). So \( K \) is characteristic in \( H \) and clearly \( H = PK \), \( P \cap K = 1 \).

If \( K_1 = H \) for every such \( B \), then \( B = P \) is the only \( \gamma \)-invariant normal subgroup of \( P \), other than \( 1 \). Hence in particular \( P \) is elementary abelian. Then \( H/P \) is an \( H_p \)-group, and even a Frobenius group, so is nilpotent. Furthermore (since \( H \) is then solvable), \( H = PK \), where \( K \) is isomorphic to \( H/P \). Let \( K = Q_1Q_2 \cdots Q_t \), where \( Q_i \) is a Sylow \( q_i \)-group of \( K \) (and of \( H \)) for distinct primes \( q_1, q_2, \ldots, q_t \).

Now let \( G \) be the holomorph of \( H \) with the group \( \{ \gamma \} \). Then, by the Frattini argument, \( N_0(Q_1) \cap H \neq N_0(Q_i) \), so by an appropriate choice of \( \gamma_i \) in \( G \), \( \gamma_i \) not in \( H \), we can assume that \( Q_i \) is \( \gamma_i \)-invariant. Thus \( PQ_i \) is \( \gamma_i \)-invariant and so it is an \( H_p \)-group (it is straightforward to check that any element of \( G \), not in \( H \), can play the role of \( \gamma \)).

If \( t > 1 \), then \( PQ_i \) has order smaller than \( H \), so \( Q_i \) is normal in \( PQ_i \). Thus both \( P \) and \( K \) are contained in \( N_{\gamma}(Q_1) \), so \( Q_i \) is normal in \( H \), hence \( K \), which is the direct product of the \( Q_i \), is normal in \( H \), so we are done.

If \( t = 1 \), let \( Q = Q_1 \), and as above, choose \( \gamma \) in \( G \), not in \( H \), so that \( Q \) is \( \gamma \)-invariant. If \( Q_0 \neq 1 \) is a \( \gamma \)-invariant normal subgroup of \( Q \), then \( PQ_0 \) is an \( H_p \)-group, smaller than \( H = PQ \) if \( Q_0 \neq Q \); thus \( P \) normalizes \( Q_0 \), so \( Q_0 \) is normal in \( H \). Then by considering \( H/Q_0 \), we find that \( Q/Q_0 \) is normal in \( H \), and again we are done. Thus we can assume that \( Q \) is elementary abelian with only trivial \( \gamma \)-invariant normal subgroups.

Now we consider the holomorph \( G \) again. The maximal normal \( p \)-group of \( G \) is \( P \), since \( \{ \gamma \} \) (as part of \( G \)) is not normalized modulo \( P \) by \( Q \). Then \( G/P \) is a solvable (and in particular, \( p \)-solvable) group of automorphisms of the elementary abelian group \( P \), and \( G/P \) has no normal \( p \)-group \( (\neq 1) \). Furthermore, this representation of \( G/P \) as a linear transformation group on \( P \) is faithful, since \( C_\gamma(P) \cap Q = 1 \) (otherwise \( C_\gamma(P) \cap Q \) would be a non-trivial \( \gamma \)-invariant normal subgroup of \( Q \)). Thus we can utilize Theorem B of Hall and Higman ([4]); since \( Q \) is abelian, Theorem B asserts that \( \gamma \), as a linear transformation of \( P \), has the minimal

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2 In these references to the holomorph \( G \), we are not making a distinction between an element as an automorphism of \( H \) and as an element of \( G \); the automorphism is actually identified with an element of \( G \) which induces the prescribed automorphism in \( H \).
polynomial \((x - 1)^p\). But in fact, \(\gamma\) has a minimal polynomial which divides \(1 + x + \cdots + x^{p-1}\), since

\[ b^{i+\gamma+\cdots+\gamma^{p-1}} = 1, \]

for all \(b\) in \(P\). Thus we have a contradiction, and so \(Q\) is normal in \(H\), and we are done.

Now we must consider the case that if \(B \neq 1\) is any \(\gamma\)-invariant subgroup of \(P\), normal in \(P\), then \(N = N_H(B)\) is never equal to \(H\). Hence \(N\), being \(\gamma\)-invariant, is an \(H_p\)-group or is a \(p\)-group, so \(N = P_1K_1\), where \(P_1\) is a Sylow \(p\)-group of \(N\), \(K_1\) is normal in \(N\) and is nilpotent, and \(K_1 \cap P_1 = 1\). Since \(B\) is normal in \(N\), \(K_1\) is contained in \(C_N(B)\), and thus contained in \(C_H(B)\), so \(N_H(B)/C_H(B)\) is a \(p\)-group (i.e., is isomorphic to \(P/P_0\), for some subgroup \(P_0\) of \(P_1\)). But then, since this holds for all such \(B\), Thompson's theorem ([6]) asserts that \(P\) has a normal complement \(K\) in \(H\); i.e., \(H = PK\), where \(P \cap K = 1\) and \(K\) is normal in \(H\). Since \(K\) consists exactly of the elements of \(H\) whose order is prime to \(p\), \(K\) is characteristic. Thus \(K\) is an \(H_p\)-group (even a Frobenius group) and is nilpotent, so we are done.

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Heinz Otto Cordes, *On continuation of boundary values for partial differential operators* ......................................................... 987
Philip C. Curtis, Jr., *n-parameter families and best approximation* ........ 1013
Uri Fixman, *Problems in spectral operators* ..................................... 1029
I. S. Gál, *Uniformizable spaces with a unique structure* ................. 1053
John Mitchell Gary, *Higher dimensional cyclic elements* .................. 1061
Richard P. Gosselin, *On Diophantine approximation and trigonometric polynomials* ......................................................... 1071
Gilbert Helmberg, *Generating sets of elements in compact groups* .... 1083
Daniel R. Hughes and John Griggs Thompson, *The H-problem and the structure of H-groups* .................................................. 1097
James Patrick Jans, *Projective injective modules* ............................... 1103
Samuel Karlin and James L. McGregor, *Coincidence properties of birth and death processes* ......................................................... 1109
Samuel Karlin and James L. McGregor, *Coincidence probabilities* ...... 1141
J. L. Kelley, *Measures on Boolean algebras* ........................................ 1165
John G. Kemeny, *Generalized random variables* ............................... 1179
Donald G. Malm, *Concerning the cohomology ring of a sphere bundle* 1191
Marvin David Marcus and Benjamin Nelson Moyls, *Transformations on tensor product spaces* .................................................. 1215
Charles Alan McCarthy, *The nilpotent part of a spectral operator* ...... 1223
Kotaro Oikawa, *On a criterion for the weakness of an ideal boundary component* ............................................................. 1233
Barrett O’Neill, *An algebraic criterion for immersion* ......................... 1239
Murray Harold Protter, *Vibration of a nonhomogeneous membrane* ...... 1249
Victor Lenard Shapiro, *Intrinsic operators in three-space* .................. 1257
Morgan Ward, *Tests for primality based on Sylvester’s cyclotomic numbers* ................................................................. 1269
L. E. Ward, *A fixed point theorem for chained spaces* ....................... 1273
Alfred B. Willcox, *Šilov type C algebras over a connected locally compact abelian group* ......................................................... 1279
Jacob Feldman, *Correction to “Equivalence and perpendicularity of Gaussian processes”* ..................................................... 1295