

## FRONT ROW FRIENDSHIPS

### Front Row Friendships: Relational Dialectics and Identity Negotiations by Mature Students at University

#### Abstract

When adults enter university after several years of work and life experience, they must negotiate their identity as mature students and their friendship with other students. In this interpretative study I examined the tensions experienced by 15 such students (aged 28 to 54) at a university in Ireland where they were attempting to integrate themselves into university life while also striving to preserve a sense of authentic and continuous selfhood. I employed a range of interviewing methods and framed the study in Baxter and Montgomery's (1996) relational dialectics theory. The results complement existing research and offer insights both on mature student friendships and on the complex processes of identity negotiation such students engage in.

Keywords: Mature Students; Relational Dialectics Theory; Friendship; Ireland.

#### Introduction

In the study reported here I focus on *mature students* as a cohort or subset of non-traditional students. University regulations in Ireland stipulate that a mature student is one who is at least 23 years of age on January first of the year they enter university. Similar to non-traditional students throughout the world, the mature student cohort at Irish universities is typically far more internally diverse than the general student body, with considerable variation in terms of age, ability, and life experience. However, despite this diversity, mature students often share a sense of separateness from their younger peers. Though such feelings can diminish over time, they rarely completely subside but rather remain to a greater or lesser degree throughout the course of their studies. This sense of separateness often makes mature students somewhat apprehensive about university life, at least in the initial stage, and also helps to explain why they frequently gravitate towards one another early on. If the front row of the lecture hall is

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generally a no-go zone for their younger peers, it is by contrast often a place of companionship and solidarity for mature students at university.

This report derives from an ongoing interpretative study of mature student identities and friendships at university and recognizes, first, that *being* a mature student is not a fixed state but rather one of constant flux. As suggested below, the extent to which a student so labeled identifies with the term *mature student* depends on a number of factors, and this identification varies according to social context, such as whether one is amongst many others in a large lecture hall or in an intimate seminar setting. In approaching the category mature student as an *identity* that one inhabits and performs and identifies with to a greater or lesser degree on an ongoing basis, I subscribe to a view of identities as actively constructed, deconstructed, and reconstructed through human relationships, which are in turn sustained and experienced through processes of communication. Identities are always positional and relational; they tell us about who you think you are and who you think you are not, where you are from and where you have been, and perhaps even where you hope to be (literally and metaphorically) in the future. Identities, in other words, are continuously and reflexively produced; they are categories of being and becoming, just as social life itself is an “unfinished, ongoing dialogue” (Baxter & Montgomery, 1996, p. 4).

I employed relational dialectics theory (RDT) in this research to help make sense of the shifting experiences of mature students at university. Rather than an all-encompassing *theory* as such, Baxter and Montgomery (1996) suggest that RDT should be considered a metatheoretical perspective insofar as it rests on a small set of conceptual assumptions as opposed to axiomatic arguments or generalizable predictions. RDT advances from the assumption that tensions (or relational contradictions) are inherent in all relationships and that these should not be viewed as problems. Rather, oppositional forces in human relationships—such as the need for independence *along with* dependence—are the very substance of evolving

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relationships. For theorists working in this metatheoretical perspective therefore, a *healthy* relationship is “not one in which the interplay of opposites has been extinguished or resolved... [but] one in which the parties manage to satisfy both oppositional demands. That is, relational well-being is marked by the capacity to achieve ‘both/and’ status as opposed to ‘either/or’” (Cools, 2011, p. 41).

The core idea in RDT is that relationships are not static but dynamic, and consequently that each relationship requires ongoing negotiation, compromise, and management. In this way RDT differs from earlier relational perspectives in rejecting the suggestion that relationships develop in simple, linear patterns or that they move through clear stages. On the contrary, no ideal end-state is assumed (Kim & Yun, 2007). The particular usefulness of RDT lies in its recognition that all relationships are unique, yet that all are equally constituted in dialectical tensions of one sort or another. All relationships face three fundamental dialectics: integration-separation, stability-change, and expression-privacy (Baxter, 1993, 1997; Baxter & Montgomery, 1996). The fundamental dialectic of *integration-separation* describes the conflicting needs of solidarity and independence; the fundamental dialectic of *stability-change* describes the opposition between permanence and immanent change; and finally, the fundamental dialectic of *expression-privacy* concerns the extent to which a relationship is revealed and expressed (i.e., made public) or kept hidden and private. The relational dialectics perspective takes account both of tensions occurring within a (typically dyadic) relationship and between the relationship partners and the outside world—or between *interactional* and *contextual* tensions, which are the preferred terms of William Rawlins (1992). In essence, it is these tensions and how relationship partners respond to them that constitute the relationship and explain how it changes over time (Baxter, 1990; Cools, 2011).

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Since the publication of Baxter and Montgomery's seminal *Relating: Dialogues and Dialectics* (1996) and their subsequent edited collection *Dialectical Approaches to Studying Personal Relationships* (1998), dialectical studies have proven popular across the academic field. For example, Dumlao and Janke (2012) pointed out that scholars from a range of disciplines, including psychology, communication, and business studies, have used RDT to study a wide variety of topics, such as friendship (Rawlins, 1992), diverse families (Sabourin, 2003), post-marital relationships (Graham, 2003), and community health initiatives (Medved et al., 2010). Though the majority of early studies focused on two-person relationships, scholars have increasingly sought to extend the dialectical perspective beyond the interpersonal dyad to wider social relationships (e.g., Goins, 2011; Lowry-Hart & Pacheco Jr., 2011; Orbe, 2008; Simmons, Lowery-Hart, Wahl, & McBride, 2013). Furthermore, Altman (1993) has argued that scholars should consider dialectical tensions within individuals (what he terms *intra-individual* dialectical processes) as well as those experienced at the *intergroup* level.

In this study I investigated the tensions experienced by mature students at university in attempting to integrate themselves into university life while also preserving a sense of authentic and continuous selfhood. Expressed in terms of the fundamental dialectics described above, my primary interest therefore was in the fundamental dialectic of *integration-separation*. I explored this from two vantage points: first, I examined contradictions experienced at the intergroup level relating to *difference-similarity* and second, I examined tensions within mature student friendships relating to *autonomy-connection*. The study incorporated focus groups, one-person depth interviews, and paired interviews with a view to capturing the overlapping tensions experienced by individual mature students, mature students as a group, and within mature student friendships. The analysis below is rooted in the vernacular categories used by informants. In other words, reflections are empirically

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grounded in the sense that they emerge from and continually return to the subjective interpretations of informants (Rawlins, 1983). First, however, I will situate the current study within extant scholarly research. The following is not intended as a comprehensive literature review but rather signals the relevance of the findings to both dialectical studies of relationships (especially friendships) and studies of mature students at university.

### **Dialectical Approaches to Friendship**

Friendship is typically characterized as a relationship involving high levels of openness, disclosure, and emotional communication (Brooks, 2007). For this reason, friendship plays a crucial role in social support, which includes emotional support, practical support, informational support, and social companionship support (Ramsay, Jones, & Barker, 2007). As a bond between self and others, and as a platform for shared meaning and dialogue, friendship also plays a crucial role in identity formation and identity maintenance. This can be especially important for marginalized persons (Goins, 2011), to which we might include mature students. Rachel Brooks (2007) provides a useful summary review of recent sociological perspectives on friendship, which tend to position friendship within the wider conditions of late modernity (e.g., Bauman, 1991; Beck, 1992; Giddens, 1992). For example, Giddens' concept of the pure relationship—one that is maintained as long as it satisfies the needs of those involved—constructs friendship as largely voluntary, though also requiring trust and disclosing intimacy. Like Giddens, Beck and Beck-Gernsheim (1995) theorize friendship in relation to processes of modernization and individualization and suggest that friendship allows for simultaneous closeness and distance, a suggestion that resonates closely with the dialectical perspective of Rawlins.

For Rawlins (1992), friendships are interesting because they occupy a somewhat hazy position in society; they are neither blood nor kin relationships, nor are they defined by

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economic contracts like work. Rawlins focuses on the communicative achievement of friendship, which is to say that he recognizes that friendship is achieved through communicative acts (rather than being ascribed). His numerous studies span adolescent friendships (1987), young adult friendships (1989), adult friendships (1994), cross-sex friendships (1982), and even teaching as a mode friendship (2000). What is especially important about Rawlins' work, given the focus of this study, is his continual insistence that friendship is a site of meaning-making and identity construction. Rawlins and Holl (1987) observe, for example, that "friends partially authorize, yet also threaten, a person's identity" (p. 346). This is particularly important during the developmental stage of adolescence, when one begins to learn about and prepare for the more complicated relationships of adulthood. Yet while the process of becoming friends involves a delicate process of risk assessment and managed disclosure, it is assumed that "*being* friends means that persons so defined can *be themselves*" (Rawlins, 1983, p. 1, author's italics).

Throughout his research, Rawlins distinguishes between *interactional* dialectics and *contextual* dialectics in friendships. An example of a contextual dialectic is what he calls the ideal and the real, i.e., between how society paints friendship (in movies, television, novels, etc.) and the often very different nature of actually occurring friendships. An example of an interactional dialectic for Rawlins is the dialectic between expressiveness and protectiveness, i.e., between the reciprocal disclosure necessary to achieve intimacy and the corresponding need for selective restraint. One of the most important dialectics that Rawlins has detected in numerous studies of friendship is instrumentality versus affection. By this, he means that individuals make distinctions between friends whom they perceive as useful to them on some level (perhaps work colleagues) and those for whom they hold deep affection.

Rawlins' methodological approach is also noteworthy because he prioritizes the *actual discourse*—or "experience-near" concepts (Geertz, 1976, p. 124) of his research

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subjects—be they adolescents, adults, or otherwise. In essence therefore, Rawlins's work focuses on how individuals *experience* friendship, how they subjectively interpret these experiences, and how such interpretations function as resources for meaning making and identity building.

### **Being a Mature Student**

Academic culture, as Read, Archer, and Leathwood (2003) observe, is not uniformly accessed or experienced. Rather, there are designated *others* in all institutional cultures. Like most categories of identity, the mature student is constructed through a variety of discourses, meaning that those so defined (i.e., those who have successfully entered university on the grounds that they qualify as a mature student) often come to university life with an assortment of preconceived notions about what it means to be a mature student. These *authoritative discourses*, as Avis (1997) points out, do not sit outside of experience but are constitutive of it (see also Goins, 2011). Therefore, each new utterance must be understood as part of a chain (Baxter, 2011); each new utterance in some sense *responds to* and *is part of* the utterances that came before (Simmons et al., 2013). In some respects this storehouse of images and associations may be negative, with the effect that mature students may enter university life primed with anxiety and apprehension. Naturally, *all* new students enter university life with a mixture of excitement and apprehension, and therefore scholars must be careful not to categorize mature students as a species distinct from more traditional students (James, 1995). Nevertheless, mature students are different in some important respects. Crucially, many express difficulty (at least in the initial phase of their studies) in self-identifying as *a student*, a term which they often feel is the preserve of young middle-class people (Read, Archer, & Leathwood, 2003). Avis (1997) consequently argues that it is essential to understand the development of a student (or learner) identity as an ongoing dialogue between individual identity and educational experience, as well as the cultural

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frameworks individuals use to make sense of this experience. Regardless of age and class position, the sense of differentness experienced by mature students can also be compounded by the unfamiliar physical terrain of the university, the routine of lectures and seminars and independent learning, unequal power relations between staff and students, and the need to speak and write in the language of academia (Read et al., 2003). However, Avis also notes that the particular idea of maturity that sets these students apart also has positive connotations: “In this discourse maturity, motivation and commitment sit together, and are contrasted with the immaturities of youth” (Avis, 1997, p. 83). Indeed, as suggested below, mature students sometimes employ this discourse to positively distinguish themselves from their younger peers.

A number of researchers have investigated mature students’ motivations for entering university, typically linking these to biography and life course (Avis, 1997; Stevenson & Clegg, 2012; Swain & Hammond, 2011). Motivations can be extrinsic (narrowly instrumental) or intrinsic (subjectively rewarding), though in practice these are usually intertwined. For example, Mercer (2007) found that a desire to change or (re)discover the self is a key motivation for mature students. In Mercer’s research, participants’ expressed motivations were emotionally loaded; they desired to feel happier, stronger and more secure, to re-find themselves and prove that they were capable of obtaining a university qualification. Mercer’s findings suggest that levels of emotional investment and intrinsic motivation may well be higher for non-traditional students. Likewise, in their research on female mature students, O’Shea and Stone (2011) found that beyond pragmatic or instrumental goals, motivations for entering higher education were predominantly expressed in terms of self-validation and self-worth, freedom and personal independence, and a desire to restore a sense of self.



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In addition to examining mature students' motivations for entering university, researchers have also investigated their experiences in higher education and the outcomes of this process. While mature students often describe the benefits of higher education as having an improved sense of self-worth and of being recognized as an active and able participant in society (what we might term "belonging"), they also frequently describe their experiences in terms of personal growth and transformation (or what we might term "becoming"). Such transformation does not occur instantly, however, and is more commonly described as a gradual process involving a series of transitions and risks (and sometimes ruptures) to self-identity, as well as the imagining of *possible selves* (Avis, 1997; Baxter & Britton, 2001; Brooks, 2007; Mercer, 2007; Stevenson & Clegg, 2012). Moreover, Stevenson and Clegg emphasize that this process of personal transformation is grounded in participants' views of what is possible. Social position is crucial here, with social class and gender in particular emerging as highly significant in elaborations of future and past selves. In short, mature students are keenly aware that the future is not an empty sheet but rather one that is "already filled with their own personal and social structural constraints" (Stevenson & Clegg, 2012, p. 11). Consequently, entering higher education comes with various risks (Baxter & Britton, 2001; Stuart, 2006). For example, participants in Baxter and Britton's (2001) study detailed challenges to identities and relationships with family and former friends, conflicts relating to gender roles in the family, and risks associated with moving away from a working class habitus, which can be threatening to both self and others. Therefore, although education is empowering and liberating in many respects—such as allowing one to gain knowledge and confidence, providing a release from domesticity, and increasing opportunities for paid work—the "becoming" associated with this is also fraught with difficulty. Baxter and Britton note that "a common feature of mature students' accounts of their experience is a sense of dislocation, which is often expressed in terms of a fragmentation or compartmentalization of

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the self' (2001, p. 89). At the same time, it is important to note that the kinds of self-reflection and self-transformation enabled and activated by higher education can be experienced more profoundly by mature students, with some research suggesting that they often develop deeper and more effective learning strategies and more positive attitudes about university in general (Ramsay, Jones, & Barker, 2007).

Such diverse findings signal the heterogeneity of mature students as a cohort and highlight that motivations and experiences differ from person to person, depending on circumstances, ability, and the salience of various social categories. In summary, the studies cited above suggest that mature students are motivated to enter university for a variety of reasons (some of which are in direct tension); that managing the demands of university life and other domains of life is difficult; that being a mature student is both demanding and rewarding; that mature students are both different from and in some respects similar to other students; and that the label "mature student" is rather a poor catch-all for a heterogeneous group of individuals. Such research also indicates that friendship plays a crucial role in shaping student identities and in creating educational success. Moreover, where friendships are precarious, students tend to feel more insecure at university (Stuart, 2006).

Friendship is often analyzed in terms of homophily, or the tendency for individuals to gravitate towards and communicate more with those perceived as similar (Kandel, 1978). This appears especially important in friendship formation in the university context, where lasting friendships can often form early on (e.g., Dunne, 2009). As suggested above, homophilic tendencies are generally more pronounced amongst mature students, at least in the early phase of their studies, as these individuals typically come to university after a break from education and sometimes with a store of negative associations and prior experiences. Hence, mature students commonly enter university with more anxiety and apprehension than their younger peers, for whom university is often an extension of existing social networks.

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The friendships of mature students are in some respects both similar and dissimilar to the various kinds of friendships examined in other dialectical studies. In comparison to adolescents, mature persons generally have a more developed understanding of the complicated relationships of adulthood and are rather more immune to what Rawlins and Holl (1987) describe as the “brutal distinctions” of adolescence (p. 349). It is likely that they will also have a more developed understanding of the ephemerality and somewhat mixing blessing of being popular. At the same time, however, much of the research cited above suggests that mature students—for all of their life experience—are often more apprehensive about university life than their younger peers and are often more conscious of being different. Consequently, their friendships are not only important for creating and sustaining identities but also act as important sites of resistance to authoritative discourses (cf. Goins, 2011).

Based on the collective body of research, then, it is reasonable to expect that dialectical tensions will emerge among mature students in regard to their overall group identification as well as within their friendships with other mature students. Therefore, I engaged in interviews with the following research questions in mind:

RQ1: What types of intergroup dialectical tensions do mature students experience at university in relation to younger students?

RQ2: What types of dialectical tensions do mature students experience at university in relation to their friendships with other mature students?

### **Method**

The study reported here included 15 participants, who were recruited initially by direct email and subsequently via the snowballing technique. Given the interpretative nature of the study, a variety of qualitative interviewing techniques were used. The study incorporated focus groups, one-person depth interviews (interviewer and a single informant), and paired interviews (interviewer and two informants), with the aim of capturing the

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overlapping tensions experienced by individual mature students, mature students as a group, and within mature student friendships. In all cases a semi-structured approach was chosen to encourage spontaneity and candor and to potentially reduce the effect of interviewer bias. Like Brown (2011), flexibility and interactivity were also key factors in the choice of methods. Discussion in interviews centered mainly on episodes and encounters recalled by informants, who were encouraged to elaborate on their responses and to delve into salient issues (cf. Simmons et al., 2013). In all cases interviews progressed from initial questions about personal background and education history, to motivations for entering university, and then finally to campus experiences and friendships, with a focus on experienced tensions or contradictions at each stage of questioning. The findings presented in this report derive from one focus group ( $n = 7$ ), two one-person interviews ( $n = 2$ ) and three paired interviews ( $n = 6$ ). All of the interviews were conducted on a university campus, and they varied in length from just under two hours in the case of the focus group to an average of one hour for all of the other interviews. All interviews were audiorecorded with the consent of informants, and all were subsequently transcribed.

In the spirit of grounded theory I refer to participants as *informants*, a term indicating prioritization of the language of the researchee and not that of the researcher (Spradley, 1979). Informants varied in age, with the youngest 28 and the oldest 54 years of age. There was an approximately even gender split, and all were white. Two additional informants were 23 years of age and therefore met the official age criterion for mature students, but their interview responses suggested markedly different experiences at university to the other informants in the study (who were mostly in their thirties or older). Therefore, to remain true to the focused intent of this study, their responses were not included in the final analysis. All of the informants were final-year undergraduate students who were approaching the end of their time at university and who had developed university friendships spanning at least two

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years, though it was not specified that these needed to be “close” in the precise sense used by Rawlins (1983).

The analytical approach here, as in many dialectical studies, is informed by grounded theory (Daymon & Holloway, 2002; Glaser & Strauss, 1967), which requires that the researcher seek out links between analytical categories and explore emerging concepts and theories by investigating how they stand up to further data. In other words, in grounded theory, analysis is interwoven with data collection in a process of finding, analyzing, and theorizing (Arksey & Knight, 1999). Subsequent to conducting and transcribing all of the interviews in this study, transcriptions were systematically analyzed and coded, producing inductive constructs which appeared most useful for explicating the data (cf. Brown, 2011; Goins, 2011; Lowry-Hart & Pacheco Jr., 2011; Simmons et al. 2013). Particular attention was given to common patterns in responses (including similar metaphors and repeated terms) as well as anecdotes used to illustrate tensions of one sort or another. The validity of the constructs was established through the method of constant comparison. As labels were chosen, transcripts were reread and finally, as dialectics became apparent, all of the data were reviewed in an attempt to explain how the dialectics functioned, thereby combining induction and deduction (see Rawlins, 1983). Like Rawlins, the approach here prioritizes the actual discourse of informants, all of whom were given pseudonyms. In what follows therefore, I use as much as possible my informants’ unaltered statements “both to support the arguments advanced and to demonstrate key points empirically” (Rawlins & Holl, 1987, p. 349).

## Results

Research suggests that mature students often experience tensions in attempting to integrate themselves into university life while also trying to preserve a sense of authentic and continuous selfhood. To investigate the university experience of mature students, the data

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analyzed for this study were deliberately restricted to dialectical tensions relating to *campus relationships*. The first research question addressed intergroup tensions, and an apparent dialectical tension emerged in mature students' shifting feelings of *difference and similarity*. In other words, these students generally regarded themselves as students just like everybody else but occasionally felt very different from their younger peers, especially during interactions outside of class. The interview testimonies of informants therefore suggested that although these individuals participate in university life, they are never fully integrated into it (cf. Lowry-Hart & Pacheco Jr., 2011). This dialectic was evidenced by two contradictions which I term *outsider and insider* and *parent and peer*. The episodes and experiences recounted by informants help to animate these contradictions but also suggest that although *being* a mature student is not a fixed identity, there *are* regular occasions at university when such students feel reduced to this label. Of course, this should not be taken to imply that the university experiences of mature students are entirely negative. On the contrary, my informants unanimously regarded their time at university as a highly rewarding experience.

The second research question addressed possible dialectical tensions experienced within mature student friendships. Here the data generated two tensions which illustrate the dialectic of *autonomy and connection* amongst friends. Tension between *instrumentality and affection*, borrowed from Rawlins (1992), describes the tension experienced by mature students in desiring intimate relationships with their university friends while simultaneously viewing such persons as work colleagues of a sort. Tension between *expressiveness and protectiveness*, again taken from Rawlins (1992), captures the tension between desiring to speak freely and disclose to others and yet also protect the self and others. Each of these dialectical tensions, in turn, is discussed and illustrated in the following excerpts from informant interviews.

### **The Intergroup Dialectic of Difference-Similarity**

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The dialectic of *difference-similarity* describes the tensions mature students experience between, on the one hand, feeling part of campus culture and, on the other hand, feeling different and distant from their generally younger peers. This dialectic was evidenced by two contradictions which together appeared to capture these shifting experiences of difference and similarity, and exclusion and inclusion.

**Outsider and insider.** Informants in the study explained that for the most part at university, they go about the business of attending lectures and seminars and completing coursework without giving much thought to their age or other differences from younger students. As Bill (38) put it, “I mean, really it serves no consequences for me being a mature student or some other named student. It’s just a label, really.” Other informants expressed similar indifference when initially asked about the label *mature student*, often responding in a self-mocking way. For example, Jane (36) commented: “I’ve always felt I was the most irresponsible mature student because I was always chasing my tail.” Likewise, Lisa (37) commented: “I don’t feel very mature at all [Laughs]. I have children, I was somebody’s wife, and still at 37, I still don’t feel mature.” However, over the course of interviews it became apparent that although my informants were not *continually aware* of being mature students, they did encounter assorted triggers—particular occasions or particular discussion topics—that prompted feelings of differentness on at least a semi-regular basis. For example, during the focus group, Sharon (31) recalled with humor a certain encounter with a younger student just before class:

I was doing an analyzing media project, and we chose to analyze *It’s a Wonderful Life*. And I remember being early for class and chatting to this lovely young fella, and I was telling him we were analyzing *It’s a Wonderful Life*—you know, a classic Jimmy Stuart movie. And he goes, “Oh no, Sharon, that’s not from my era.” [All laugh] And I went to

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him, “It’s not from my era, either! It’s something like the 1940s. How old do you think I am?!” [Laughs]. (Sharon, 31)

Here the informant suggests that despite her apparent ease in conversing with her younger classmates, and on this particular occasion with one whom she clearly liked (“lovely young fella”), that age can show itself to be significant even in the most unlikely and casual of encounters. More commonly, however, the often lively responses of informants centered on extracurricular encounters, during which their consciousness of being different (or perceived as such) was heightened. These often embarrassing encounters, though mostly recalled with humor, cast mature students as campus outsiders of a sort—or what Simmons et al. (2013) imaginatively term “cultural visitors” (p. 382). As a consequence of these experiences, informants tended by and large to band together and maintain friendships primarily (if not exclusively) with other mature students. Lisa (37), who identified most strongly as a mother of three and who was the most animated informant, began the following exchange in the focus group:

I die sometimes when you’re with the younger people and you go, “Yeah, that was really cool,” and they’re looking at you and going, “God, I’m really embarrassed. You’re like my ma,” and you die [Laughs]. Do you remember the night in first semester we went to join them for a drink?” [Turning to the other mature students] (Lisa, 37)

And they wouldn’t sit with us! [Laughs] (Sharon, 31).

And they all left. Oh, it was awful! The whole class was going for a drink, so we arrived... We walked in, and either people left or moved away, and I remember thinking, “You [expletives]! I’m mortified!” I actually almost died (Lisa, 37)

[Everyone laughing]



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You know, I'd be talking to young people and forgetting that I'm like their mammy. You know, I'm old enough really to be these people's parents, so yeah, I'd kind of forget and then you'd get this look like, "Why is this old lady talking to me?" [Laughs] (Lisa, 37).

The above exchange suggests that informants do not feel different or distanced from their younger peers on a *continual* basis—indeed; here Lisa suggests that she often simply “forgets” that she is older—nor does it indicate discomfort generally in interacting or conversing with younger students. Rather, the above exchange suggests that feelings of differentness are typically induced in particular social encounters or in particular conversational moments. More specifically, it suggests that such feelings are typically brought on in encounters outside of class or in conversations about non-university related matters. For example, Diane (32) commented, “I’m working on this project with a group of girls, and one day they were all psyched up and they said [clapping her hands], “Let’s have a girly night out.” And then they all realized I was in the room and went silent.” Again, Diane’s comments suggest that feelings of differentness were only activated by the sudden switch in conversation (in this case, to the prospect of an extracurricular outing). The fact that Diane was engaged in a group project in this example is also important. Informants’ feelings of otherness—especially in extracurricular encounters—contrasted sharply with their experiences when it came to group-based assignments, where the reputation of mature students as generally hard-working and diligent often made them attractive teammates. As Sharon (31) remarked, “By second year, everyone wanted to work with the mature students.” Here my informants described being characterized by their often calculative younger peers according to academic ability and leadership skills, as opposed to personality traits associated with sociability or likeability (sense of humor, fun, etc.); or according to the *task* dimension of interpersonal attraction theory, as opposed to the *social liking* or *physical appearance* dimensions (McCroskey &

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McCain, 1974). Jim (54), for example, claimed that he was forewarned of this by an academic tutor and then subsequently experienced it first-hand:

I always remember the tutor saying, “What’s gonna happen after assignment two?” He says, “People are gonna gravitate to you guys because suddenly they’ll realize, ‘This fella knows what he’s about.’” And that’s exactly what happened. With the first project we [three mature students] were left on our own, and nobody wanted to come near us. But then when the next one came around, the tutor said, “Well, we have two choices here. I can pick who goes in what group, or you can decide yourselves.” And about three hands went up—we want to work with Jim! (Jim, 54)

Again, this passage illustrates how mature students are sometimes considered attractive teammates by their younger peers on account of perceived academic prowess or diligence, yet that the inclusion afforded here is of a decidedly limited kind; i.e., in the above passage it is clear that it was only *after* his impressive performance on the first assignment that this informant’s (younger) classmates wished to work with him. Before that point, as he put it, “Nobody wanted to come near us.” In other words, these mature students appeared to have insider status when it came to coursework but more of an outsider status when it came to extracurricular encounters and conversations.

**Parent and peer.** In addition to outsider and insider, the interview testimonies of informants also pointed to a second and generally more subtle contradiction illustrating the *difference-similarity* dialectic that I have labeled *parent and peer*. Though they recognized that they were different in some respects to the main student body, mature students in the study insisted that they participated as equals for the most part at university, without preferential or prejudicial treatment. Despite this, many of my informants also recounted episodes in which they felt shunted into positions of authority, despite their own reservations.

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The binding thread in these episodes is a sense of *social expectation* by their younger peers; a sense that mature students should *naturally* (i.e., on account of age) gravitate towards positions of responsibility and that they should act as group disciplinarians if so required.

In some respects, the responses of my informants suggested that they *did* believe mature students are more naturally equipped (and therefore more likely) to occupy positions of leadership in student groups. In the following, for example, Sharon (31) suggests that mature students often have more confidence in dealing with authority figures:

I think when they [traditional students] start, they still have very much the teacher-student relationship. Whereas we're coming in and, you know, we can relate to [lecturers] a lot better, and we're not intimidated. And you know, we can come up and have a chat. And I remember coming to see [a lecturer] after class once and I said to the girls in the group I've just been up to see him and they went, "What for?!" And I said that I just wanted to have a chat with him. "Oh my God, are we in trouble?!" And I was like, "No, I just wanted to see how we did, and I have the feedback here and I have the essay."

Comments of this sort sometimes led to more developed constructions of traditional students, which often hinged on a contrast between the real-world experience of mature students and the insular lives of traditional students, as revealed in the following exchange between Sharon and Lisa in a paired interview:

University is like a cushion. I don't see it as the real world. I mean if you look at our classmates even, I mean they lead very charmed lives some of them. If you look at their technology, living in the big smoke, two classes a week... I mean that's not the real world. I feel for my younger female cohort, I really do, because they haven't a clue of the obstacles that will be put in their way. There's a few that are switched on, and there are many who will get the land of their lives (Lisa, 37).

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Basically, they haven't grown up. They're still in this little school cocoon (Sharon, 31).

And it *is* like a cocoon (Lisa, 37).

It's a cocoon, basically (Sharon, 31).

While their real-world experience may render some mature students more naturally equipped to occupy leadership positions in student groups, my informants were nevertheless uncomfortable with the expectation (by their peers) that they should naturally occupy such positions. Moreover, several expressed acute discomfort in having to play the role of disciplinarian *at the same time* as trying to cultivate and maintain normal peer relations. For example, in the following passage Jim (54) describes an awkward encounter with teammates following a poor result on an assignment. Though angered by his teammates' nonchalance, Jim was uncomfortable having to play "daddy" to the group:

We had one occasion—I think it was in first year—we did something for Bryan [a lecturer] I think. And I was the mature student and the rest of them [in the group] were the 18- or 19-year-olds, and they didn't give a [expletive] like. We got a bad mark, and I went to talk to the lecturer. And I came back down and I was like daddy because I said, 'Listen, lads, you know this can't happen again,' and then I felt a bit awkward. But you know, I slated them because they hadn't pulled their weight, and that brought the [expletive] mark down, simple as. I mean we threw away fifteen marks or something, and they just sat there mute. "Who the [expletive] does he think he is?!" (Jim, 54).

The above excerpt, like the earlier comments by Sharon, suggests that mature students in the study were generally comfortable liaising with lecturers on behalf of their groups and indeed, that they often took on this role freely and willingly; but it also suggests that they were

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uneasy about disciplining their peers. In addition to Jim, a number of other informants recounted similar experiences of both embracing and yet also resisting expectations of responsibility. While the majority of episodes were campus-based, Sharon extended the parent metaphor to a rare social outing in first year during which her younger peers were getting “sloppy drunk”:

I’ve been there. I mean, I’ve gone out with younger cousins and they get sloppy, you know, sloppy drunk. I’ve been to that sloppy stage, and I don’t want to be anybody’s mammy; and I think sometimes when you’re that bit older and you go out, you’re put into that role (Sharon, 31).

Sharon’s presence at this social outing suggests that she was reasonably comfortable attending in the first place, however, her comments also suggest a degree of tension. Here again it is the perceived social expectation of responsibility that is the source of the informant’s frustration; she is bothered by the presumption that she will play a certain role or assume a certain identity. More precisely, as with the contradiction *outsider and insider*, the contradiction *parent and peer* signals the interplay of opposing tendencies. Taken together, these contradictions illustrate the push and pull of the dialectic of *difference-similarity*, as it is experienced by mature students at university in relation to their younger peers.

### **The Dialectic of Autonomy-Connection**

The dialectic of *autonomy-connection*, again nestled within the fundamental dialectic of *integration-separation*, describes the contradictory impulses mature students experience within their friendships between desiring interdependence on the one hand, and desiring independence on the other. This was evidenced in the study by two tensions, *instrumentality and affection*, and *expressiveness and protectiveness*, which together illustrate the push and pull of the dialectic.

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**Instrumentality and affection.** Instrumentality and affection, borrowed from William Rawlins (1992), describes the opposing desires of mature students to both deepen their relationships with their university friends while simultaneously treating these relationships as the means to particular ends (e.g., better grades). In identifying instances of this contradiction in interview discourse, the importance of the campus itself as a physical and relational boundary became apparent.

When asked to describe their university friendships, informants frequently began by contextualizing these in terms of their motivations for entering university. For example, Ben (28) commented:

You know, this might sound kind of cold, but I treated college like just... not for the bond with everyone but... I wanted to go in and learn and get my stuff done and get out of here. That's how I treated it. I kind of had my friends, and I'm not saying you couldn't make new friends, but just, I had quite a good circle of friends.

In almost identical fashion, Diane (31) stated: "I came in—and this probably sounds really awful—but not really caring if people spoke to me or not. Like I said, because this was my job for the next three years." Other informants invoked similar images of university as *work*. As put by Sharon (31): "For me... this is like work for me. I'm not here to make friends, I'm here to get a degree. And if I make friends, that's a happy positive, which I'm glad I did." Though there is insufficient space here to consider in detail informants' expressed motivations for entering university, the predominance of instrumental considerations in their accounts is undoubtedly related on some level to the context of ongoing economic recession (a number had lost their jobs prior to entering university, for example). Regardless, one might surmise that the predominance of such motivations had some bearing on processes of friendship formation and development. For example, it would be remiss to interpret Diane's

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(32) description of her university friends as “more like work colleagues” without giving due consideration to either her expressed motivations or the wider economic context.

Nevertheless, over the course of interviews it became apparent that informants generally relied a great deal more on their university friends for emotional support, guidance, and encouragement, than the frequent analogy of work implied. Jane (36), for example, claimed in an individual interview that making friends was not a priority for her when she first entered university and that she was more concerned, in fact, to avoid negative stereotypes held by others about mature students: “I didn’t want to sit at the front. I consciously didn’t want to sit at the front.” Consequently, Jane’s initial approach to friendship was, as she put it, “to be a friend to no-one and a friend to everyone.” By second year, however, Jane had become good friends with another mature student and found it increasingly difficult to approach university in a purely instrumental fashion. Indeed, she found herself desiring greater closeness with this new friend and admitted to feeling saddened that this individual seemed to already have an extensive friendship circle: “I’m a little put out in a way, a little disappointed in a way because it’s a pity it can’t be a full relationship because she has her own friends, and it’s like I’m never gonna get to that pedigree or position, you know, I’m just a college friend.” While Jane described herself as “just a college friend,” several other informants insisted that their university friendships had become key relationships in their lives, though like Jane, these also acknowledged that striking a balance between university (or “work”) commitments and developing intimacy—or “wearing different hats” as Diane (32) put it—was not always easily accomplished. On such occasions, the interview responses of informants were loaded with notions of authenticity and sincerity. For example, Sharon (31) commented: “I don’t make friends very quickly, and if I make friends I want them to last. You know, I wouldn’t make fast friends, that’s a waste of time.” Likewise, Lisa stated: “Like for me personally, I am who I am and I know what I believe in

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and what I don't, and I know the type of people I like, and I don't do fakery and I don't do bullshit" (Lisa, 37). Though these informants acknowledged that their university friendships are curtailed by an assortment of other relationships and responsibilities—and therefore are mostly *lived out* on campus—they were adamant that this had little bearing on their affective depth. This was particularly evident in the triadic friendship of Lisa, Sharon, and Jim, as revealed in the following exchange:

We have [met up outside of university] a couple of times but our lives are busy (Lisa, 37).

And they're different as well... I mean Lisa has three kids and I don't, so we're in different spaces. I think what college allows us, it allows us a neutral platform to come together. (Sharon, 31).

Yeah, I feel my life just continues from college to home because I talk about the people who are important in my life with my college friends, and like my kids and my sister and my mam and dad would know like most of the people in my class, what I'm doing... like you've met my family [Turning to Sharon]. You know, I'd have no hesitation calling Sharon in the middle of the night if I needed her. Haven't done it yet! [Laughs] (Lisa, 37).

Though all of the mature students in the study appeared to experience the contradiction of instrumentality and affection, the nature and extent of this tension varied amongst friendship groups. While such friendships were clearly rooted in shared participation in campus life, for some, such as Lisa, these appeared to be continuous with other significant relationships outside of university, while for others the campus appeared to mark the primary limit of the relationship. For example, when asked in a paired interview if they would socialize outside of university, Bill and Ben responded:



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Not hugely. I mean, outside of something college-related... how many times would I have met you? [Turning to Bill] (Ben, 28).

I don't know, to tell you the truth. I mean, everything is kind of college-related until you go on the summer holidays, and then you just get out of here! [Laughs] And plus I live in Glenstown, and you... I don't know where you live at the moment! (Bill, 38).

I'm nomadic [Laughs]. I suppose when we're not in college, we're off doing different things... the opportunity to meet up, I mean it's probably impossible. College is always in the background, there is always some kind of assignment, so it's always in college terms. College is sort of the glue, it really is the glue (Ben, 28).

The above exchange suggests that although Bill and Ben describe themselves as friends, their friendship is effectively limited to campus interactions (college is the "glue"). This impression is given added weight by a subsequent, somewhat awkward exchange, when the informants were asked if it's likely that they'll remain friends after university:

That's the next question. I mean, I think so. I think possibly... We'll bring it back to Facebook! [Laughs] Facebook is useful because we're able to keep these bonds. So would you be really ringing or texting, I'm not too sure, but Facebook definitely. It's not too hard to drop a line on Twitter or whatever. I think some of the younger students, they'll have lasting friendships, lifelong friendships (Ben, 28).

Yeah, they've only come out of a school environment for the first time and meeting new people, so they still have a lot of sponge to fill up, you know. Like I've got my sponges at capacity! [Laughs] So I'm not gonna go out of my way to become over friendly with this person because I've got ten of them already (Bill, 38).

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To some extent the above exchange between Bill and Ben suggests candid acceptance of the nature and limits of their friendship. It is noteworthy that these informants also freely acknowledged that they would soon become competitors in the labor market (i.e., upon graduation). Ben's comments also appear to set up a contrast between his friendship with Bill and the "lifelong friendships" that younger students sometimes develop, to which Bill responded that his (friendship) "sponges" were already "at capacity." Yet there is an uneasiness about this exchange that betrays perhaps a greater level of affection between the two informants, and that was more clearly discernible in other parts of the paired interview. For example, when describing how they first became friends, Ben commented on the unspoken understandings between people of a certain age: "I think there's just a common age and lots of common areas. You've seen the same movies and shows and stuff, so it's almost like you don't have to say it." Earlier comments by Bill also implied a level of accustomed closeness with Ben: "In fact, I was thinking about it the other day, and we're kind of like middle-aged, boring, quite run-of-the-mill people. [Laughs] I mean, we don't do anything extraordinary." Considered alongside their earlier comments, these passages suggest a degree of experienced tension in the friendship of Bill and Ben, which is likewise evident to a greater or lesser degree in the friendships of other informants in the study. By necessity, mature students at university are required to complete coursework and, therefore, some level of instrumentality is to be expected in their university relationships, including their friendships. At the same time, however, the interview testimonies of informants suggest that their university friendships are also socially and emotionally fulfilling, and provide them with a sense of common purpose and shared identity. Tension between instrumentality and affection therefore provides one instance of how the dialectic of *autonomy-connection* is experienced within mature student friendships at university.

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**Expressiveness-protectiveness.** Informant interviews also offered evidence of what Rawlins describes as the dialectic of expressiveness-protectiveness in friendships, which explains the tension friends experience between desiring open and honest communication on the one hand, and wishing to protect their own feelings and those of their friend on the other hand. For informants, this was sometimes experienced as a tension, especially early on in university, between wishing to open up to others and a fear of disclosure, as illustrated in the following focus group exchange between Jane and Lisa:

I would have felt like a bit of a fraud for the first two years because I felt like I was kind of keeping a lot of stuff to myself. I wasn't doing it out of badness, it's just I felt a bit ashamed, like a lot ashamed... but eventually, you know, I had a lot of support in Lisa at the start. Oh God [gets upset] (Jane, 36).

You see that's my mammy instinct. You know, if I see someone vulnerable, even the younger people, like I will just ask, "Do you need a little bit of help?" (Lisa, 37).

So just to say Lisa, [Turning to Lisa] I would have opened up to Lisa sort of the second year. She would have known a lot about me, so in a way it eased it off a little bit. Like I felt like, "God, that's a relief. I don't have to kind of have two different worlds with Lisa" (Jane, 36).

The above suggests a process of gradual and selective disclosure by Lisa, revealing the contradictory impulses to be open and expressive and yet also protective of self (Rawlins, 1983). Like with all relational dialectics, this tension does not occur in isolation. For example, expressiveness-protectiveness noticeably intersected with instrumentality and affection (discussed above) in the interview discourse of Bill and Ben. More than other informants in the study, these two mature students seemed to have difficulty describing the nature of their friendship, and in particular, their comments suggested a degree of tension

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around expressive boundaries. As put by Ben, “I suppose I’d be comfortable talking to him [Bill] about most things... but we mostly talk about college stuff, to tell you the truth. I like that we’re close, but I suppose we’re not too close, if you know what I mean?” [Laughs]. By contrast, in the seemingly closer friendship between Lisa, Sharon, and Jim, the tension expressiveness-protectiveness revealed itself in more diverse and more subtle ways. For example, in the following lengthy exchange in a paired interview with Lisa and Sharon, this tension is suggested first in light-hearted banter about Lisa’s sometimes overbearing “mammy” behaviour, but then also in the much more serious discussion about how Lisa and Sharon helped Jim with his coursework following the death of his father:

She tells me what to do! [Laughs, looking at Lisa] I have to say to Lisa sometimes, “Take your mammy hat off.” And that’s just the mammy element in her, and sometimes if we’re wandering around campus, she’d be like, “Sharon pick up that cup and move it over there” [Both laugh] and I’m halfway to moving the cup and I say, “What am I doing?!” (Sharon, 31).

It’s the same with Jim... six foot of Jim and he gets turned into a little boy [Laughs] (Lisa, 37).

But we have become tremendous support for one another (Sharon, 31).

And we’ve really seen how much we rely on each other this semester with Jim’s dad dying. We’ve had to help and support him and literally sit him down. I mean the man literally can’t even think at the moment, he’s in that raw grief stage and that could last up to a year but he needs to graduate... so we literally sat him down and we all sat down and that really helped *us*. It was nearly selfish, I felt almost selfish doing it (Lisa, 37).

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Yeah, I felt very energized (Sharon, 31).

Because we were telling him, this is what you need to do and this is how you need to do it. And it was motivating *us* to get stuff done as well (Lisa, 37).

You see, we're emotionally invested in each other now, and we have our own baggage. I'm the fixer in my own family. I don't know if that's something that I've just carried on here. I mean, if Lisa needs help with something, then I'll help her or whatever, and same for Jim. But I wouldn't say we have defined roles (Sharon, 31).

Yeah, we're very open, and we share a lot. (Lisa, 37).

The above exchange suggests that the friendship that exists between Lisa, Sharon, and Jim is perceived by all as a true friendship that is genuinely reciprocal and emotionally engaging, and that each is comfortable expressing himself or herself ("We're very open and we share a lot"), though Sharon's comments about Lisa's "mammy" behaviour perhaps demonstrate more protectiveness than honesty on her part. This exchange provides a sense of how their particular friendship is enacted and performed, including expressive roles. As the exchange unfolds, they describe how the recent death of Jim's father was not only devastating for him personally but was also distressing and disorientating for the group as a whole. Indeed, Lisa's use of the word "selfish" again suggests a point of intersection between expressiveness-protectiveness and instrumentality and affection. Rather than pushing Jim to talk about his feelings, Lisa and Sharon respected his "raw grief" and instead directed their efforts at identifying and itemizing a series of tasks which they would collectively engage in. While Sharon claims that the three do not have defined roles, as such, the above exchange does suggest relational duties of a sort (e.g., Lisa acting as "mammy" and Sharon as "fixer"). It is important to note that the comments of Lisa and Sharon resonate with Jim's remarks in a subsequent individual interview. For example, in the following passage Jim describes his

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“osmotic bond” with Lisa and Sharon and recounts a recent meeting (or “regrouping”) with the other two:

Recently, with my dad passing on you know, things for me got difficult. I had fallen behind, and I spoke to lecturers, and they were ok. But little did I know that the other two [Lisa and Sharon] were suffering as well, not because of my father’s death but because we’d had so little contact. It’s like osmosis now between the three of us—we only need to be in the one room. So that’s how we’ve bonded over the three years. So we decided to have a regroup session... And we rang one another on Wednesday, and the three of us are back up again... you know, we only need to be in the same room. You’re stuck, I’ll pull you along. I’m stuck, you pull me along. Or you’re pushed. That’s the dynamic (Jim, 54).

In the above passage Jim describes the reciprocal nature of his friendship with Sharon and Lisa, but in the interview he also explained the difficulty he experienced during this “regrouping” in wishing to both express his grief and yet also keep it private. In the end he was grateful that his friends respected his reluctance to speak about it and viewed this as a sign of protective support on their part. As he put it, “When the chips are down, you know who your mates are” (Jim, 54). As with the tension instrumentality and affection, the tension expressiveness-protectiveness points to some of the difficulties mature students experience in their university friendships. Both tensions reveal how mature students struggle with the dialectical push and pull between building meaningful connections with friends at university and retaining personal autonomy.

### Discussion

In this report I presented findings emerging from an ongoing interpretative study of mature student identities and friendships at university. The purpose of the report was to

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explore some of the dialectical tensions experienced by such students, both at the intergroup level (relating to *difference and similarity*) and within their university friendships (relating to *autonomy and connection*). The interview testimonies of informants suggested that they experienced tensions, first, in feeling both similar and dissimilar to their younger peers, and second, in desiring open and intimate relationships with their campus friends while also wishing to retain autonomy and keep such relationships collegial or instrumental. More broadly, the findings highlighted the *selective integration* of mature students into campus culture, yet also suggested that their friendships with other mature students helped them to navigate university life and make sense of their shared positionality and experience.

Although mature students as a cohort of non-traditional students will be familiar to readers, this study finds (along with others) that this cohort is internally diverse and heterogeneous and that differences within (including age) can sometimes be greater than differences without. Gender, class background, and other identity categories intersect and overlap in the interview testimonies of mature students, as do narratives of past, present, and future. As Stevenson and Clegg (2012) suggest, these students are “keenly aware of the relationship between their past lives, their present constraints and their future possibilities. They recognize that their life experiences have disrupted both their learning trajectories and their learning identities and that their futures are not always certain” (p. 10). Likewise, this study confirms that mature students’ motivations for entering university are complex and multifaceted (though I perhaps find greater evidence of instrumental considerations than is often reported in other studies, which is indicative no doubt of the wider recession context).

It is noteworthy that the study reported here is the first in Ireland to utilize relational dialectics theory, meaning that there remains considerable scope in this context to further apply this theoretical perspective. It is equally important to emphasize, however, that the findings reported here are relevant to *all* mature students, whatever their nationality (although

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it must be acknowledged that the relatively low overall number of participants in the study limits the generalizability of the findings). This study suggests that uncovering dialectical tensions experienced by mature students on campus may help universities to better understand the lived realities of such students and improve their relational satisfaction. The analysis above also suggests a number of potential action steps (cf. Simons et al., 2013). First, while it has long been recognized that higher education is not uniformly accessed or experienced, this study suggests that universities should make greater efforts to trace the effects of surrounding discourses on identity formation, relationship development, and learning amongst non-traditional students, including mature students (cf. Baxter, 2011). Second, although the findings here, especially at the intergroup level, highlight some of the negative experiences of mature students at university (e.g., self-segregation), it is suggested that these might be constructively employed in the design of more inclusive class-based exercises. For example, assigning *parental* roles to younger students in group exercises may help to generate greater intergroup understanding. Finally, universities should make efforts to better understand how the tensions experienced by mature students (such as those reported here) influence both their learning and their learning environment. Informants in this study, for example, tended to favor individual learning, except where collaborative learning involved other mature students. Moreover, their interview testimonies suggested that experienced tensions can sometimes be *productive* in respect of learning.

To further investigate this subject, future research should attempt to disaggregate the mature student cohort (for example, by focusing on gender differences) and investigate other intergroup relations (for example, relationships with academic staff). Indeed, scholars might address the university *itself* as a relational partner (see Simmons et al., 2013). Furthermore, dialectical studies of university friendships should consider a range of friendship types and cross-group friendships, including, for example, friendships between mature students and



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traditional-age students. Finally, while a number of contradictions are described and illustrated here, future research should attempt the next theoretical task, which is to identify and elaborate praxis patterns. Such research will help us to better understand the shifting experiences of those for whom the front row of the lecture hall is often not the margins of campus culture but rather a site of resistance, belonging, and group solidarity.

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