Abstract: Aboriginal peoples in Canada and Travellers in Ireland are both Indigenous and marginalized minorities that share significant similarities. Activism, as a means to ameliorate their representation, not only raises awareness regarding their marginalization, but it also highlights one significant difference between them. The creation of Idle No More was a pivotal event that mobilized Indigenous peoples, including academics to raise awareness of Indigenous issues. So why have academics in Canada engaged in activism to support Indigenous groups while Irish academics have not? This qualitative research paper assesses how the academic community engages in activism for two selected cases. Historical institutionalism will analyze power structures that create opportunities or obstacles for activism within academia, and the actors engaging within these frameworks. The outcome of this research is to generate a discussion of activism for Indigenous groups that discloses its implications within academia and between other institutional arrangements in both countries.

Aboriginal peoples in Canada and Travellers in Ireland are Indigenous marginalized minorities (Lewis and Williams 2007, 59) that share significant similarities. They are the fastest growing populations and have proportionately larger youth populations in their respective countries. Most of them experience lower educational and employment attainment, and are at higher risk for health indicators (diabetes and suicide, for example) when compared to the general population. They are acknowledged by their respective governments as distinct groups.¹ Yet, both groups remain politically under-represented. Activism, as a means to augment their political representation, not only raises awareness regarding their marginalization, but it also highlights one significant difference between Aboriginal peoples and Travellers. Indigenous activism is more pervasive in Canada generally, and in academia specifically, than Traveller activism in Ireland. This may be directly attributed to the mobilization of Indigenous academics in Canada compared to the absence of Travellers in academia in Ireland currently. However, forty years ago there were few Indigenous

¹ Section 35 of Canada’s Constitution Act entrenched Aboriginal and treaty rights (Canada 1982); and the Travelling Community is recognized in the Equal Status Act (EA 2002).
academics and few Indigenous post-secondary students in Canada. Why did this happen in Canada but not in Ireland? What accounts for this significant difference between similar groups? Answering these questions requires a shift to a broader scale of analysis that asks: To what extent do institutions influence Indigenous activism in academia? This qualitative research paper assesses the extent to which institutional legacies support or curtail Indigenous activism in academia in Canada and Ireland. An historical institutionalist approach will be used to analyze power structures that create opportunities or obstacles for activism within one institution, academia, and the actors engaging within these frameworks. The outcome of this research is to generate a discussion of activism for Indigenous groups that discloses its implications within academia and between other institutions in both countries. The paper commences with an introduction to Historical Institutionalism followed by a conceptualization of activism. It then proceeds to provide context regarding post-secondary educational legacies for Aboriginal peoples and Travellers. Next, interviews with academics whose research interests pertain to Aboriginal peoples and Travellers are presented, followed by a discussion of these findings, and the conclusion.

Historical institutionalism (HI) emphasizes that institutions are structured in time and space and as such resist change within and between entities (Pierson and Skocpol 2002). When change does occur it may take place either within the institution or its subsystems. Punctuated-equilibrium theory also explains change in HI by suggesting that change always occurs somewhere in the subsystem, but the systemic level remains stable (Howlett and Rayner 2006, 13). Complementing punctuated equilibrium is the notion of policy paradigms as change. Based on Canadian Aboriginal policy, Howlett’s paradigms in policy research included the notion that ideas about public policy problems can be analyzed as distinct entities, that paradigms change in a predictable fashion, and that the process of paradigm change is applicable to any area where ideas
count. Paradigmatic policy change acknowledges the punctuated equilibrium model. Exogenous sources of change affect policy communities and these are as significant as endogenous sources in explaining policy change (Howlett 1994, 642). Punctuated equilibrium and the paradigmatic model are illustrative of how, when and where change may occur within the stability and path dependency of HI. Up to this point the theoretical development of HI has been devoted to a discussion of dynamics within institutions. Because the state is viewed as an aggregation of various institutions and organizations where decisions made during policy development have a pervasive impact on subsequent policy choices across institutions (Peters 1996, 210).

“Governments are large and complex organizations, but so are universities” (MacKinnon 2014, 55). There are three aspects of HI that frame an analysis of academic institutions. First, historical institutionalism “focuses on asymmetrical power relations as well as the impact of long-term institutional legacies on policy making” (Béland 2005, 29). Second, building on the first, is the notion of how ideas and interests are implicit in HI and how asymmetrical power relations may dominate and control prevailing ideas and interests. Third, a historical institutional analysis is not confined to political institutions. Because ideas and interests do not have boundaries political institutions may simultaneously reflect and influence academic institutions. As much as academia may have a wider lens to explore ideas and interests a historical institutional approach serves as a reminder that academic institutions may actually reflect broader state and societal influences rather than reject them. In summary, HI acknowledges the fluidity of ideas and interests within and between institutions. Change, while possible, may meet resistance within institutional norms.

Activism challenges existing political and societal norms and advocates for change. In this sense it has the potential to question prevalent ideas and interests within institutions whose very structures may prove resistant to reform. Academic involvement in activism varies in purpose and
institutional proximity in five ways. First, academics produce knowledge that informs social change when they contribute to policy processes by writing submissions or engaging in debates. Second, research itself may be framed by activist methodologies. “Action research” is informed by a community participatory model focused on researching current practices. Academics involved in these participatory models “conduct activism as academic work.” Third, the practice and philosophy of teaching is an important site of activism. Fourth, student and staff participation in university decision-making is the fourth sense in which academia is a site of activism to counter criticism that universities are subordinate to government agendas. Finally, academic employment provides income and security to engage in activism off campus, outside of working hours and academic specializations (Flood et al 2013, 17-18). While these are positive aspects of academic activism, negative ones exist as well. Academics are at risk for being labeled an “advocacy academic” because “the legitimacy of scholarly knowledge remains at least partially rooted in a definition of objectivity that emphasizes detachment from the object of study” (Rodino-Colocino 2012, 550). Academics who engage in social justice activism may also encounter administrative resistance to scholarship-activism that impedes research funding (Rodino-Colocino 2012, 550). Administrative resistance may also be buttressed by the increasing financial dependence of universities on private donations and corporate sponsorships (Huish 2013, 365). However, presidents have declined prospective donors when their offer does not align with the university’s mission and future plans (MacKinnon 2014, 71).

Robert Huish advocates that activism raises public awareness on issues and engages in, rather than counters, political systems (2013, 373). His Development & Activism undergraduate course at Dalhousie University in Canada supports his belief that academics should strive to bridge activism with university education. Part of the course is the activist assignment, the Two Billion
Project, designed “to draw attention to the gross global inequity of having nearly a billion people suffer from hunger while another billion suffer from illnesses from overconsumption of unhealthy foods“ (Huish 2013, 367). Students are assigned various tasks to stage a legal protest that range from making posters to securing police permits. Huish explains: “I argue that if activism is understood as creating an effective means of communication to those in power by employing mechanisms of organisation, manifestation and dissent, it should not be divorced from university curriculum” (Huish 2013, 369). Huish overcame efforts within academia to suppress his hands-on curriculum. Unlike campus demonstrations and protests that appealed to a wide base of student and faculty participants in the 1960s, there appears to be a more cautionary aspect to activist engagement in academia in the present day.

Aboriginal Peoples, Education, and Activism in Canada

According to the Canada Census (2011) over 1.4 million individuals or 4.3 percent of Canada’s population identify as Aboriginal, which includes First Nation, status and non-status, Métis and Inuit. The Aboriginal population is expanding rapidly compared to non-Aboriginal peoples. Between 2006 and 2011 the Aboriginal population grew by 20 percent compared to 6 percent for the non-Aboriginal population in Canada (Stats Can 2011). As a group, Aboriginal peoples fare lower on indicators for longevity, and levels of education, and have higher rates of suicide (Kirmayer et al 2007), addictions, poverty and incarceration (Cardinal 2006) than the general population. More than 28 percent of the Aboriginal population is under 14 years compared with 13 percent of the non-Aboriginal population (APS 2011). In addition, Aboriginal peoples face forms of racism and social exclusion not seen among other groups that experience similar poverty rates (Quebec, 2008).
In Ontario in 1968, “fewer than twenty Indians attended university” (McCue 1994, 391). Trent University in Peterborough Ontario initiated the first Indian studies program in Canada in 1969. In 1971 Trent formally established a Department of Native Studies in the Faculty of Arts and Science that attracted an increasing number of Aboriginal students from across Canada taught by newly appointed Aboriginal academics (McCue 1994, 394). Despite an increasing Aboriginal presence, academic institutions remain hostile environments for most Indigenous students (Turner 2006, 91). According to Lindsay, First Nations students learned their history and contemporary academic knowledge from non-First Nations instructors “whose knowledge has been learned in schools instead of lived” (2010, 144). Aboriginal students have been sought out by professors as “all-knowing Indian experts,” when there are over thirty different First Nations groups in Canada and their cultures, languages, and historical experiences all differ:

Asking a First Nations student to comment on issues pertaining to groups that the student does not belong to would be like going to Europe and asking a Frenchman to state his opinion or expertise regarding all things Greek or Polish.” (Lindsay 2010, 145).

First Nations students also face miscomprehension and discrimination in academia:

How can an outsider really understand life on reservations, the struggle for recognition, sovereignty, economic development, preservation of language and culture? (Mihesuah 2004, 192).

What probably hurts the most, however, are the forces of overt racism, discrimination, and ignorance that First Nations students are forced to deal with on a regular basis (Lindsay 2010, 146-147).

Indigenous scholars speak of their positions in academia as reflecting broader institutional power relationships. For Turner, the “indigenous intellectual’s place in the dominant culture will always be problematic because virtually every aspect of indigenous life remains steeped in colonialism” (2006, 105). “The university is contentious ground” for Alfred (2004, 92):

Like all Indigenous people, if we are accountable to our nations and truly cognizant and respectful of our cultures, we have as a responsibility to do what we can where we are to
ensure the survival of our culture and our nations. Being in the university, we as Indigenous academics have the responsibility to work to defeat the operation of colonialism within the university and to reorder academe (Alfred 2004, 88-89).

However, according to Daniel Justice, the “academy can also be a site of significant cultural recovery work, a place where all people who are disconnected from their histories can begin their journeys homeward” (Justice 2004, 102).

Indigenous movements are different from other social movements because they “contest the very foundation of the Canadian state as a colonial construction while most theories of group politics and social movements take the state for granted” (Ladner 2009, 228). The contested relationship with the state accentuates political problems of representation of Indigenous peoples:

Even if representative bodies became more reflective of the diverse populations over which they rule, this would not change the fact that some of the most revered representative democracies – Canada, the United States, and Australia, for example – are European settlements on indigenous land that many aboriginal peoples claim was never willingly surrendered to the colonizers. These countries, which often talk about their long history of democracy, are the result of centuries of massacres, exclusion, racism, and denial. The language and laws of representative democracy tend to hide this bloody history and ongoing indigenous resistance (Cairns and Sears 2012, 80).

Indigenous activism as protest reaches back to the arrival of Europeans in Canada. The following are some of the notorious struggles that have taken place between Indigenous peoples and colonizers in North America. Early struggles include the 1763-1766 resistance against the British led by Obwandiyag (Pontiac) and the 1869-1870 and 1885 Métis resistance led by Louis Riel (Ladner 2009, 228). In peacetime the creation of Indigenous organizations was curtailed by Canadian laws. In 1918 Frederick Loft established the League of Indians in Canada, comprised mainly of leaders of bands from Ontario and Quebec. His goal was to create a national unifying organization of Indigenous peoples that would petition the federal government to improve living conditions and education on reserves. The league was impeded in its efforts by the federal
enforcement of restrictions in *The Indian Act*, regarding mobilization, organization and travel, which were not lifted until 1951 (Ladner 2009, 231-233). Government attempts to impede organizing failed to deter the formation of new associations. At the provincial level, the League of Indians of Alberta was established in 1933 and expanded with other bands to become the Indian Association of Alberta (IAA). In Ontario, the Union of Ontario Indians (UOI) was the only organization that included Métis and status and non-status Indians. In 1968 the National Indian Brotherhood (NIB) united provincial First Nation organizations into a national organization with two distinct purposes (Ladner 2009, 233). The UOI, IAA and NIB along with other Indigenous organizations were united and instrumental in organizing marches to protest the White Paper\(^2\) when it was released in 1968. Under the leadership of Harold Cardinal the IAA published the *Red Paper* in 1970 (Ladner 2009, 232). Although the White Paper was withdrawn by the Trudeau government in March of 1971 (Neigh, 2012, 82), its protest was a pivotal political opportunity, “which gave a rallying point to the Indigenous movement, encouraged mobilization, demanded the development of organizational capacities, and provided access to the policy network” (Ladner 2009, 233). In the 1980s, the negotiations for Meech Lake Accord involved further attempts at constitutional reform (Behiels 2007, 280). Elijah Harper, a Cree member of the Legislative Assembly of Manitoba, was a pivotal actor in the demise of the Meech Lake Accord when he refused to give his assent to the Accord in his provincial legislature where a unanimous vote was required for its ratification. “Harper thus made all of Canada realize that the Meech Lake Accord, whether it met Quebec’s reservations about constitutional conditions or not, did not recognize and accommodate Aboriginal wishes” (Lindau and Cook 2000, 15). In the 1990s the standoff at Oka

\(^2\) The White Paper was a policy proposal by the Trudeau government that unilaterally sought to disband reserves, eliminate Indigenous rights and abolish the *Indian Act* (Ladner 2009, 233).
is an examples of violent reactions to Indigenous protest (Ramos 2006, 211). Oka was a 78 day confrontation between the people of Kahnawake (which borders the city of Montreal), Quebec police and Canadian military was “an unappreciated benchmark of indigenous resistance struggles” (Alfred 2005, 46-47). Despite hostile reactions to their demands, Indigenous peoples made gains in the courts regarding their land claims and lawsuits in the acknowledgement of past treaties in the Calder decision, the success of the James Bay Cree in their fight against Hydro Quebec, and participation in drafting and ratifying section 35 of the Constitution Act, 1982 (Ramos 2006, 214). In the present day:

The contestation of Indigenous people in contemporary Canada reflects a continuity with the past histories of the relationship between Indigenous nations and settler societies….It is important for settler cultures to approach Indigenous contestation from the perspective of Indigenous peoples themselves, seeking to understand indigenous perspectives and traditions on their own terms, rather than strictly in terms of the dominant Euro-Canadian legal and political categories (Ladner 2009, 247).

The mobilization of Indigenous peoples in Canada through Indigenous organizations is reflective of their cultural beliefs of political participation:

The Haudenosaunee Great Law of Peace makes it clear that politics is not something that can be separated out from society and left to an elite group of representatives. Politics is, rather, deeply rooted in a holistic understanding of human life and the natural world, and therefore the domain and responsibility of all members of the community (Cairns and Sears 2012, 88).

In summary, Indigenous activism has existed as long as European colonization. Unlike many other groups, Indigenous peoples were subjected by the state and their legal protests were curtailed by law. Although Indigenous peoples have achieved some accomplishments regarding recognition in Canada and internationally within state institutions, several unresolved issues remain. In recent times Idle No More (INM) has been instrumental in empowering Indigenous peoples to unite and mobilize.
Indigenous academics in Canada are actively involved in the Idle No More (INM) movement. It was founded by four women, some of whom are academics, who first met in Saskatoon, Saskatchewan in December 2012 to protest Bill C-45 a 470 page omnibus bill introduced by the federal government. Of the several amendments buried in Bill C-45 were changes to *The Navigable Waters Act* and *The Indian Act*. One of the founders of INM explains:

> We never ceded our land and resources. What government is doing is a form of genocide. Without land or water no human being can survive. It is a privilege to talk about democracy, equality, nationhood, but if we don’t do anything to protect land and water we can’t survive. Canada has the largest bodies of fresh water that the government is not protecting. Indigenous peoples are the last stand.

The inaugural teach-in - an educational forum that discusses political issues - in Saskatoon in response to Bill C-45 as a means to inform the community. It was during the second or third teach-in that the founders realized they could use social media, specifically Facebook and Twitter events pages to attract attention and spread public awareness to their cause because mainstream media were not reporting on INM. By December 10, 2012 social media were instrumental in coordinating the National Day of Action that witnessed INM events throughout Canada.

The INM website also tells “The Story.” It has become one of the largest Indigenous movements in Canadian history by conducting teach-ins, rallies, and protests across Canada and around the world. INM began as a protest movement for government legislation that disregarded Indigenous sovereignty and environmental protections. On the National Day of Action media attention and use of social media attracted millions to INM. The movement sees itself as resistance against neo-colonialism: “The impetus for the recent Idle No More events, lies in a centuries old

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3 “From the government’s perspective, its two 2012 budget bills were all about cutting red tape to speed up economic development – particularly when it comes to natural resources and natural-gas pipelines. To many first nations, the changes are viewed as an infringement on treaty rights and environmental protection. Also, Bill C-45 includes changes to the Indian Act that make it easier for band councils to lease land. Some protesters have claimed the bill goes further and makes it easier for reserve land to be sold outright” (Galloway 2013).
resistance as Indigenous nations and their lands suffered the impacts of exploration, invasion and colonization. Idle No More seeks to assert Indigenous inherent rights to sovereignty and reinstitute traditional laws and Nation to Nation Treaties by protecting the lands and waters from corporate destruction.” The purpose of the INM website is to inform followers “on the historical and contemporary context of colonialism” and other forms of oppression based on race, gender, sexuality, and class. In addition the website will share the “powerful personal stories of those who have been moved by the spirit of Idle No More” (“The Story” INM 2014).

To bring awareness to Indigenous issues INM activists conduct teach-ins at community centres, schools, colleges, and universities. A teach-in held in March 2013 at McMaster University in Hamilton, Ontario, is one example of many that have been held in Canada and abroad. Under an Idle No More banner, the panel comprised of faculty and students addressed an audience of almost one hundred on various Indigenous issues pertaining to the Canadian government, their community and university. The teach-in started with an explanation of the creation of INM as social media to fight Bill C45, especially amendments to the Navigable Waters Act. The first speakers related personal institutional struggles with university administration regarding the incorporation of Indigenous knowledge in their research. Personal challenges of finding voice as an Indigenous person through a decolonization process of locating and understanding colonizing barriers within the university were shared by the second speaker. The domination of Indigenous peoples by mainstream society and how this dominant group will entrench power when they feel threatened was addressed by the third speaker. Violence against Indigenous women as colonized sexualized violence was the message of the fourth speaker who informed the audience of the 582 cases of lost or stolen Indigenous women in Canada in the last thirty years. The final speaker expressed disillusionment about the ability of INM to accomplish change when the relationship
between government and Indigenous peoples has not been significantly altered. Although the Teach-In at McMaster University was only one in hundreds of INM events, it strongly illustrates the range and intensity of issues that confront Indigenous scholars and students in universities in Canada.

Travellers, Education and Activism in Ireland

Travellers\(^4\) are a historically nomadic group, indigenous to Ireland, and include approximately 30,000 people, slightly less than one percent of Ireland’s population of almost five million (Census 2011). The Traveller Health Study placed the Traveller population at closer to 40,000 (AITHS 2010). Although they comprise less than one percent of the population Travellers rely on disproportionate amounts of state resources due to their status as a vulnerable group, rank high in terms of health risk including a suicide rate three times that of the national rate (Royall 2010, 154) and face low levels of educational attainment and employment.

Traveller culture, values, language, customs, family economy, oral traditions and nomadism all separate them from mainstream society to the extent that they are othered:

Travellers’ separateness, partly by choice, enables them to retain their identity as an ethnic group in the face of much opposition and pressure to conform to sedentary society. Their experience of low social status and exclusion – which prevents them from participating as equals in society – is mostly due to the widespread hostility of settled people towards them. This hostility is based on prejudice, which in turn gives rise to discrimination and affects Travellers in all aspects of their lives” (Fay 2001, 99-100).

According to Fanning, the “anxieties of the settled community found expressions within a racialized discourse of exaggeration that provided a justification for anti-Traveller feeling that

\(^4\) The Government of Ireland defines Travellers as: …the community of people who are commonly called Travellers and who are identified (both by themselves and others) as people with a shared history, culture and traditions, including historically, a nomadic way of life on the island of Ireland (Ireland Equal Status Act, 2002).
could not be expressed through objections grounded in fact” (2012, 133). He provides personal insights regarding anti-Traveller discourse:

Otherwise reasonable settled people feel entitled to openly express anger and hostility towards Travellers in everyday discourse and on the airwaves. My attempt to explain policies of recruiting ethnic minority police in American cities to social work students back in 2001, by asking them to imagine those being recruited were Travellers, resulted in the class bursting into incredulous laughter. More recently, in 2010 a class I taught on Travellers and social policy was interrupted a number of times by shouts of ‘knacker’ and other pejorative terms for Travellers, from students outside the door of the lecture theatre. Anti-Traveller racism in Irish society is difficult to deal with but easy to exploit whether for political gain or as media entertainment (Fanning 2012, 152).

The Traveller Education and Adults: Crisis, Challenge and Change (TEACH) project investigated why education services in Ireland generated relatively low rates of education progression for Travellers, and examined the experiences of Travellers who had entered the workforce and mainstream education (Hourigan and Campbell 2010, 1). The TEACH report highlighted three issues regarding Travellers, education and employment. First, as Travellers progress through school, there is a significant drop in both enrolment and attendance. In 2008 approximately twenty percent of Travellers completed the Leaving Certificate (Secondary School Diploma) compared to the national average of eighty-four percent (Hourigan and Campbell 2010, 82). Second, Traveller enrolment and attendance statistics indicate that more girls than boys are staying in school at a rate of two to one (Hourigan and Campbell 2010, 83). The report explained that the years fifteen to nineteen are a critical period for Irish students to progress to further education and write state exams. For Travellers, these years are also a critical period when Travellers are expected to marry, in keeping with Traveller culture. “The impossibility of reconciling the competing demands of these two sets of expectations leads to the disappearance of most Traveller teens from the state school system prior to Leaving Certificate” (Hourigan and Campbell 2010, 99). “However, within Traveller culture, there is little or no social prestige attached to participation in the workforce. Social status is derived, almost completely, from
marriage and family ties. ... While Travellers take pride in their skills, they do not define themselves in terms of specialisations” (Hourigan and Campbell 2010, 97).

Third, and related to the second issue, anti-Traveller racism “indicated that the level of prejudice amongst the settled community was so great that they wouldn’t even consider trying to get a job” Travellers interviewed for the TEACH project related how they concealed their identity in school to avoid becoming a ‘target’ (Hourigan and Campbell 2010, 98). One Traveller student explained: “Yes, sometimes you would have a few friends and they would be talking about something in the paper about Travellers. I had to learn to let it pass. If I stood up I would become a target for three years. If I had to say anything my whole three years would have been different” (Hourigan and Campbell 2010, 93).

*Our Geels*, the Traveller health study echoed similar sentiments by Travellers regarding their experiences of discrimination in the education system. Although education was identified by Travellers to be of key importance the report noted their lack of education impacted on “social, cultural psychological and economic factors. These affected self-esteem, and confidence of not just the child but the parents too” (2010 122). When young people were asked what they would most like to change about being a Traveller they unanimously said, “being called names” (2010, 123). This research study failed to locate education programs for Travellers taught by Travellers. Traveller issues at the post-secondary level are conducted through social justice or education programs.

There is not system for collecting data regarding Traveller enrollment in the education system in Ireland. Estimates indicate that fewer than 20 Travellers were at third level (secondary school equivalent in Canada) in 2002 and 28 Travellers were enrolled in higher education in 2004 (Ireland 2006, 74).
Traveller activism emerged in response to societal reactions to their increasing urbanization and attempts to remedy the situation with policies of assimilation. Travellers migrated to cities starting in the 1960s due to the obsolescence of tinsmithing and farm labour and the availability of social welfare. Their urbanization contributed to a rise in anti-Traveller prejudice and racism. Travellers were regarded as a ‘problem’ that the state and the voluntary sector worked in partnership to solve starting in the 1960s (Fay 1992, 37; Royall 2010, 158). Stigmatized by mainstream society, Travellers as a group were not equipped at this time to counter emerging settlement and assimilation policies (Royall 2010, 158). While most organizations that mobilized for Travellers fell into a category of supporting assimilationist policies, there were organizations that supported Traveller traditions. For example, in the 1960s the Itinerant Action Committee/Campaign (IAC) organized marches mainly in Dublin to raise awareness for Travellers’ struggles and to protest against Traveller evictions (Royall 2010, 158). By the 1980s Traveller organizations increased in number and scope and Travellers were included in management and staffing positions of these organizations (Royall 2010, 161). Although most of these rights-based organizations were short lived, they were active in marches, media publicity and resistance to evictions (Noonan 1998, 162). A rights-based mandate was influential in the formation of the Dublin Travellers’ Education and Development Group (DTEDG) in 1984. The DTEDG changed its name to Pavee Point in 1993 and has since become a national Traveller organization. The National Traveller Women’s Forum (NTWF) was created in 1988 (Fay 1992, 50) and is still in existence today. These organizations “sought to resource and motivate the Traveller community to build a national movement for self-determination, which located the recognition of Travellers’ distinct ethnic identity as central to their campaign” (Noonan 1998, 162). “What began in the late 1990s as a robust anti-racism movement led mostly by asylum seekers and
refugees (but also Travellers) … has been gradually eroded due to dispersal and direct provision policies, but also to co-optation, professionalization and the (often enthusiastic) adoption and integration, in the (ultimately mistaken) belief that this would gain them access to the decision making and societal power” (Lentin 2012, 44). While Traveller activism emerged in response to the rise in Traveller prejudice and racism resulting from their urbanization, it has been reconfigured into state supported Traveller organizations in the present day.

Methodology

Participant selection was based on identifying scholars engaged in Indigenous activism in the past, or present. The search commenced by identifying and selecting scholars in Canada who contributed to *The Winter We Danced: Voices from the Past, the Future, and the Idle No More Movement*. This anthology, “brings together the writings of both actors and activists within idle No More but also Indigenous and non-Indigenous thinkers, organizers, leaders, artists and advocates” (ARP 2014, 26). While there is no Traveller activist movement in Ireland comparable to INM, there is a collection of essays written by Travellers and non-Travellers, *Travellers and the Settled Community: A Shared Future*: ‘the writers have approached the theme of engagement and interaction between Travellers and ‘settled people’ in a new and dynamic way. They have traced the themes that bind both … communities today, in addition to those cultural aspects that remain distinctive to both communities” (Liffey Press 2012, cover). The anthology was selected for a “snowball” recruitment process for academics in Ireland with research interests related to Travellers. It should be noted that not all of the contributors to these two publications participated in the study. Participants were selected by research interests affiliated with disciplines that spanned the social sciences that included Aboriginal peoples in Canada or Travellers in Ireland presently, or in the past. The interviews, conducted by telephone or by Skype, involved asking open-ended
questions and lasted approximately thirty minutes. Most Indigenous academics in Canada were open to disclosing their actual institutions and disciplines, while the Irish academics were more reluctant to do so. With the exception of one, all of the academics identified as Indigenous in Canada; half of them were tenured and half were PhD candidates. All of the Irish academics had attained PhDs, most were tenured, and none of them identified as a Traveller. Thirteen academics in Canada (six) and Ireland (seven) participated in interviews between September and December 2014.

**Interview Findings**

The interviews revealed four significant findings: differences in Indigenous activism in both countries; tendencies for academia in Ireland to reflect institutional legacies regarding education, research and activism that continues to other Travellers; Indigenous academics influencing policy as activists in Canada; and the emerging challenges for Indigenous academics in Canada as actors influencing policy change.

The first finding revealed that activism, academia and indigeneity are more interrelated than separate for scholars interviewed in Canada, but separate and exclusive in Ireland. All scholars interviewed in Canada identified as Indigenous and indicated they are involved in Indigenous activism. None of the scholars in Ireland identified as Travellers, and while some were engaged in Traveller activism in the past, none of them were presently. Most Irish scholars adhere to institutional preferences that distances activism in academia, regardless of the group or issue.

The second significant finding confirmed institutional legacies regarding education, research and social activism. Regarding education, an interviewee observed that the majority of university students are Irish and there are “not enough Travellers, foreign students and refugees in
higher education.” Another interviewee explained the transformative implications of dispelling Traveller stereotypes, “It’s thrilling to think you’ve changed one person’s mind,” other interviewees focused on the societal barriers. They explained that there is discrimination toward Travellers because they are characterized by their behaviour, and not as an ethnic group. The extent to which Traveller discrimination pervades academia directly impacts on the number of Traveller learners in post-secondary education that may actually be under reported.

While Traveller research has been undertaken by the academics interviewed, there no conclusive information on how this would impact on their employment. Most Irish interviewees commented that, “abortion, gay rights, gay marriages are the hot topics,” of current social science research compared to Traveller research. All interviewees researching Travellers admitted that their research is not considered politically threatening. Some shared experiences of threats from other research projects not involving Travellers or Traveller advocacy. One interviewee had the experience of having posters with their picture and home phone number posted on streets in reaction to their research. And another interviewee found out that their picture was on a dart board: “someone despised me that much.”

While one non-tenured interviewee in Ireland was asked whether their involvement with Travellers prevented them from getting ahead, tenured interviewees agreed that Traveller research would not have impacted negatively on their careers, despite anecdotal comments made by their colleagues. While they commented that, “Travellers don’t have friends politically,” they observed that, “services people take for granted are denied to Travellers,” and “newspaper commentary regarding Travellers is appalling.” Some interviewees commented that they receive negative feedback about their research, such as, “why would you care about those people”? One interviewee
mentioned that they “would be wary of having conversations regarding Travellers in certain settings.”

Some Irish academics have engaged in Traveller advocacy in the past, or their current advocacy is related to issues facing Travellers, mainly racism. Some interviewees did not consider themselves activists, but claimed that their research regarding Travellers influences public policy. Most interviewees expressed a concern that their research projects concerning Travellers were undertaken in the past or were temporal, including projects that had a social justice component, that were also discontinued due to shifts in their research mandates. While academics are not personally threatened to pursue Traveller research, they may be chided by their colleagues. One interviewee stated that their colleagues felt that research and activism are two endeavours that should be separated. Another explained that their supervisor preferred an observation-based “lab” (laboratory) approach that precludes activism. While not as engaged in activism as their Canadian counterparts, Irish interviewees did not have any comments regarding how it may benefits their careers other than to say that academic benefits are measured by performance and funded research. And activism is classified under service, and as such there is no formal academic recognition compared to publishing journal articles or securing research grants. One interviewee, however, mentioned that funded activism in universities takes the form of meetings, seminars and conferences, for migrants and migrant women’s groups, for example.

The third finding the interviews revealed was Indigenous activism as promoting change within academia in Canada. Indigenous academics spoke of how their activism provides teaching opportunities that are transformative for their students. They also related how every question they are asked while engaging in community activism is an educational opportunity for both parties. One interviewee explained that their activist network provided a broader range of learning
opportunities and another stated: “The main, and perhaps the only benefit, is the satisfaction of knowing that I contributed in a small way to a better future for both Indigenous and non-Indigenous peoples.”

All of the Canadian interviewees indicated they are involved in Indigenous activism. Some were connected to Indigenous activism through their families and they related childhood experiences of carrying picket signs and participating in protest marches. As academics they were all involved in publishing regarding INM, and some were also engaged in non-violent activism that includes teach-ins, blockades, marches and protests. Some interviewees explained that their curriculum is based on providing students with experiences in activism.

Some Canadian interviewees were quite clear that their activism was crucial to their employment, “If I didn’t have activist experiences I wouldn’t have been hired.” Others commented that they received positive feedback from their university president in response to an op-ed published in public media and they have received awards from other universities regarding their activism.

The fourth significant finding revealed by the interviews is the institutional challenges that activism presents to Indigenous academics. Canadian interviewees relayed a variety of employment experiences influenced by their activism. A faculty member at a former university unsuccessfully attempted to have an interviewee fired because they were First Nations. One informant was reprimanded by the university vice president when they advocated for First Nations students. In light of these experiences, Indigenous academics generally reported support within academia. However, most Canadian academics did indicate that while they are supported in their Indigenous activism, this notoriety likely counters their eligibility for promotion within academia. Interviewees in Canada indicated their careers do not benefit directly from their activism. While one interviewee commented that activism is “almost expected” in their work in Indigenous studies
and respected in the university community, another commented that “activism is also perceived to take vital time and resources away from being a productive academic.” Most academic informants in Canada revealed that they receive hate mail and death threats resulting from their activism. One interviewee commented that, in addition to death threats received at home and at work, they have been followed with video cameras by security staff and denied access to public buildings. While one felt that their activism made them “a target of personal threats and public disrespect,” another commented that countering hostility in social media takes time away from their academic writing. Academics in Canada did not indicate that these personal assaults regarding their academic pursuits impacted negatively on their careers, commenting that, “no one has told me to stop,” and “negative experiences haven’t hindered, but has shaped the experience.”

**Discussion**

As marginalized Indigenous minorities Aboriginal peoples in Canada and Travellers in Ireland share many similarities, but differences in their engagement in activism is directly linked to ideas and interests embedded in academic institutions in their respective countries.

In Canada Indigenous scholars and students are increasingly present in academia. The engagement of Indigenous academics in activism in Canada highlights significant differences that indicate that they are instrumental in facilitating change in academia. The INM movement not only provides an example of community engagement that highlights Indigenous issues in Canada, but it demonstrates how external events may impact on activism within academia. Engaging in activism in this case creates hurdles not encountered by their non-Aboriginal colleagues. In comparison to other faculty Indigenous academics are at a disadvantage. They face harassment
and threats while they are resilient to harassment and threats that does take time from other academic pursuits. Academics in Canada are pushing for institutional change that accommodates activism. This accommodation, however, is within a colonized system of power where Indigenous academics may encounter personal threats because of their activism. Their professional forecasts of limited promotion potential further accentuates these power relationships within academia.

Viewed from an institutional lens, the situation in Ireland is remarkably different. This research failed to locate academics who identify as Travellers. Irish academics were reluctant to identify projects with Traveller students because they believed such a disclosure could be harmful for them. Social othering of Travellers in Ireland may account for the under representation of Traveller post-secondary students, who may choose not to identify as such.

In Ireland education and research are in a predictable path in academia where Traveller awareness is present in academia generally by non-Traveller academics. It appears to be struggling against mainstream preferences that tends to prioritize other minority issues and consequently downgrade Traveller issues. Academics who study Travellers presently or in the past have intellectual freedom to pursue their studies but admit that this work would generate negative their positive feedback from their colleagues.

**Conclusion**

This study has demonstrated how Indigenous activism in Canada and its absence in Ireland reflect and reconstruct institutional norms. Despite similarities that contribute to the marginalization of the two groups, activism accentuates significant differences between Aboriginal peoples in Canada and Travellers in Ireland. Indigenous scholars are increasingly present in academia in Canada.
While all Indigenous scholars interviewed are engaged in activism, they are still struggling in systems of colonization and confrontation. In comparison Traveller representation as faculty lags behind in Ireland. The proportion of Traveller learners in Ireland is comparable to Indigenous students in Canada forty years ago. Non-Traveller academics exercise intellectual freedom to study Travellers, yet very few undertake this area of research, partly because of the prioritization of researching other rights-based groups and partly because of societal influence. From an institutional comparison, activism in Ireland faces considerable resistance, while the Canadian case demonstrates change within academia spearheaded by Indigenous scholars. Yet it remains unclear how Indigenous academics, as part of the process of institutional change, will be instrumental in resetting the policy path within academia and beyond.

References


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