What Is Meant By The Term Group Mentoring?

Jonathan Kroll

To cite this article: Jonathan Kroll (2016): What Is Meant By The Term Group Mentoring?, Mentoring & Tutoring: Partnership in Learning, DOI: 10.1080/13611267.2016.1165488

To link to this article: http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/13611267.2016.1165488

Published online: 26 Mar 2016.
What Is Meant By The Term Group Mentoring?

Jonathan Kroll
The Institute for Leadership and Training

Much like traditional dyadic mentoring experiences, group mentorship has been practiced since time immemorial. Benjamin Franklin, for example, as a young entrepreneur created the Leather Apron Club, a group mentoring experience for a select group of Philadelphia tradesmen. Since the late 1990s, when group mentoring became a serious focus of academic research, scholarship has focused primarily on the rationale for group mentoring and has explored the outcomes. As a community of scholars and practitioners, we have yet to fully explore or explain what we mean by group mentoring. In this article, I bring attention to, establish a foundation, and set appropriate parameters for group mentorship.

Keywords: group, group mentoring, mentorship, peer group

Much like traditional dyadic mentoring experiences, group mentorship has been practiced since time immemorial. As a developmental relationship, it has played a significant role in the learning and growth of individuals, the enhancement and productivity of organizations, and the evolution and progress of whole communities. Benjamin Franklin, for example, as a young entrepreneur created the Leather Apron Club, a group mentoring experience for a select group of Philadelphia tradesmen. Since the late 1990s, when group mentoring became a serious focus of academic research, scholarship has focused primarily on the rationale (e.g. Bona, Rinehart, & Volbrecht, 1995; Darwin, 2000; Mullen, 2009) for group mentoring and has explored the outcomes (e.g. Darwin & Palmer, 2009; Driscoll, Parkes, Tilley-Lubbs, Brill, & Pitts Bannister, 2009; Mitchell, 1999). As a community of scholars and practitioners, we have yet to fully explore or explain what we mean by group mentoring. In this article, I bring attention to, establish a foundation, and set appropriate parameters for group mentorship.

I begin this paper with a detailing of Benjamin Franklin’s Leather Apron Club as well as contemporary group mentoring experiences. These depictions serve to make tangible various accounts of group mentoring experiences. Following these representations, a section is included to detail research data highlighting outcomes from mentoring groups. I then review the group literature in order to appropriately create context and parameters to define group mentoring. Finally, a section is provided to demarcate group mentorship from dyadic mentoring.

Benjamin Franklin and The Leather Apron Club

Benjamin Franklin, the First American, (Brands, 2000) is widely regarded for his professional endeavors and inventions. Printer, postmaster, and politician are three such ways
he emerged to become the “best-known American” of his day (Lyons, 2013). His inventions solidified his legacy as one of the foremost fathers of the United States of America. Included in these inventions are the lightning rod, bifocals, and the Franklin stove. As talented and bright as he was, the often-neglected part of the story relates to his collaborative nature.

He saw such endeavors as primarily a collective pursuit rather than as the preserve of the solitary scientific genius, secreted away in his laboratory or hunched over his lonely workbench. Even his most famous contributions … were the products of teamwork and the free exchange of information, ideas, and observations. (Lyons, 2013, pp. 4–5)

Philadelphia, Pennsylvania in 1,727 was the fastest-growing city in all of the British settlements—a bustling urban environment of 51,000 colonists. It was on the verge of becoming the commercial, economic, and political power of the Thirteen Colonies—more culturally relevant and influential than the other dominant settlements of the New World (Lyons, 2013). This is the same year that Benjamin Franklin convened friends and colleagues to create a peer mentoring group named The Leather Apron Club. Much of Philadelphia’s emergence as a prominent colonial force is due to the work of Franklin and his collaborators.

This secretive society was comprised of men who donned leather aprons as part of their trade—artisans, craftsmen, and merchants. These middle-class entrepreneurs dreamed of a city that would better serve its populace and utilized this forum to realize those dreams. Also referred to as the Junto, these dozen men discussed issues of the day, debated philosophical topics, devised schemes for self-improvement, and developed a network that allowed for the furtherance of their own careers and tangible improvements to the city (Isaacson, 2003). The Leather Apron Club combined the “conviviality of a private drinking club with the advantages of a mutual-aid society, the moral and intellectual improvement of a discussion circle, and the altruism of a civic association” (Lyons, 2013, p. 46).

The Junto was not a casual social gathering. Under Franklin’s guidance the men met on a standard day every week, at a regular time, and in a specific location—the Indian King Tavern. A formal induction ceremony ensured new members understood the significance of participating. These inductees were required, while standing, to lay their hand upon their breast and answer four questions: Do you have any disrespect for any current member? Do you love mankind in general regardless of religion or profession? Do you feel people should ever be punished because of their opinions or mode of worship? And do you love and pursue truth for its own sake? (Isaacson, 2003).

During their gatherings, the members were encouraged to abide by several rules that would assist the participants in creating a fruitful and engaging experience. These included conversation techniques such as no prying for personal secrets, seeming uninterested, intentionally contradicting others, or spreading scandal. It was also emphasized that each participant should limit their talking as a way to include others in the dialog (Isaacson, 2003). Keeping the Junto secretive was another obligation of the members. Doing so ensured the collaborations yielded and advanced projects, enhanced personal and professional development, and reduced unwanted solicitations from outsiders (Lyons, 2013). Less a rule, but of equal importance, were the questions utilized to guide the weekly dialog. It was expected that the dozen collaborators reviewed the 24 guiding questions the morning of their gatherings. Such questions included: Hath any citizen in
your knowledge failed in his business lately, and what have you heard of the cause? Have you lately heard of any citizen’s thriving well, and by what means? Has anybody attacked your reputation lately, and what can the Junto do toward securing it (Isaacson, 2003)?

The weekly Leather Apron Club gatherings provided a forum for dialog that supported the personal growth and professional advancement of the members. Franklin, in his personal invitation, shared that the rules for participation required every member “to produce one or more queries on any point of morals, politics, or natural philosophy, to be discussed by the company” (Lyons, 2013, p. 47). Additionally, each collaborator drafted original papers once every three months. Although these occasions were filled with laughter and joy, it was also an intentional space for participants to engage in inner work and to collaborate on ways in which to pursue initiatives for social impact. Such efforts contributed to city building and other forms of innovation.

The Junto, as a mutually supportive experience, was a safe space for ideas to simmer and initiatives to unfold. The reflective space for dialog and relationship-building established an important holding environment. These gatherings resulted in each member engaging in personal growth and professional learning opportunities. Stimulated by Franklin, a particular method was encouraged—the utilization of soft Socratic queries which guided the developmental and democratic dialog. Suggestions and questions were utilized rather than debate or dictatorial responses (Isaacson, 2003). This allowed for each member to pause, enter into a reflective space, forge their own knowledge, engage with their peers, and then author their own decisions.

Over time, these gatherings fostered the development of deep and committed relationships with the others. For example, Thomas Godfrey and his wife boarded in Franklin’s shop when in need. Thomas Grace and William Coleman, two other Junto members, provided financial assistance when Franklin split with his original business partner Hugh Meredith. As a group, these individuals pooled their resources, funds, and other commodities to advance the Leather Apron Club’s civic projects.

The Leather Apron Club served as a crux for social change. A multitude of civic improvements rooted in “social utility” and social improvement were devised within the gatherings. Some of the crowning achievements include the establishment of paper currency, a system for regular road repair, and consistent street cleaning. A volunteer fire company, city hospital, educational academy (which would become the University of Pennsylvania), and the first subscription library all were the direct result of these mentoring gatherings (Lyons, 2013).

The Junto was a product of Franklin’s own persona and part of his imprint on the American personality … Like Franklin himself, it was practical, industrious, inquiring, convivial, and middlebrow philosophical. It celebrated civic virtue, mutual benefits, the improvements of self and society, and the proposition that hardworking citizens could do well by doing good … It was, in short, Franklin writ public. (Isaacson, 2003, p. 60)

Benjamin Franklin’s Leather Apron Club is a historical account of group mentoring. In the next section, I provide an overview of the core philosophical underpinnings of group mentoring as well as illuminate contemporary experiences of mentorship groups.
Contemporary Experiences of Group Mentoring

Group mentorship, as an alternative to traditional dyadic (one to one) mentoring, is a fairly recent addition to scholarly discourse—only since the late 1990s. As a constructivist approach to mentorship (McGowan, Stone, & Kegan, 2007; Millwater & Yarrow, 1997), these developmental relationships are built upon an intentional focus on social justice, the distribution of power and authority, and the flattening of hierarchy (Mullen, 2005). These contemporary experiences include, yet expand upon many of the principles found in the Leather Apron Club.

Contemporary Values of Group Mentoring in Relation to the Leather Apron Club

Group mentoring is a mentorship experience that is intentionally inclusive. As a measure of justice, those who have traditionally been barred from participating in mentoring experiences are purposefully included. In much of Colonial America, there was a strict division between the wealthy and everyone else—the middle class was only beginning to emerge. This rigid social division clearly demarcated the “gentlemen” from the “plebes” (Lyons, 2013). As men who were excluded from the social elite’s private social clubs, Benjamin Franklin and the other Leather Apron Club members—all enterprising tradesmen—created an experience where they could advocate for themselves—marginalized members of the community. Furthermore, this group mentoring experience provided a forum for the men to collectively work towards issues of justice and well-being for many underserved in and around Philadelphia.

The Leather Apron Club served as a medium to bring about real, tangible, and social changes. The first subscription library referenced above is a prime example. This library, founded in 1,731 still operates in Philadelphia. Presently, The Library Company of Philadelphia, its formal name, is an independent research library specializing in American history and culture from the seventeenth through the nineteenth centuries. The Thirteen Colonies at the time were not known for having extensive volumes of texts or literature. Alone, it was near impossible for individuals to create substantial personal libraries—the expense was too great to import from overseas (The Library Company of Philadelphia, 2015). Yet, together, by pooling their resources, the Leather Apron Club collaborators, along with others (50 initial subscribers) ensured the creation of a library was possible.

Originally established as a way to expand learning opportunities for the civic community, the library flourished due to an intentional purchasing policy—one which was responsive to the needs of the intellectually alert, economically ambitious, but non-elite membership (The Library Company, 2015). It served as a model—with similarly structured libraries up and down the east coast. Franklin commented on his and other libraries at the time by noting they, “have improved the general conversation of Americans” as well as “made the common tradesmen and farmers as intelligent as most Gentlemen from other countries” (The Library Company, 2015, p. 2).

A group approach to mentorship is power-distributed; authority is shared and every member of the group has leadership and mentoring responsibilities. Although organized and initiated by Benjamin Franklin, this was intentionally devised as a collective operation. He relinquished control so that the rules and expectations would be co-constructed. One such rule emphasized that Club members should limit their talking. Doing so allowed for others to be included in the dialog. This practice reinforced the notion that
within this mentoring space, every member was encouraged to share their vision for and voice within the group.

Additionally, group mentoring models dislocate hierarchy; all participants, regardless of role in the organization or stature within the community, are seen as valued and valuable contributors to the development of others. Within the Leather Apron Club, this manifested via the drafting of original papers. Every mentoring collaborator was expected to deliver an original essay once every three months. Furthermore, it was expected that each individual “produce one ore more queries on any point of morals, politics, or natural philosophy, to be discussed by the company” (Lyons, 2013, p. 47). Length of time in the Club, financial status, and social standing were extraneous. All members were worthy contributors to the learning, growth, and development of the others—and well-regarded collaborators on the variety of projects undertaken by the Leather Apron Club.

Varieties of Group Mentoring Structures

In the twenty-first century, this alternative model of mentoring—group mentorship—is experienced in a variety of ways. In practice, group mentoring is differentiated from the more traditional model by a combination of group structure and defined roles of the participants. Four typologies have been identified (Huizing, 2012). These include one-to-many, many-to-one, many-to-many, and the most popular form, peer group mentoring.

One-to-many and many-to-one mentoring relationships are considered facilitated group mentoring wherein a selected mentor (or mentors) with greater experience or knowledge facilitates the mentorship experience (Zachary, 2014). Many-to-many is synonymous with Zachary’s (2014) team mentoring approach. In this construct, participants serve in distinct roles (i.e. mentor or mentee), while engaging as a group of mentors and mentees.

Peer group mentoring is designed as a group-directed and group-managed mentoring experience. Regardless of age, professional title or responsibilities, and life experiences, individual participants oscillate between mentoring roles. Each individual serves as mentor as well as mentee to their mentoring collaborators. In this structure, all members, through their challenge and support, provide value for the others. Furthermore, learning occurs through dialog and social interaction (Heikkinen, Jokinen, & Tynjala, 2012) rather than a banking model (Freire, 1970/2002) of knowledge transfer where mentors deposit information onto mentees.

The awareness of peerness is the basis for peer group mentoring processes (SunWolf, 2008). This notion of sameness or being in a similar situation is intentionally broad. “Group members must consider one another equals in at least one particular element which can be shared within the peer group” (Skaniakos, Penttinen, & Lairio, 2014, p. 76). These elements may include, but are not limited to, age, background, or professional work experiences. For example, a similar situation might refer to a collection of faculty members from a particular institution even though the group members have a wide range of teaching experience, age, or subject matter interests.

Group Mentoring: Identified by Many Names

Collective mentorship experiences have been identified varyingly: Co-mentoring (Bona et al., 1995); mentoring communities (Daloz Parks, 2000); collaborative mentoring (Mullen, 2000); and mentoring circles (Darwin, 2000). Regardless of name or identifier,
group mentoring experiences are such that every participant serves as a sponsor, advocate, or guide—and teaches, advises, trusts, critiques, and supports others to express, pursue, and finalize goals (Lick, 2006). Synergistic relationships and energizing experiences are created and sustained when individuals engage in concert with others (Mullen, 1999). Regardless of how they are implemented or which form they take, group mentorship experiences are complex learning processes. Below are descriptions of several such experiences.

**Co-mentoring.** Co-mentoring was initially developed as a response to the male-dominated hierarchical nature of mentoring (Bona et al., 1995). The derivation of mentorship and traditional usage indicate a presumption of hierarchy where the mentor leads and the mentee follows. “Co-mentoring gives a name to supportive assistance provided by several connected individuals” (Bona et al., 1995, p. 5). When co is placed intentionally before mentoring, the relationship is reconstructed as nonhierarchical. The co establishes the mentoring relationship as reciprocal and mutual; its placement invites the participants to share responsibilities as mentors and mentees. “It does not, however, remove the elements of counseling, modeling, and teaching preserved in the term mentoring” (Bona et al., 1995, p. 5).

Co-mentoring is thus not a method, but a relationship. It is a way of being together—a developmental experience in which a safe space for vulnerability is created (Southern, 2007). Co-mentoring is an intentional developmental relationship where mentoring collaborators act as teachers and counselors for one another—they agree to mentor each other (Lick, 2006). It differs significantly from the traditional androcentric conception of mentoring—that is, centered upon the experiences of men, hierarchical in nature, and grounded in knowledge and power differences (Bona et al., 1995).

**Mentoring community.** Speaking specifically about young adults, Daloz Parks (2000) expressed the importance of a mentoring community. She articulated that if professions, organizations, corporations, and societies are invested in the future—in what they could become—only a mentoring community will suffice:

> Because we are social beings, if each new generation is to contribute to the ongoing creation and renewal of life and culture, young adults need more than to be challenged individually … Ideas and possibilities take hold in the imagination of the young adult in the most profound ways when he or she is met by more than a mentor alone – by a mentoring community. (p. 134)

Mentoring communities are built upon recognition, support, challenge, and inspiration. It is this type of mentoring experience that distinctively honors and animates the lives of young adults. More so, a mentoring community nourishes “the renewal of culture for the common good” (Daloz Parks, 2000, p. 135). This type of group mentoring experience is formed when a number of strategic influences coalesce into a safe space for both internal examination and outward action. This space is branded as a network-of-belonging which includes mentors, friends, and colleagues.

This network-of-belonging serves as a holding environment. The holding environment is designed to encourage reflective exploration into questions of depth and
significance as well as intentional encounters—potentially uncomfortable—with otherness. This inner exploration encourages healthy habits-of-mind (i.e. norms of inclusion and discourse that include dialog, critical thinking, connective-holistic awareness, and the contemplative mind) and access to images which provoke rumination upon the images and the pursuit of worthy dreams (Daloz Parks, 2000).

A mentoring community is one in which individuals have complementary strengths and perspectives as well as common challenges and hopes. Members partner with one another and assist each other in growth and development. The mentorship community is one where participants are drawn into a larger, systemic awareness where they see themselves in relation to their particular community and the global commons as a whole (Parks Daloz, Keen, Keen, & Daloz Parks, 1996).

**Collaborative mentoring.** Collaborative mentoring was utilized to describe a group mentoring experience between school and university professionals (Mullen, 2000). The Partnership Support Group (PSG) was devised to generate closer ties between individuals at The Florida State University School and Florida State University. Seventeen participants, drawn from teachers, professors, administrators, librarians, doctoral students, and therapists, gathered biweekly to explore mentorship in theory and practice.

The project identified two goals: (a) To experiment with group mentoring as a vehicle for strengthening the relationship between the University and the School, and (b) to create a forum where participants could be encouraged, assisted, and supported in pursuing their own individual studies of mentoring. Their yearlong exploration resulted in the publication of Mullen and Lick’s (1999) *New Directions in Mentoring: Creating a Culture of Synergy* text, where each chapter includes participants’ accounts of their experiences. They wrote about their discovery regarding of new forms of mentoring, learning, identity, community, and expression (Mullen, 1999).

The collaborative mentoring model allows for new possibilities in human relationships and institutional change. Mullen (2000) suggested that collaborative mentoring serves as a stimulus for change through the development of synergistic relationships and organizational structures. Similar to the two types of groups described above, collaborative mentoring promotes a counter-culture to traditional mentorship—one that is opposed to the prevailing institutional practices of separation and exploitation (Mullen, 2000). Mentoring in this way is “a catalyst for changing traditional practices, hierarchical systems, and homogeneous cultures that result in stagnation. Co-mentoring values diversity in such areas as ethnicity, gender, status, age, ability, learning style” (Mullen, 2000, p. 5).

**Mentoring circles.** Mentoring circles are group mentorship experiences rooted in co-learning that encourages authentic dialog and power-sharing across cultures, genders, and hierarchical levels (Darwin, 2000). Within mentorship circles, the group members share experiences, challenges, and opportunities for the purpose of creating solutions (Darwin & Palmer, 2009). Within a circle, each mentoring collaborator has the opportunity to develop multiple developmental relationships characterized by reciprocity, mutuality, and trust (Murphy & Kram, 2014).

The circle concept is a group mentoring structure that encourages multiple experiences and diverse perspectives that go above and beyond what any one participant could
contribute. This group approach to mentoring has been recently popularized by LeanIn.org, a nonprofit organization established after the popular book of the same name, Lean In (Sandberg, 2013). The online platform serves as a clearinghouse for women to create or join a mentoring group dedicated towards mutual learning and growth through the power of peer support.

George and Baker (2011) wrote of their mentoring circle—naming it a True North Group. Although theirs involved single-gender participants (all male), they advocate for mixed-gender mentoring groups as well as mentoring circles for women. Regardless of group composition, they describe these developmental experiences as an opportunity for individuals to meet regularly with the intention of engaging in deep, intimate dialog. True North Groups provide a forum for the sharing of challenges and the discussing of important questions in the lives of the mentoring collaborators.

Advantages of mentoring circles, in general, include access to networks, reductions in feelings of isolation, greater connectivity, increased confidence and commitment, career progression, knowledge acquisition, and better understanding of the organizational culture (Darwin, 2000). And for organizations, these types of group-based developmental relationships engender diversities-of-opinion as well as expertise and relationship-building that can better serve a constantly changing workplace (Darwin & Palmer, 2009).

**Group Mentorship Experience Outcomes**

Group mentoring has resulted in participants successfully moving from solitary work to collaborative work, seeing oneself as valuable and valued, and developing an understanding of self, other, and environment (Driscoll et al., 2009); gaining access to networks, reduction in feelings of isolation, greater connectivity, increased confidence and commitment, career progression, and knowledge acquisition (Darwin & Palmer, 2009); and feeling supported, effectively generating new ideas, and resolving problems (Mitchell, 1999). The following examples highlight the impact group mentoring experiences.

In one such autoethnographic study, the positive benefits for five aspiring women scholars were revealed (Driscoll et al., 2009). These collaborative peer mentors investigated their reflective narratives about the group mentorship experience both individually and collectively. These reflective narratives revealed three important areas-of-impact. The peer mentoring collaborators learned to mentor one another as trusted and valued peers; they moved from solitary work to collaborative work; and they each developed an understanding of self, other, and environment. In their own words, “we each found a way to pursue tenure in a more positive way, recognizing that we are valuable and valued aspiring scholars who bring our gifts of research, scholarship, teaching, and service to the university” (Driscoll et al., 2009, p. 18).

The mentorship circle experience previously referenced is another example of peer group mentoring (Darwin & Palmer, 2009). Faculty member participants (n = 20) gathered together for eight two-hour blocks during their six-month mentorship immersion. These mentorship circle participants completed a survey at the establishment and conclusion of the six months and engaged in focus groups to explore issues raised in the surveys at the close of the six months. Furthermore, two of the three mentorship circles opted to continue in the mentorship experience. The advantages associated with the mentorship circle included gaining access to networks, reduction in feelings of isolation, greater connectivity, increased confidence and commitment, career progression, and knowledge acquisition.
In New Zealand, a women’s professional networking organization utilized group mentoring as a relationship building and professional development tool (Mitchell, 1999). The 31 women were comprised of corporate officers, small business owners, and self-employed women working from home. These women found the mentorship experience meaningful and beneficial. The range of opinions, advice, input, and perspectives were valued. These women also commented on the strong sense of support they felt from participating in the group and noticed an increase in self-confidence due to the blending of mentoring roles (mentor and mentee). Finally, it was recognized that a good facilitator was critical to the success of the group.

A final example highlights the experiences of one dozen executive-level professional women in an American mid-west city (Kroll, 2015). These women, representing four autonomous groups, meet monthly for 60–90 min. Some of the groups have been gathering for four years and have no intention to stop.

Narrative interviews were utilized to elucidate their stories of experience. One of the women was quoted as sharing, “We try to help each other know ourselves not just solve our problems … It is more about how do we make ourselves better people so that we can lead better” (Kroll, 2015, p. 184). Other research participants describe their group mentoring experience as “extremely interesting and stimulating,” “truly warm and enriching,” and “life changing” (Kroll, 2015, p. 184). When provoked to describe further the life-changing nature of her group mentoring experience, this participant shared:

It’s helped me to build confidence. It’s helped me to get a better sense of my own value both within the workplace and outside of the workplace. I think it’s actually helped me to be a more generous person because I receive so much from being part of this group that I feel more compelled to give back to others. (Kroll, 2015, p. 184)

Summary of Group Mentoring

For millennia, group mentoring has resulted in significant positive outcomes for individuals and communities alike. Benjamin Franklin and his Leather Apron Club—a historical account—highlight the impact that this type of developmental experience can have as a mechanism for personal development, professional skills enhancement, and as a forum to dream about—and then act upon—projects for social utility. Contemporary examples detail the powerful outcomes for participants. Group mentoring has resulted in individuals seeing themselves as valuable and valued to others, gaining access to networks, increasing confidence levels, progressing in career, and having a deepened understanding of self.

Although this constructivist approach to mentoring experiences has been associated with many names (e.g. co-mentoring, mentoring communities, collaborative mentoring, and mentoring circles), these experiences are united by the same philosophical underpinnings. Group mentoring has an intentional focus on justice (e.g. intentionally including those who have historically been barred from participating—namely women and people of color), the distribution of power and authority so that leadership is shared, and the flattening of hierarchy which allows all participants—regardless of role or responsibilities within an organization or community—to be seen as valued and valuable to the mentoring experiences.
The study of group mentoring is a fairly recent phenomenon. *Group research*, though, has a much longer history. It is claimed that the study of groups began in 1895 with the publishing of manuscripts by two French sociologists (Levine & Moreland, 2012). Stimulated by the sight of street mobs in Paris, Gustave Le Bon and Emil Durkheim each published a group-focused text. Durkheim’s (1982) book, *The Rules of Sociological Method*, served as an introduction to the new field of sociology. *Social facts*—those values, structures, and phenomena that transcend the individual and establish norms for the social community—were described. Le Bon’s (2009) *The Crowd* explored what he called the collective mind. This *collective mind* influences individuals to act in unusual (typically unconscious) ways when engaged in groups. He attributed Paris’ mob behavior to this collective mind.

**Defining Groups**

Broadly speaking, groups can be recognized as two or more people (Williams, 2010). “Two or more people. The end. Everything else, shared past, anticipated future, interacting, communicating, cohesive, and so on, is where the action is” (Williams, 2010, p. 269). This broad definition is an important attempt at inclusivity. However, a definition of *two or more people* does not provide any clarity as to what a group is, leaving more questions than answers. When defining groups, a certain set of parameters is critical. These parameters create a context and structure, which in turn, enable scholars and practitioners to conceptualize—and then study—groups. *Place* and *temporality* are two such parameters—the location and time of the group engagements matter. A group, therefore, can be defined as two or more people who are in the same place at the same time (Herr, 1998). Although the individuals are in the same place at the same time, within this construct, they do not necessarily need to be interacting. As long as those group members occupy the same general space, they are considered a group. For example, the thousands of participants at an academic convention or professional development conference are considered a group. These participants may spend their entire time on-site without encountering the vast majority of the other participants. Yet, as long as they are together for the event (at the physical location during the allotted days for the gathering), they are considered a group. On a smaller scale, this notion of a group translates into those individuals on the same bus or even two people in the purchase-line at a supermarket.

Similar to place and temporality, albeit at a much deeper level of analysis, is the parameter of *social relationship*. That is, groups are not just individuals who happen to be in the same place at the same time. Groups require relationships among the members (Forsyth, 2006). Just as friends are joined in friendship and co-owners of a business are engaged in a partnership, people in a group are connected by their membership.

*Common purpose* is another parameter utilized in defining groups. Within this parameter, groups consist of two or more people who interact with one another for the explicit purpose of fulfilling needs or accomplishing goals (Aronson, Wilson, & Akert, 1994). In this view, a group consists of interdependent individuals. For example, within an educational environment, the students of an introductory-level course in a large lecture hall might be considered a group. During class time, they interact with one another for the purpose of learning and receiving academic credit. As this definition does not
require place to be determined by the same physical space, this notion also translates into an online academic environment.

Common purpose, place, and temporality are thus several foundational parameters utilized to define groups. Still, more parameters may provide a deeper understanding as to what is meant by the term group. Physical proximity and cognitive awareness of group membership create more distinct boundaries. Johnson and Johnson (1987) stipulated that groups are distinguished in the following way: Two or more individuals who have face-to-face interaction, awareness of their own involvement in the group, awareness of the other group members, awareness of their interdependence, and are working towards goal accomplishment.

Members of a university admissions office or teammates on an athletic squad are exemplars of this definition. These individuals work face-to-face in an interconnected manner in order to achieve a goal. Furthermore, they recognize their own involvement in the group’s work, the others who are (or are not) part of the group, as well as how each member of the group is immersed in an interdependent relationship with the others. Members of an admissions office work individually, yet intentionally interact with their counterparts in order to promote the degree programs, review applications, and make decisions on acceptance. Similarly with the athletic squad, each athlete knows her role on the team, who her teammates are (as compared to the competition), and how she needs to operate symbiotically (hopefully synergistically) with her teammates if they are to accomplish team goals. And, of course, they engage face-to-face on the practice field, in the locker-room, and certainly during competition.

Johnson and Johnson (1987) and Williams (2010) offered that two or more people—a pair of individuals is considered a group. Size, then, is also a parameter. Some believe, as evidenced above, that groups begin when two people join together: Dyads are groups. Others articulate that dyads are qualitatively different than groups (Moreland, 2010). For instance, research on dyads is applied utilizing different theories and methods, by differing researchers, and is published in different sources. Dyads are simpler than groups—some group phenomena cannot occur in dyads (Moreland, 2010) due to the level of interaction among group members (Jentzsch, 2000).

A final group parameter is member roles. Group members develop specialized roles within the group (Hackman, 2012). Although Benne and Sheats (1948) were the first to develop a list of roles in groups (they outlined 19), a universal taxonomy of group member roles does not exist (Stewart, Fulmer, & Barrick, 2005). Even so, group roles are typically differentiated by two general categories, task roles and social roles (Bales, 1970). Task roles represent work completion and problem-solving behaviors. Group members who draft notes or lead reflective dialogs are fulfilling task roles. Social roles are related to interpersonal relationship building. Group members who mediate conflicts or empower others to voice opinions model social roles.

The parameters detailed above provide a structure that enables us to better understand the ways in which groups are defined. But what does this mean for group mentoring? I explore this question in the following section.

Groups in the Context of Group Mentoring

Presently, little work, if any, has been conducted to explain and determine what is meant by group with regard to group mentoring. The term is utilized as a catchall for any
mentorship experiences involving three or more collaborators. Labeling these developmental relationships with the term group seems to be employed unconsciously.

In order to utilize the term group in the context of group mentoring more mindfully, it is important to begin by presenting my definition and understanding of mentorship. “Mentoring is a distinctive relational learning experience whereby participants, through intentional challenge and support, enhance the personal growth and professional/skills development of the other(s)” (Kroll, 2015, pp. 38–39).

With this definition in mind, we can appropriately apply group parameters to better understand these collective developmental relationships. Group mentorship can be recognized as a collection of three or more individuals, connected by their social relationship, distinctly gathered for the specific and shared purpose of intentionally challenging, and supporting the others to enhance personal growth and professional skills/development of the others.

Group mentoring interactions are simultaneous and collaborative (Huizing, 2012) and are directed at enhancing the personal growth and professional skills development of the members. Simultaneous mentoring interactions indicate that the mentorship experience is conducted in the same time and space for all participants. Collaborative mentoring interactions signify a shared responsibility for each member to provide and be provided with mentorship. The following paragraphs unpack this definition of group mentoring guided by the parameters previously discussed.

One parameter of groups within mentoring contexts is clear. Group mentorship experiences are comprised of three or more individuals. Traditional mentoring experiences are dyadic (one-to-one) experiences. Group mentoring, therefore, at a minimum, includes three collaborators. The third individual differentiates group mentoring from dyadic mentoring.

These group members are connected by their social relationship. These individuals have an association with one another—a mentoring relationship. Participants are immersed in a reciprocal, collaborative, synergistic, and developmental experience (Dansky, 1996; Lick, 1999, 2006). Often, members of mentoring groups have intimate bonds and strong social relationships due to the nature of the sharing involved.

These group members are gathered for a specific and shared purpose. Mentoring is the common purpose of the group members. They gather with the intentionality to challenge and support one another as a means to work through struggles and accomplish goals.

By utilizing parameters from group literature, in combination with the historical and contemporary philosophical underpinnings of group mentorship, I bring attention to and set a grounded foundation for group mentoring. This allows scholars and practitioners alike, to move forward consciously, with a common language for and what is meant when the term group mentoring is utilized.

Conclusion

Group mentoring—much like traditional dyadic mentorship—has been practiced since time immemorial. Historical examples, much like Benjamin Franklin’s Leather Apron Club, raise our awareness as to how these mentoring experiences served to transform individuals as well as whole communities of people. And contemporary experiences of group mentoring highlight the powerful nature of these developmental experiences for individuals and communities today.
We know based upon the work of scholars since the late 1990s that mentoring groups, as developmental relationships, are built upon an intentional focus on social justice, the distribution of power and authority, and the flattening of hierarchy. Notwithstanding, as scholars and practitioners, we have yet to appropriately define or establish suitable parameters with which to demarcate group mentoring from one-to-one mentoring experiences. I have posited in this paper that if we are to continue to strengthen our scholarship and practice of group mentoring, defining group mentoring and establishing appropriate parameters is critical. I propose that group mentorship be formally recognized as a collection of three or more individuals, connected by their social relationship, distinctly gathered for the specific and shared purpose of intentionally challenging and supporting the others to enhance personal growth and professional skills/development of the others. It is my hope that with the writing of this article, scholars, and practitioners alike, can confidently move forward with a common language and definition of group mentoring.

Disclosure statement
No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author.

Notes on contributor
Jonathan Kroll is the co-founder and executive director of the Institute for Leadership and Training (tilt)—www.tiltathletes.com. His research and practice interests include the impact and effectiveness of group mentoring as well as leadership development in the Global South. Jonathan earned a doctorate in Human and Organizational Systems from Fielding Graduate University.

References


Williams, K. D. (2010). Dyads can be groups (and often are). Small Group Research, 41, 268–274.