Globalization, Individualization and Gender in Adolescents’ Texts

Pat O’Connor

Drawing on texts written by young people aged 14–17 years in a school context in response to an invitation to write a page describing themselves and their vision of Ireland and to use the reverse side creatively for drawings, poems or songs, this article illustrates the methodological difficulties of exploring globalization and individualization in such texts. The indicators of globalization were global entertainment and consumer culture, global technology, references to international travel, and global concerns. The indicators of individualization were the absence of references to structural location, or the presence of references to choices, hopes or plans and related images. There were insurmountable methodological difficulties in differentiating between individualization in these terms and stereotypical ways of ‘doing boy/girl’. Hence, the typology that was created focussed on the global content of the main texts and back pages and their gendered content.

Introduction

Globalization has been variously defined, sometimes including a cultural, political, and/or economic element and frequently linked with the dominance of consumer culture and a focus on global media products. However, it has also been widely noted that this focus on transnational processes and technologies underestimates variation in the meaning and assimilation of global products and symbols within particular local cultural contexts (Bennett, 2000; Paulgaard, 2002). The methodological purpose of this article is to illustrate the way in which globalization can be explored in young people’s written texts and other visual data. In addition, it highlights the difficulties of looking at individualization in such texts, and in particular differentiating between it and the persistence of stereotypical ways of ‘doing boy/girl’.

A number of theorists (such as Beck, 1992, 1994; Beck & Beck-Gernsheim, 2002; Giddens, 1991) have suggested that young people’s experiences can best be explored in the context of a theory of individualization. Thus, rather than identity being expressed in terms of structural categories (such as age or class position), the focus is on individual choice and on ‘becoming’ in a context where information and knowledge are being rapidly absorbed and revised. In this reflexive context, Giddens (1991, p. 217) suggested that: ‘What gender identity is, and how it is expressed, has become itself a matter of multiple options’. However, although gender is seen as ‘part of a collective moulding of individual behaviour’ that has been rendered obsolete, it is not consistently referred to as an outdated category (Beck & Beck-Gernsheim, 2002, pp. xxiv and 203, respectively). Thus, conceptually as well as methodologically, there are difficulties in differentiating between individualization and stereotypical ways of ‘doing boy/girl’.

The texts that are the focus of this article were part of a wider sample of texts written in a school context by those in Fifth Class in First Level (typically aged 10–12 years) and those in Transition Year in Second Level (typically aged 14–17 years) in response to an invitation, to ‘tell their life stories’, to write a page ‘describing themselves and the Ireland that they inhabit’ so as to ‘to provide a national data base’ ‘an invaluable archive’. Thus, they can be seen as similar to solicited diaries (Bell, 1998) or externally required texts (Stanley, 2000). In addition to these main texts, the young people were given the option of using the reverse side of the sheet creatively for drawings, poems, songs, lyrics, or anything else that they wished to include. The latter type of data has begun to be seen as a way of stepping outside a particular verbal culture (Prosser, 1998) and providing insights into young people’s concepts of health (Wetton & McWhirter, 1998); family (O’Brien, Alldred, & Jones, 1996); examinations (Leonard, 2003) and self image (Wakefield & Underwager, 1998). It has been argued that the
Difficulties posed by such material are not necessarily much greater than that posed by verbal data (Becker, 1998; Prosser, 1998), although the difficulty of combining data generated by different methods has been recognized (Bryman, 1992; Deacon, Bryman, & Fenton, 1998). However, such an approach potentially provides deeper insights than that derived from one method alone. Hence, this is the approach used in this article, focusing on a random subset ($n = 96$) of the 14–17-year-old texts and exploring indicators of globalization and of individualization in the main texts and back pages.

Globalization and the Irish Context

Ireland is a small society of just over four million people. It has been identified for the past three years as the most globalized country by the AT Kearney Globalization Index which ranks 62 countries (which together account for 85 per cent of the world’s population: see O’Toole, 2003). The index includes indicators of technology connectedness; international personal contacts, such as international travel and tourism; and indicators of economic integration and international political engagement. Globalization in Ireland stemmed first from the substantial structural funds received in the late 1980s and 1990s from the European Union, in addition to the legal transformation of the position of women associated with membership of it (O’Connor, 1998; O’Toole, 2003). Second, it has stemmed from the increasing penetration of Irish society by privately owned media conglomerates (providing tabloid newspapers, Sky television channels, etc.; Devereux, 2003). Third, it has been driven by US influence, with 25 per cent of all new US investment in the EU since 1993 coming to Ireland—far more than its parity share, since Ireland has only 1 per cent of the EU population. Finally, a tradition of very high levels of emigration, particularly in the 19th century, created a diaspora that in turn became an important contributor to globalization (Gray, 2004). Thus, global influences at the economic, legal, technological, and cultural level have increasingly been very much a part of Irish life, with TV ownership in Ireland exceeding 98 per cent of households, and the viewing hours of Irish households being above the EU average (ODTR, 1998). Ownership of a household computer has also been increasing rapidly in Ireland: from 19 per cent of all households in 1998, to 32 per cent in 2000, to 42 per cent in 2003. Similarly, the percentage of households with Internet connections rose from 5 per cent in 1998 to 20 per cent in 2000, to 34 per cent in 2003 (CSO, 2003).

The social and cultural context in which the young people in this study, born between 1982 and 1985, have grown up has been one of rapid economic, social, and cultural change. During their lives, the economy moved from being the ‘sick man of Europe’ in the 1980s to the ‘Celtic Tiger’ in the 1990s; massive outward emigration in the 1980s has given way to inward migration; high levels of respect for authority have given way to an increasing awareness of corruption in the institutional church, the economic system, and the State. As a society, Ireland had remained patriarchal in the sense that divorce was not allowed until 1997; married women’s participation in paid employment was very considerably below the EU average up to the 1990s; and very high levels of church attendance persisted until relatively recently within what was a predominantly Catholic society (O’Connor, 1998, 2000). Irish people’s evaluation of their own culture and life style has traditionally been low (Brody, 1974), a position that is popularly believed to have been transformed by recent economic success. The consequent ‘melange of modernities and traditions … which animate contemporary Ireland’ has been described as a ‘collision culture’ (Keohane & Kuhling, 2004, p. 7).

We know relatively little about the lived experience of young people in this society: what we do know mainly revolving around health-related concerns and educational experiences. The European School Survey Project on alcohol and drugs (ESPAD, 2004) involving data from 35 countries showed that more than a quarter (26 per cent) of Irish 15–16-year-olds had been drunk at least three times in the past month, and almost a third (32 per cent) had five or more drinks in a row at least three times in the past month. No other country exceeded these trends. There was little gender difference in the Irish trends. Lifetime cannabis use was also relatively high in international terms in both this study and in the Health Behaviour in School-Aged
Children Survey (HBSC, 2004). Thus, quite clearly, young people in Ireland use escapist mood-altering drugs to a greater extent than their European counterparts and, at least in the case of alcohol, do so to excess several times a month. Concerns have also been expressed about Irish young people’s levels of actual and attempted suicide rates (National Suicide Review Group, 2004).

In Ireland, attendance at school is compulsory up to age 16 years, and 73 per cent of girls and 57 per cent of boys are in full-time education at age 18 (CSO, 2004). Girls outperform boys in state examinations—a pattern that sits uneasily with the ideological assumptions underpinning patriarchal dominance in the economic system, the state, the institutional church, etc. (O’Connor, 1998). Boys’ educational experiences are typically narrower and less focused than girls’ on personal development, while practices (such as ‘streaming’) which stigmatize those who are less able academically are more common in boys’ than in girls’ schools (Baker, Lynch, Cantillon, & Walsh, 2004). We know relatively little about young people’s social and emotional lives. Friends were mentioned by half of those in one study as the first place they would go to if they had a serious problem, such as stress, anxiety or depression (NYCI, 1998). Using the same database as in the present article, although more than half (56 per cent) of the 14–17-year-old girls referred to friends in their texts, only just over a quarter (26 per cent) of the boys did so. A very small proportion of both boys and girls referred to best friends (17 per cent and 4 per cent, respectively), the kinds of relationships where stress, anxiety, etc. might be discussed (O’Connor, Haynes, & Kane, 2003). Hence, one might suggest that, at least as indicated by these data, young people were unlikely to have the kinds of relationships that might enable them to talk through such worries and anxieties: a pattern that could be seen as related to their relatively high levels of drunkenness, etc.

**Methodology**

Stanley (2000, p. 40) noted that auto/biography is concerned with ‘practices, that is the myriad of everyday and frequently competing social practices concerned with the articulation of (often competing, sometimes discontinuous) notions of “selves” and “lives”’. The accounts produced by the young people in this study are organizationally driven in the sense that they were invited to do them within a school setting (a common strategy in studies of young people; James & Prout, 1990).

In this article, the focus is on a sub-set of texts written by those in Transition Year in Second Level in Ireland (typically aged 14–17 years). These were part of a wider universe of 4100 texts which were randomly selected from a total universe of 33,828 texts returned by half of the 3658 schools in Ireland. Of the 4100 texts, 14 per cent were written by those in Transition Year. A random sub-sample \( n = 96 \) of these 14–17- year-olds texts are the focus of the present paper (58 per cent of these were written by girls, as compared with 62 per cent in the overall Transition Year sample).

All of these texts were written in response to an invitation, as part of the millennium celebrations, to ‘tell their life stories’, to write a page ‘describing themselves and the Ireland that they inhabit’ so as to ‘to provide a national database’ and ‘an invaluable archive’. The guidelines sent to teachers suggested that topics include: locality and community, family and friends, home, hopes and ambitions for the new millennium, pastimes and hobbies, role models and influences including fun, fashion, music, sport, technology, and games (Write Now, 1999). The young people were told that a random selection of texts would be bound into a Millennium Book that would be presented to the President of Ireland. The remainder of the texts were returned to the schools (the sample of 4100 texts having been drawn before they were returned). They were encouraged to produce local or regional Millennium Books, since the purpose of the exercise was ‘a lively, unmediated account of a young person’s life’, which would explain to a ‘time traveller’ in 2999 what ‘they could have expected to see, hear, enjoy and avoid’ in the previous millennium (Write Now, 1999). This focus gave the young people the opportunity to imagine such a reader and to try and give them ‘some insight into
what life is like for teenagers … and what all us teenagers do with our selves’ (Joan Kay, Transition Year), thereby potentially reducing power imbalances between adults and young people (James et al., 1998). The directions to schools specifically indicated that no selection was to be made on the basis of quality, appropriateness, etc. The adolescent texts varied considerably in structure and style. Nevertheless, the influence of the school setting or perceived reader on the texts cannot be ascertained; nor can one know to what extent the texts reflect normative ideas about young people’s lives, although in so far as there are gendered patterns, it seems possible that they may do so at least to some extent.

To ensure confidentiality, pseudonyms were used and identifying information, local or school referents were not used in the case of individual quotations. Although the specific permission of the young people involved was not sought, this material came from an initiative aimed at providing an account of their lives for future generations: a reference to the use of such data for research purposes being included in the material sent to schools. Given increasing awareness of the importance of children’s perspectives politically (Government Publications, 2000) and in the wider sociological context (Brannen & O’Brien, 1996; Cleary, Nic Ghiolla Phadraig, & Quinn, 2001) these texts were seen as providing a unique source.

The method of analysis in the overall study was both quantitative and qualitative. Gender was a focus of interest in both. A coding frame assessed the absence/presence of a number of themes including descriptions of self, local embeddedness, family and friends, etc. A thematic qualitative analysis was undertaken of a random selection of 600 sheets each by two of the other researchers. Working initially in the context of the categories identified in the quantitative analysis, themes and sub-themes were identified and quotations transcribed to illustrate these. The qualitative data were also used inductively to identify themes, which were in some cases reframed in interaction with the theoretical literature. A focus on global elements was one of those that emerged through this process. In order to explore such global content, a random sub-sample (n=96) of the 14–17-year-old texts was drawn and a typology developed, initially based on the global content of the main text and the back page. These types were then relabelled based on a more in-depth analysis of their content.

Four types of global elements were identified: first, those referring to a global entertainment or consumer culture, whether at the level of bands, chart song lyrics, international sport, designer labels or other material artefacts; second, global technology, including TV programmes, the Internet, mobile phones etc; third, references to international travel (see Rygaard 2003); and fourth, global concerns, including war, global warming etc. In the sub-sample (n = 96) of adolescent texts that is the focus of this article, almost two-thirds (64 per cent) of the main texts were assessed as having global elements (68 per cent of the boys’ and 61 per cent of the girls’ respectively). The most common was the first one, although some texts included references to more than one element. Those aspects of their lifestyle which were not seen as global included those related to references to local family, friends, school or community networks, locally played sports, etc. Irish pop and rock bands were seen as global, since they were at least potentially part of the global entertainment industry. Passing references to enjoying discos were not seen as global, since it was not possible to know whether local friends or global music was the basis for the reference.

The young people were given the option of using the reverse side of the sheet creatively for drawing, poems, songs, lyrics, etc. As one would expect in the light of other work (such as Morrow, 1998; Punch, 2002) the extent to which they used this back page varied by gender and indeed also by age. Thus, across the sample as a whole, the 14–17-year-olds were much more likely than the 10–12-year-olds to leave it blank (49 per cent as compared with 27 per cent). The boys were more likely than the girls (in both age groups) to do this. These trends were replicated in the random sub-sample of the 14–17-year-olds (n = 96): 58 per cent of the boys and 41 per cent of the girls leaving the back page blank (as compared with 57 per cent
and 44 per cent in the 4100 sample). In the sub-sample (and in the total sample), boys were most likely to use the back page for drawings/collages; girls for songs/poems (Table 1).

The content of the back pages in the sub-sample \((n = 96)\) was classified in terms of the absence/presence of global elements. Drawings of TV characters or of international soccer teams, collages of international pop stars, products or song lyrics, etc. were classified as global. Drawings of local football events, lists of friends, chat up lines, verses from classical English poems, etc. were not regarded as global. There were some drawings that were difficult to classify. Thus, on Dolores Prendergast’s back page, there was a drawing of a tight bud of a rose on a stem coming up through barbed wire with the suggestion of what might be a rainbow, a river, and drops of rain in the background. One might suggest that this image suggested beauty despite evil/trouble; the blending of transience (the rose and rainbow) with the permanence of rivers capturing the continuity of life and yet its finiteness-elements that were also present in the main text. It was not defined as global in the terms defined in this study. Just under a quarter of the back pages in the sub-sample were deemed to have global elements, with boys and girls being more or less equally likely to have such global elements on their back pages. When one excluded the back pages that were blank, the proportion with global elements increased to 44 per cent: with boys being more likely than girls to include global elements on their back pages (53 per cent vs. 39 per cent, respectively).

Table 1. Content of back page by gender in 14–17-year total and sub-sample

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Type of Sample</th>
<th>Drawing/ collages</th>
<th>Songs/poems</th>
<th>Other, e.g lists/facts</th>
<th>Blank</th>
<th>Total</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>A/total sample</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Boys</td>
<td>18% (41)</td>
<td>13% (30)</td>
<td>12% (26)</td>
<td>57% (130)</td>
<td>100% (227)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Girls</td>
<td>15% (54)</td>
<td>28% (106)</td>
<td>13% (48)</td>
<td>44% (165)</td>
<td>100% (373)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>16% (95)</td>
<td>23% (136)</td>
<td>12% (74)</td>
<td>49% (295)</td>
<td>100% (600)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>B/sub-sample</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Boys</td>
<td>25% (10)</td>
<td>13% (5)</td>
<td>5% (2)</td>
<td>58% (23)</td>
<td>101% (40)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Girls</td>
<td>18% (10)</td>
<td>32% (18)</td>
<td>9% (5)</td>
<td>41% (23)</td>
<td>100% (56)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>21% (20)</td>
<td>24% (23)</td>
<td>7% (7)</td>
<td>48% (46)</td>
<td>100% (96)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

In order to provide a deeper understanding of the way in which global elements were reflected in the young people’s texts, four main types were identified on the basis of both the content of the main text and the back page. In the qualitative exploration of the content of these types, individualization was seen as reflected in ‘disembedding’: in the absence of references to young people’s structural location within institutions; in direct or indirect references to choice, hopes, plans or anxious reflexivity or (in the case of the back page) to images or content which suggested these elements. Thus, for example, a drawing of Stressed Eric, a cartoon TV figure, was seen as both an individualistic and global image. It was impossible to differentiate between stereotypical gendered scripts and freely negotiated ways of ‘doing boy/girl’ which conformed to traditional patterns. Thus, for example, although references by girls to playing football (a nonstereotypical pattern) could be seen as individualistic, references by girls to pop music or by boys to football could be seen either as indicators of individualization or as stereotypical ways of ‘doing boy/girl’. These issues are explored in the
qualitative analysis of the types below (Table 2). (The excerpts are verbatim quotations, with spelling, grammatical, and other mistakes/capitalization as in the original texts.)

**Type 1: Global, Somewhat Gendered (Global Elements in Main Text and Back Page)**

This type accounted for 19 per cent of the sub-sample of 14–17-year-olds, and there was little difference in the proportion of boys and girls in this type (18 per cent vs. 20 per cent, respectively). Paradoxically, those in this type were particularly likely to begin by locating themselves structurally. In this respect, they can be seen to confirm Gray’s (2004, p. 162) observation that globalization, rather than ‘heralding homogenization and an emptying of cultural content’, points to ‘the culturalization of local identities’. The picture as regards individualization was not clear cut since, on the one hand, they located themselves structurally, and on the other hand, there was evidence of individualization as reflected in favourite television programmes and pop groups and plans or hopes as regards international travel.

**Table 2. Distribution of types by gender (sub-sample: 14–17 years)**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Types:</th>
<th>Boys</th>
<th>Girls</th>
<th>Total</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1: ‘Global, Somewhat Gendered’: Global elements on both</td>
<td>18% (7)</td>
<td>20% (11)</td>
<td>19% (18)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2: ‘Less Global, Somewhat Gendered’: Global ‘in passing’; back page blank</td>
<td>35% (14)</td>
<td>16% (9)</td>
<td>24% (23)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3: ‘Essentially Gendered’: Global elements on main page</td>
<td>15% (6)</td>
<td>25% (14)</td>
<td>21% (20)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4: ‘Individualized, Somewhat Gendered’ No Global</td>
<td>28% (11)</td>
<td>36% (20)</td>
<td>32% (31)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5: Residual: ‘Individualized and Global’: Global on back page only</td>
<td>5% (2)</td>
<td>4% (2)</td>
<td>4% (4)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>101% (40)</td>
<td>101% (56)</td>
<td>100% (96)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Lorraine Begley located herself structurally at the start of the main text: giving her name, age, school year and location, evening job and time of arrival home. She located the family socially by referring to her parents’ occupations (her mother being a nurse and her father a sales representative and small farmer). She described the family composition and the ages of her two sisters. Her career aspiration mirrored her mother’s job. She did not actually name her local area but defined it in terms of its distance from her school. Her hobbies included ‘horse-riding, walking, listening to music, hurling and football’. She made detailed references to global entertainment and global technology, referring to her favourite pop groups (Robbie Williams, the Corrs, etc.); and her favourite television programmes (Friends, Dawson’s Creek, Ally McBeal, etc.). Her back page also featured a global element—a romantic lyric (Perfect Moment) by Martina McCutcheon. The other global element in her text was her reference to ‘wanting to travel the world’ and to ‘live in Australia when I am older’.

Similarly, Jim Doherty having referred to his name, place of residence, and school year, referred to global aspects of the entertainment industry, describing himself as a ‘great fan’ of rock bands such as the Manic Street Preachers and the Stereophonics. The invitation to young people included the possibility of acting as social interpreters for a future reader with those (like Jim Doherty) who adopted this role implicitly becoming what Giddens (1994, pp. 65 and 82) called ‘guardians’ ‘who supply interpretations’. Thus, he referred to global political
issues, such as the war in Kosovo and the intervention of NATO. As he saw it: ‘Ireland is a great country and has come a long way as far as music and politics is concerned’. He described school as ‘not half bad. … we seem to be out of school more than we are in it’. However, he was concerned about teenagers’ lives: ‘Life for teenagers in Ireland is very pressurised as far as Alcohol and Drugs. Most of my friends drink regularly and I see that they have a lot of problems already’. For him, music was both an escape and a possible future career: ‘I love to mess around on my guitar at home. I hope to play professionally one day’. He used the back page to draw an electric guitar, with a line of a lyric that he identified as coming from the Manic Street Preachers: ‘The aim of design is to define space’. One could suggest that this line captures the dilemma of contemporary Irish cultural existence: cultural ambiguity after decades of authoritarianism leading to a lack of clear purpose and identity. Thus, both the main text and the back page included global elements. For him, the global seemed to be a way of escaping from difficult international and national realities: the back page focusing on what one could regard as this escapist element. Thus, despite his structural embeddedness, there was a suggestion of individualization in his enjoyment of music and his occupational hopes.

Other texts were much more focused on consumerism. Fionnuala Phelan’s back page was a photocopied collage of what she called ‘Some Stars of the 90s’ and included photos of pop stars surrounded by material objects such as Nokia mobile phones, Nike Air Zoom runners (priced at £99.99), Compact Discs and hairdryers (with brand names visible). This back page could be seen as both part of a social documentary of teenagers’ material culture and as a record of the material cultural artefacts in her own life. It complemented and illustrated the global consumerist theme in her main text (Miles, Dallas, & Burr, 1998). Again, however, the extent to which it could be seen as reflecting individualization was unclear.

In this type, both the main text and the back page were assessed as having global elements. Global entertainment and technology were particularly salient, with global political concerns and consumer culture also being evident. The back pages developed or highlighted specific global elements mentioned in the main text. The assessment as regards individualization was confused, since structural embedding was combined with evidence of choice as regards television programmes, pop groups, travel, music, etc. Furthermore, it was unclear to what extent the gendered patterns (for example, boys being more likely to refer to global political events and girls to romantic lyrics) reflected stereotypical gender patterns or individually negotiated ones.

Type 2: Less Global, Somewhat Gendered (Global ‘In Passing’ and Back Page Blank)

Just under a quarter (24 per cent) of the young people were of this type: with boys being more likely than girls to be in it (35 per cent as compared with 16 per cent, respectively). The majority of these texts included a global element, but referred to it, almost in passing, in the main text. The back pages in all cases were blank. Thus, Mark Brown began by referring to his area of residence, age, school, farming background, his father and mother’s names, and the composition of his family: so that there was little evidence of structural disembedding. He mentioned his pastimes (‘snooker, reading, watching TV and socializing’); his favourite snooker player, his favourite author, snooker club and the nightclub where he socialized with his friends. Finally, he indicated that he was also a fan of soccer: ‘My favourite team are Arsenal. In May 1998 we were crowned Premiership and FA Cup champions’. This was the only global element in the text. However, the use of the word ‘we’ was very striking, suggesting a very strong identification with this limited global element. Football is widely seen as a key site for the expression of masculinity, so the extent to which it can be seen as reflecting individualization is unclear.

Mags Lawson’s reference to a global element similarly occurred at the end of a text where she had referred to her ambitions for the millennium; her anticipation that she would do her
Leaving Certificate, get into the course she wanted, go travelling with her friends for the summer, and generally have a lot more freedom when she was eighteen. As in the case of Mark Brown, reference to a global element occurred at the end of the main text when she referred to spending New Year’s Eve with family and friends listening ‘to Robbie Williams as I think he is a brilliant singer and performer and could be a role model for everyone.’ As in the other texts in this category, the back page was blank. Overall, in its focus on individual plans and choices, it can potentially be seen as individualized, although the reference to pop music was reflective of gender stereotypical patterns.

In summary, then, roughly a quarter of the young people were in this type (35 per cent of boys; 16 per cent of girls). Typically in these accounts, references to global elements were brief and made very much in passing, and the back page was blank. Despite the presence of global elements in the main text, this type was seen as less global than Type 1. Again, the evidence as regards individualization was complex. Thus, there was greater variation than in Type 1 as regards structural embedding while there were similar references to choice and similar dilemmas as regards the interpretation of stereotypical gender patterns. Like Type 1, it was seen as somewhat gendered.

Type 3: Essentially Gendered (Although Global Elements on Main Page)

Beck and Beck-Gernsheim (2002, p. 113) recognized that despite individualization, it was possible that ‘elements of a gender-specific socialization’ were still at work as regards, for example, women’s attitudes to caring. They did not indicate how such elements were related to individualized choices. However, Renold (2004, p. 249) noted that: ‘The more complex theorization of the gendering process has shifted from ‘roles’ that males and females ‘learn’ to an understanding of the forming of gender identities as relational, multiple, processual’. It is thus theoretically possible for individualization to be combined with gendered accounts. Given the nature of the data, however, it was impossible to differentiate between indicators of individualization and gender stereotyping.

This type accounted for 21 per cent of the sub-sample of 14–17-year-olds. Girls were more likely than boys to be in this category (25 per cent as compared with 15 per cent, respectively). In contrast to those in Type 1, they were typically less concerned with locating themselves structurally, and so in this sense could be seen as more individualized. They were also less global than Type 1, since there were no global elements on the back page, although there were such elements in the main text. Whereas, in Type 2, the back page was blank, in this type it illustrated or highlighted the content of the main text. However, in contrast to both the previous two types, the tenor of both the main text and the back page was such as to suggest that gender was the dominant theme.

Thus, Mary Mulligan’s main text was a social commentary that revolved around a gendered topic: ‘Fashion! Looks! Labels!’; which she says ‘play an important part in my life and in the life of those around’. She did not locate herself structurally, but described her favourite clothes, her make up, and her hair style, thus suggesting individualization, albeit one mapped by gender. She saw a global concern with the body as critical in defining identity and in affecting other’s evaluation of us:

all you have to do is turn on the television and there are advertisements for slimming foods or other ways to make yourself thin … to be popular and cool you have to be pretty and thin. … We’re all moulded to look like a model because we know that the first thing we notice about someone is their looks.

Her reference to global elements included the latest labels (Nike, Rebock, Adidas). These were seen as important, since they can ‘give us confidence in how we look’. The content of her back page consisted of what were described as ‘chat up lines’: suggesting a sexual
relationship (‘first ruffle the person’s hair and say: I just wanted to see what you looked like in the morning’); a more broadly romantic one (‘if I could rearrange the alphate (sic) I’d put I and U together’); and one implicitly suggesting male power (‘Your father stole the stars and put them in your eyes’). Unlike the main text, the back page included no global elements. However, when taken together, the two can be seen as part of a gender narrative, although the extent of individualization is not clear.

Other accounts focused on ‘critical moments’ (Thomson et al., 2002) frequently linked with accounts of football matches in masculine ‘narratives of remembering’ (Mac an Ghiall, 1994, p. 25). Tony Doherty’s text illustrated this kind of theme. In the main text, having referred to his date of birth, he quickly turned to sport, describing it as something that had ‘made a big impact on my life, both World Cups 1990 and 1994 had some of the happiest and saddest days of my life’, with Kildare winning the Leinster final in Gaelic football being referred to as: ‘The moment in my life up to now’. Kildare was later beaten by Galway, and ‘that was heartbreaking’. The intensity of the language, reflected in the repetition of the word ‘heartbreaking’ to refer both to that defeat and to Ireland’s defeat in the World Cup was striking. Tony Doherty concluded by writing that: ‘Nothing else has happened in my life since … but I am content with life and that’s enough’. This can be seen as implying that competitive defeat, in an all-male context (whether global or local) that affirmed a gendered identity is ‘enough’. As in Mary Mulligan’s text, there was no explicit reference to a gendered identity. However, football can be seen as a metaphor for his life: with competition in an all-male context being seen as inevitable; success, exhilarating; defeat as emotionally exhausting, but the reinforcement of a gendered identity through the activity being the ultimate validation. His back page consisted of a drawing of four team members holding up a Cup, with the caption specifying that it was the Leinster Final—‘a great day in my life’. Thus, whereas the main text included a global element, the back page did not. However, in so far as the key element is seen as the articulation of a male identity, this apparent discontinuity is sidestepped. In its focus on a critical moment, it can be seen as reflexive and hence individualized—although the content suggested a more stereotypical articulation of identity.

Derek Murphy’s text illustrated another albeit similar male-gendered account. He referred to his height, to playing a wide range of sports, and to aspects of a global entertainment industry that he saw as influencing teenagers’ dress, hairstyles, and sporting activities. He referred to going out to the pub with his friends every weekend and on to the disco three hours later (a traditional pattern in Irish life, and one that can be seen as reflecting a cultural unease with heterosexual contexts: O’Connor, 2003). He noted that, although legally you needed to be 18 to get served alcoholic drink in Ireland, ‘most pubs serve 16-year-olds without asking for ID’. His text concludes with ‘Thanks for Reading’, implicitly suggesting that an interest in young people’s lives cannot be taken for granted (see Anderson, 2001). The back page of Derek Murphy’s text featured 18 signatures (11 by boys and seven by girls) beneath a quote that he said ‘describes how young people feel about life these days’: ‘Reality is an illusion caused by lack of alcohol’. The implication is that only in an inebriated state can young people appreciate the distorted nature of reality. It is possible that this is simply bravado and macho-posturing. However, it is clear from his text that the global is a source of enjoyment and influence, while it is the local that allows, supports, and implicitly necessitates what is illegal activity (i.e. under-age drinking). As in the other two examples, it is arguable that at the heart of it is a gendered (arguably stereotypical) account of ‘doing man’ (Haywood & Mac an Ghiall, 2003).

In summary, then, although this type included global elements in the main text but not on the back page, it was suggested that the essence was a gendered account, which could be seen as either individualized or stereotypical. A focus on global elements obscured this essentially gendered account, and distracted attention from the underlying similarity in the content of the main text and the back page. However, it was not possible to explore to what extent this
gendered account did/did not reflect individualistic choice as opposed to stereotypical ways of doing boy/girl.

Type 4: Individualized, Somewhat Gendered (No Global on Main or Back Page)

Just under a third (32 per cent) of the 14–17-year-olds were in this type, with girls being more likely than boys to be in this category (36 per cent and 28 per cent, respectively). This type included those who had no global elements in main text or on the back page or whose back page was blank. These texts can be seen as individualized texts with individualization being seen as a ‘subjective challenge and an individual quest’ (Bauman, 1997, p. 71). These young people typically made no attempt to locate themselves structurally but focussed selectively and exclusively on one particular dimension of their lives (such as Transition Year, school, sports, loss, etc). Beck and Beck-Gernsheim (2002) suggested that individualization was particularly fraught for women because occupational institutions were changing faster than family ones. However, in the present study, it was the content of the girls’ rather than the boys’ texts which most reflected individualization (Beck, 1992, 1994; Beck & Beck-Gernsheim, 2002; Giddens, 1991, 1994).

Thus, Aileen Donoghue’s main text implicitly revolved around issues related to control and choice in her school (the timetable, the subjects that could be done at different stages, the school uniform, rules about footwear, behaviour, etc.), themes that have occurred in other Irish studies of young people’s school experiences (Lynch & Lodge 2002). The back page was blank—as it was in Angela Kelly’s text which focused on gossip and what she saw as the pressure on the person who became the focus of this interest: ‘I often had the honour of this pivotal position, which sent me into hiding for a few days for fear of showing my face’. Others such as Maeve Foley’s (whose back page was also blank) focused on ladies’ football, and thus implicitly challenged gender roles. Cara Walton wrote about the loss of her father at 4 years of age: ‘the saddest thing that ever happen to me’: her back page consisting of a poem she wrote herself about ‘the love, the friendship’ that she has received in one relationship. There were no references whatsoever to global elements in any of these main texts or on the back pages.

Most of the boys’ texts in this category also focused on one or two themes. Many of these included sport of some kind. Thus, Mick O Connor’s revolved around rugby, although he also referred to discos and drinking; while others included references to political elements—both kinds of themes arguably reflecting gendered accounts. There were a small number of texts that suggested a limited range of experiences and/or writing skills. Thus, Jim Bergin hoped ‘to do something in the line of carpentry’ when he left school. His back page consisted of a drawing of a hand. It seemed possible to suggest a link between this image and his desire to be a carpenter.

Overall, these main texts and back pages included no global elements. The focus of the main texts was typically on one particular aspect of their lives. This selective focus could be seen as indicative of individualization, with themes related to this emerging particularly in the case of the girls. In the case of boys, the cultural motifs appeared to be mostly related to stereotypical male concerns such as sports so that one might suggest that the individualization in their cases was limited by gendered scripts.

Type 5: Residual: Individualized and Globalized (Global on Back Page, Not in Main Text)

There were a very small number of texts (4 per cent) where the overall tone was one of anxious reflexivity (Beck & Beck-Gernsheim, 2002; Giddens, 1991) focused on what Birch and Miller (2000, p. 94) called the ‘private experiences of subjectivity’, with the self being ‘an object of attention and sometimes anguished scrutiny’ (Berger, Berger, & Kellner, 1974,
p. 75) and strongly suggestive as regards individualization. There were no global elements on these main texts, although such elements were on the back page.

Thus, Celia Conway agonized about where to start her story; about how many friends she had—and how many most people really have anyway; about whether she should list the names of all her known relatives, but that would be boring, etc. By the end of the text, she regretted the fact that she has said she would not change her text: ‘but I said I wouldn’t and I wont, anyway I cant because we are only allowed one sheet’. There were no global elements in the main text. The back page consisted of a drawing of a global ikon—Stressed Eric, a cartoon figure on TV. It seems plausible to suggest that Celia Conway identified with him and was using him as a kind of code for describing her own feelings. It seems plausible to suggest that there was an effective continuity between the main text and the back page, and that together they illustrated a kind of cultural reflexivity.

The small size of this group (four respondents: two boys and two girls) is provocative given the importance attached to such reflexivity by the individualization theorists, and the implicit assumption that individualization is linked to globalization.

Summary and Conclusions
This article is concerned with young people’s accounts: looking at the extent to which it is possible to explore the existence of global elements in them; and/or whether such accounts are individualized or suggest the persistence of stereotypical ways of ‘doing boy/girl’. It draws on a sub-sample of main texts and back pages written by 14–17-yearolds in a school context, as part of a wider national initiative to encourage young people to ‘tell their life stories’ for posterity within a small fast changing, highly globalized society.

Four indicators of globalization were identified. It was possible to identify such indicators in almost two-thirds (64 per cent) of the main texts. There was greater difficulty in the case of the back page. Nevertheless it was possible to conclude that 23 per cent of the back pages included such elements. One could suggest that the main text is a more accurate indicator of globalization or that the back page, reflecting as it does the more creative aspect of the young people’s orientation, is the more accurate indicator. It is impossible to choose between these two accounts given the nature of the data, thus illustrating the difficulties involved in triangulation (Bryman, 1992; Deacon et al., 1998). An attempt was made to also explore individualization, with the main indicators being lack of reference to structural location (‘disembedding’) and direct or indirect references to choices, hopes, plans, or anxious reflexivity. It was much more difficult to explore this, since it was methodologically impossible to differentiate between stereotypical gendered scripts and negotiated but still gendered individualization.

On the basis of the global content of the main text and the back page, four main types were identified and their gendered character referred to. Type 1 was described as Global, Somewhat Gendered (19 per cent of the sample), since it included those who had been assessed as having global elements in the main text and on the back page. Boys and girls were equally likely to be in this type. There was very little suggestion that the traditional institutional structures has been swept aside by individualization in these texts, since the young people located themselves structurally in their schools, families, etc. There was some variation in gender content but it was not possible to know to what extent this reflected stereotypical gender scripts or individualization. Type 2 was assessed as Less Global, Somewhat Gendered, since there were no global elements on the back page, and those on the main text were mentioned very much in passing. Just under a quarter of the young people (24 per cent) were in this type, with boys being much more likely than girls to be in it (35 per cent of boys as compared with 16 per cent of girls). Again, there were methodological problems in identifying indicators of individualization that could not also be seen as maintaining stereotypical ways of ‘doing boy/girl’.
Type 3 was assessed as Essentially Gendered, since the essence of the texts was gendered accounts, and this gendered reality was reflected in the content of the main text and back pages. This title thus disregarded the global content of the main text in an attempt to make sense of the consistencies in the content of the main text and back pages. Just over a fifth (21 per cent) of the young people were in this type, with girls being more likely than boys to be in it (25 per cent vs. 15 per cent). Given the nature of the data, the extent to which such gendered patterns were stereotypical scripts or individually negotiated ways of ‘doing boy/girl’ (Renold, 2004) was not clear.

Type 4, labelled Individualized, Somewhat Gendered, was assessed as being characterized by the complete absence of global elements in the main text and on the back page. This type typically focused on a specific aspect of the young people’s lives. Just under a third (32 per cent) of the texts were of this type: with girls being more likely than boys to be in this type (36 per cent vs. 28 per cent, respectively). Although it was labelled Individualized, there was a suggestion that individualization in the case of the boys was limited by a focus on stereotypical male activities. Only in the residual group of texts (4 per cent) were global elements combined with a reflexivity which was seen as indicative of individualization.

Gendered patterns existed in each of the main types. Thus, these young people’s accounts suggested that, despite the highly globalized and rapidly changing nature of Irish society, young people’s choices, concerns, and interests continue to be ‘mapped’ by gender. There was little evidence that: ‘What gender identity is, and how it is expressed, has become itself a matter of multiple options’ (Giddens, 1991, p. 81). The qualitative analysis of the texts also suggested that it was the girls’ texts that were most likely to be characterized by indicators of individualization (Beck & Beck-Gernsheim, 2002; Giddens, 1994) with ways of ‘doing boy’ continuing to be reflected in stereotypical themes related to sports and politics.

The methodological purpose of the paper was to illustrate the ways in which globalization could be explored in young people’s written texts and other visual data. Although there were some difficulties in doing this (particularly in the case of the visual data), it was possible to transcend them. Rather than choosing between the main text and the back page as the most valid measure of globalization, they were combined in a typology. However, there were insurmountable difficulties in assessing individualization. Thus, it was impossible to know to what extent gendered patterns reflected stereotypical gendered scripts or could be seen as indicators of gendered individualization. This reflects the methodological limitations of this kind of data in assessing individualization but not globalization.

References